



New England Fishery Management Council

News Release

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New England Fishery Council Approves Groundfish Amendment 16 for Public Hearings; Reacts to the NMFS Groundfish Interim Rule

PORTSMOUTH, NH By a unanimous vote yesterday, the New England Fishery Management Council approved Amendment 16 to its Groundfish Plan for purposes of seeking input on the proposed measures at public hearings. The date, time and location of the hearings will be announced, but are planned for this April or May.

The Council's action is the first in a number of steps that, if given final approval, will expand the use of sector management, in which a percentage of the annual catch of defined species are allocated to groups of fishermen. It also will continue and in some cases adjust the stock rebuilding programs now in place, with a particular focus on several species of flounders; set up a system of annual catch limits and accountability measures for the groundfish fishery; include management measures for Atlantic wolffish; and revise a number of the restrictions on fishing, as well as measures that affect both the leasing and transfer of days at sea.

The Amendment 16 deliberations were preceded by a discussion in which Council members expressed grave concerns over the potential impacts of the National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) proposed secretarial interim action to reduce groundfish fishing mortality while Amendment 16 is under development. Intended as a transition between the management program now in place, which must be updated by May 1 with newly available scientific information, and the Amendment 16 measures which are likely to be implemented in May 2010, the interim rule, among other things, would significantly expand an existing area in the Gulf of Maine in which groundfish days-at-sea are counted as 2-for-1, and establish a very large area that extends from Nantucket Sound to Long Island in which federally permitted groundfish boats could not target groundfish with traditional gear.

In describing their worries about what was described as a broad brush approach taken by the agency in the proposed interim rule measures, Council members cited the possibility of fishing effort displacement into the Gulf of Maine, jeopardizing the hard-won stock rebuilding efforts in that area, including those targeting cod; and safety-at sea-issues if small vessels travel beyond the closure and differential counting areas to fish.

As its official response, the Council voted to reiterate the comments it submitted to NMFS last September, including strict limits or Total Allowable Catches (TACs) on overfished stocks, reduced trip limits on several flounder stocks of concern and an 18 percent reduction in the current low number of days-at-sea available to fish for groundfish. The Council comments also included a measure that would allow any TAC overages in 2009 to be deducted in 2010 with the payback mechanism to be outlined in Amendment 16. The deadline for comments to NMFS is February 17.

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