



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

THE DIRECTOR

NOV 7 2011

Mr. Rip Cunningham, Chairman
New England Fishery Management Council
50 Water Street
Newburyport, Massachusetts 01950

Dear Mr. Cunningham:

We would like to thank the New England Fishery Management Council for hosting the Sector "Lessons Learned" Workshop, and for inviting us to participate. As you know, I had the opportunity to personally attend most of the session and very much appreciated the chance to hear directly from participants about their individual experiences, challenges and successes.

It was clear, leading up to and during the workshop, that sector participants, their managers, your staff, and NOAA staff have worked very hard together over the last year and half to implement the sector program. During this time period, there have also been ongoing efforts to identify and implement improvements in support of the fishery. The workshop provided a timely and comprehensive opportunity to bring all parties together to learn from our experiences of the past year and plan aggressively for the future.

Overall, I personally heard participants across the region express support for opportunities afforded to them by sector based management. While challenges remain, there was consistent recognition that sector based management presents a particularly promising approach to help the fishery operate under constrained catch limits required to end overfishing and rebuild stocks. The presentations, participant questions and follow up commentary focused most directly on how to move forward and address legitimate concerns around implementation. I heard significant discussion and good ideas on how we can work together, with fishermen, to streamline reporting requirements, reduce monitoring costs and reduce remnants of old effort controls.

Workshop participants generated a number of great ideas. While many of these are for Council action, our staff also took away helpful suggestions for how to streamline our programs and requirements. These align under three themes:

- Decrease operation costs by making the reporting and monitoring programs and data reconciliation process more efficient and user friendly.
- Improve communications through targeted improvements on how NOAA Fisheries and the Council communicate with sector managers and permit holders.
- Explore opportunities to optimize utilization.

We have begun implementing improvements that will address these areas. For example, to improve the efficiency of our year-end reconciliation process, we have been working on an ongoing basis to reconcile 2011 trip data with sector managers, and intend to have this be an



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ongoing, rather than year-end, process. At the suggestion of sector managers, we have also been developing and clarifying accessible guidance documents to better communicate sector requirements. We are currently reviewing all sector members and sector manager reporting requirements and are looking for report components that can be streamlined and potentially omitted to ease the burden on sectors.

We also expect to work closely with the Council as you consider action items suggested by the workshop participants. The workshop confirmed the need for both NOAA Fisheries and the Council to work to optimize quota utilization. I want to extend our commitment to you to work together on this issue. Sector management provides an opportunity to focus management on the most critical issue - catch levels - and move away from measures that control fishing effort such as closed areas. This approach allows operational and business innovation by fishermen in a manner consistent with our shared conservation goals. The New England Council's Omnibus Habitat Amendment presents one opportunity to explore which closed areas are necessary and which can be opened. We will continue to be actively involved in that analytical process.

We also want to work with you to explore approaches that could fast track some of these measures, including exploring the feasibility of opening additional nearshore areas in advance of the comprehensive essential fish habitat evaluation. To do this, I have directed our staff to consider and analyze these actions for potential agency approval through sector operations plans for the 2012 fishing year and plan on discussing this with the larger Council at the November 2011 Council meeting. Several sectors have requested exemption from portions of the Gulf of Maine rolling closure areas through their operations plans for fishing year 2012. In the past, we have not approved additional rolling closure exemptions due to concerns pertaining to harbor porpoise and potential disruption to spawning aggregations of fish. We are currently reviewing these exemptions in addition to considering including mitigation measures to address some of our concerns. We plan to solicit comment from the Council and the public in the upcoming proposed rule for fishing year 2012 sector operations plans this year.

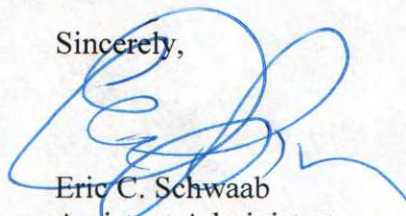
We also want to advance action on rollover of unused quota above 10 percent. Some of the sectors have requested that we consider approving an exemption from the carry-over limit in their fishing year 2012 operations plans. Our staff has begun an analysis of this option and will also solicit public comment on this issue in the proposed rule for FY 2012 sector operations plans. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee will also need to review this potential action to assess the biological impacts.

Workshop participants had many other ideas about improving or reducing at-sea and dockside monitoring requirements. We look forward to discussing these ideas with you, as well as the many other interesting ideas presented and discussed at the workshop.

On a separate note, I want you to know that we are aware of the preliminary results of the stock assessment workshop for Gulf of Maine cod stock recently hosted by our Science Center. We await the results of the Stock Assessment Review Committee evaluation of the assessment scheduled for 29 November-2 December 2011. Anticipating a range of potential outcomes, we would like to begin work with the Council, industry, and scientific community in a discussion of potential management responses.

We look forward to working with the sector managers and with the Council to further explore these and other action items that have come out of this workshop. We continue to want to be a partner in the success of fishermen, to sustain fishing jobs, to create a profitable and healthy future for fishing communities and to maintain healthy marine fisheries.

Sincerely,



Eric C. Schwaab
Assistant Administrator
for Fisheries