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**April 9, 2009****U.S. Acts to Alter New England Fisheries****By [CORNELIA DEAN](#)**

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the federal agency that regulates ocean fishing, is taking preliminary steps toward privatizing fisheries in New England, the agency's administrator said Wednesday.

The official, Jane Lubchenco, said the agency would finance surveys and other research needed to establish a system in which fishermen, grouped by "sectors" defined by the type of gear they use or other factors, could work together to decide who will fish, and where. As is now the case, the New England Fishery Management Council would set overall catch limits, with the approval of NOAA.

Dr. Lubchenco, who spoke in a telephone interview after a meeting of the council in Mystic, Conn., said she hoped the effort would eventually lead to a system in which people would have an ownership interest in ocean fish. Though it goes against the grain among people who believe that anyone should be allowed to go to sea and catch fish, the idea is gaining ground as a remedy for what some experts call "the race to catch the last fish," in which fishermen spend more time, money and fuel to catch fewer and fewer fish per voyage.

In an ownership, or "catch share," system, individuals, companies, cooperatives, communities or other entities receive the right to take a set percentage of the annual catch of particular fish in particular areas. The system gives fishermen a powerful motive to fish sustainably, because the value of their share rises as fish stocks increase. Fisheries scientists say the systems can produce significant improvements in the health of fish stocks, many of which are seriously depleted in the United States.

According to Steve Murawski, director of scientific programs at the NOAA Fisheries Service, eight fisheries around the country have some kind of sector or catch share system, including the halibut fishery in Alaska and the surf clam fishery off the Middle Atlantic States. Such systems are in development in an additional 11 fisheries, Dr. Murawski said.

But New Englanders, he said, have been relatively slow to embrace the idea.

4/9/2009

U.S. Acts to Alter New England Fisheri...

Ray Hilborn, a fisheries expert at the [University of Washington](#), said he believed that New England fishermen would be receptive to the sector system because they would work out the details themselves. "It's more bottom-up," Dr. Hilborn said.

In theory, he said, fishermen in a sector could decide to keep fishing the same competitive way. But usually "they end up being cooperative rather than competitive," he said, "because they make so much more money."

At the meeting in Mystic, Dr. Lubchenco announced that NOAA would provide \$16 million to advance the effort. She said \$6 million would finance collaborative research efforts by fishermen and scientists on fish abundance, gear design and other issues. The rest will be used to establish fishery monitoring systems needed for a sector approach.

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