



New England Fishery Management Council

News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
June 4, 2003

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Council System Working to Rebuild and Maintain Healthy Fish Stocks

Newburyport, MA As the Pew Oceans Commission releases its report today recommending changes to protect marine ecosystems, Tom Hill, the Chairman of the New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC), cites the recent successful efforts of his own organization to rebuild and maintain the region's healthy fish stocks.

Mr. Hill expressed his reservations about some of the report's recommendations, but said he would keep an open mind about changes to the structure of fisheries management. "It would be premature to draw conclusions from a single report," he said, referencing another report on the marine environment scheduled for release from the President's Oceans Commission in September. He added, "I think it is appropriate to reserve judgment until both reports are in and the full Council has an opportunity to review all of the recommendations."

While also expressing appreciation of the significant amount of work that went into compiling the report, Mr. Hill reviewed a number of the Council's key accomplishments over the last five years.

1. Regional Council Process

Fishery management involves far more than addressing allocation issues. Strong public participation from fishermen and other affected parties is essential to long-term success. We must have public faith in a system that will produce sustainable resources and which will provide a source of revenue and recreation to fishermen and their communities.

The Council system provides not only knowledge and experience, but also opportunities for direct public involvement in the fishery management process. All council meetings, as well as subcommittee meetings, are open and provide a mechanism for participation at all points in the decision-making process. The Council system maximizes public participation in the management of a public resource.

- more -

P. 2 – Council System Working

2. Acceptance of Science

The issue of “best available science” has been a long-standing and occasionally a controversial issue in New England. Through persistence and commitment by the Council, a dialog between fishermen and scientists is emerging that will have a long-term, positive outcome as fisheries are managed into the future.

The establishment of trust and a basic understanding of the scientific underpinnings of management has come about through direct involvement between these groups under the auspices of the Council. Ownership and acceptance of the science leads to better participation in the Council process, and as a result better fisheries management.

3. Complex Management Issues

A number of issues contribute to the complexities of fisheries management, but are successfully being addressed through the Council’s fishery management plans. These include reducing wasteful discards, protecting important habitats, and working toward minimizing interactions with protected species such as harbor porpoise, whales and turtles. The NEFMC has made progress in each of these areas, though challenges remain. Overcapitalization, as an example, is still an outstanding issue that the Council is presently addressing in amendments to fishery management plans that are currently under development.

4. Successful Efforts

NOAA’s annual Status of U.S. Fisheries Report to Congress for 2002, released in April details the successful stock rebuilding that has occurred through the regional fishery Council process. The notable gains in the overall stock size of New England groundfish were included in the report as an example of this trend --- an increase from 170,000 metric tons in 1994 to over 450,000 metric tons in 2001.

The report again documented the success of the NEFMC’s Scallop Fishery Management Plan. Management measures that have produced a jump in landings from 22 million pounds in 1999 to over 32 million in 2000. Even as the stock was declared no longer overfished, a record 44 million pounds were landed in 2001.

- more -

P. 3 – Council System Working

Other major changes in New England stocks status for 2002 include:

- Gulf of Maine/northern Georges Bank stock of silver hake - fully rebuilt in 2002
- Atlantic Pollock - assessed to be no longer overfished since the August 1 report cutoff date
- Redfish - no longer overfished
- Southern Georges Bank/mid-Atlantic silver hake - no longer overfished
- Gulf of Maine haddock - no longer subject to overfishing
- Monkfish – northern stock no longer overfished and nearly rebuilt

5. Ecosystem-Based Approach

The Council fully supports an ecosystems based approach to resource management. Toward that end, NOAA Fisheries has recently released its Draft Strategic Plan for 2003-2008 (<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/>). The plan identifies specific improvements in existing programs, processes and strategies that, over the next five years, will promote ecosystem-based management approaches. This will require a significant commitment of resources by the government to model and understand the complex relationships hundreds of fish species and their environment.

6. Important Partnerships

Cooperation with other agencies, organizations and affected stakeholders is a cornerstone of effective fisheries management. An example of an innovative and successful partnership is cooperative research, fostered in New England as a means to enhance the data used for fisheries management and to expand communication and collaboration between fishery participants, scientists and managers. Based on the advice of the Council's Research Steering Committee, the National Marine Fisheries Service's Cooperative Research Partners Initiative has funded nearly \$10 million in long and short-term projects since 1999. Projects have included gear selectivity studies, bycatch reduction mechanisms, inshore stock assessment and habitat investigations.

Equally important are the Council's international efforts. Several stocks on Georges Bank are transboundary and, to be effectively managed, require coordinated actions between the United States and Canada. As a party to this important effort, the Council is proposing to incorporate the recently concluded U.S./Canada agreement into a fishery management plan amendment. If approved, the harvest of Georges Bank cod, haddock and yellowtail flounder will become subject to an allocation agreement between the two countries based on a formula which includes historical catch percentage and present resource distribution.

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