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Move to Redefine New England Fishing

By **ARIANA GREEN**

GLOUCESTER, Mass. — Vincenzo Russo, a fisherman here for 35 years, used to fish as many days as he wanted, but federal regulations now require him to secure expensive permits — up to \$500,000 — if he wants to fish more than 73 days a year.

To protect declining [stocks](#), the government has been increasing efforts to restrict the number of groundfish — species like [cod](#), haddock and flounder found at the bottom of the sea — that can be caught per day and narrowing the number of days New England fishermen can be out.

“The 1970s were the good old days when I could spend 220 days fishing,” Mr. Russo grumbled. “Now I have to pay over half a million dollars just to be allowed to fish like I used to.”

After more than a decade of growing tensions with federal regulators, fishermen here and throughout New England are pushing for a new system based on group quotas that would avoid these individual restrictions.

The system calls for fishermen to band together in groups called “sectors” that would receive the right to take a set percentage of the annual catch of a variety of fish. Two sectors have been operating in Cape Cod on an experimental basis, and in April, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which regulates ocean fishing, announced that it would provide about \$16 million to move the rest of the Northeast toward sector fishing.

New England has submitted requests for 19 sectors, and the system could be up and running for the 2010 season, which begins next May.

“The era of lawless rule-breaking and a Wild West mentality has put us between the rock and the hard place we are in today,” said Eric Brazer, who manages the Georges Bank Cod Fixed Gear Sector, one of the two Cape Cod sectors. “As a result of that period, there are less fish and more regulations.”

Sector fishing has been applied in the mid-Atlantic, Alaska, British Columbia and Iceland, but New England has been late to catch on.

Nationally, 12 other fisheries — communities that harvest similar species — have some kind of sector or similar “catch share” system that allows them to avoid limits on trips and days at sea, said Steve Murawski, director of scientific programs at the NOAA Fisheries Service. These include the halibut fishery in Alaska and the surf clam fishery in the mid-Atlantic. Five additional fisheries are looking to adopt a similar model, Mr. Murawski said.

Cape Cod's results are evidence that sectors have tremendous promise, Mr. Brazer said. The fishermen in one sector were able to keep half a million dollars' worth of codfish that they would have had to throw back if they were fishing alone and subject to catch-per-day rules, he said. In the second sector, 50 percent of hooked fish would have had to be thrown back, he said.

"A fisherman spending 100 days at sea, with all the costs associated with that, can go out and catch the same amount of fish in 30 days under a sector," said Peter Taylor, president of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. "Sectors don't waste fish and put more money in the pockets of fishermen."

Cape Cod's sector fishermen pay \$5,000 to \$10,000 annually for membership and management costs, including technologies for monitoring and reporting how many fish are caught.

The Northeast Seafood Coalition, an organization based in Gloucester that represents fishing businesses from Maine to Long Island, has submitted 13 of the 19 requests for New England sectors. The other requests come from Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard and Maine. Eligible fishermen representing over half the fishing permits in the Northeast have applied to join the sectors, according to Vito Giacalone, policy director of the coalition.

Still unsettled is whether fishermen can select their sector mates. The more experience a sector's fishermen have, veterans argue, the higher the group quota should be. The coalition would prefer that a sector accommodate all levels of experience.

Richard Burgess, a commercial fisherman here for several decades, is uneasy about the idea of sectors and worries that federal regulators would establish smaller quotas for his group if it contains neophyte fishermen.

"We just don't know enough about how sectors will be organized to say for sure whether they'll be good for us," Mr. Burgess said. "I'm scared to death of sectors."

As a result of tighter days-at-sea rules, revenues from groundfish fell more than 50 percent in New England from 1994 to 2007, and the number of active boats also declined by about half, said Peter Baker, who manages fisheries policy for the Pew Environment Group.

In 2005, cod, which had been steadily declining, reached its lowest level, at 7 percent of the amount of stock needed to produce a sustainable harvest, and though it has recovered somewhat, it is still at only 12 percent, according to the NOAA Fisheries Service.

The NOAA Fisheries Service says progress has been made as a result of regulations, with groundfish increasing by 77 percent since 2004 and the average fishing rate decreasing. Still, winter flounder is at only 10 percent of its ideal population. Haddock and redfish have recovered well.

Mr. Russo has not yet decided whether he will join a sector. He sold one of his boats and took out a loan to buy permits for more fishing days — what he thought was a wise investment. Now he wants to be sure that the permits would still entitle him to extra fishing within the sector. But he will not learn the answer until September, when specific proposals for the region are approved by the federal regulators.

Russell Sherman, 61, a lifelong fisherman here, says he is supporting the new system.

“For little guys like me, it isn’t worth it to pay to maintain a boat given existing regulations,” Mr. Sherman said. “But a sector might let me share another fellow’s boat so I could sell mine — and we could combine our permits.”

He added, “Sectors are the only hope we have left.”

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