

4.4 Stock rebuilding

The annual fishing mortality targets were set by Amendment 7 to rebuild the biomass to the FMP targets by 2008. As long as fishing mortality remains below the annual targets, the action will not jeopardize the Amendment 7 rebuilding program, especially if the fishery reduces its catch of small, fast growing scallops to target large, slow-growing scallops. The higher productivity of young scallops (at least in terms of growth) would promote rebuilding faster than if the closed areas did not re-open.

4.5 Groundfish bycatch and bycatch of other species

Many of the stocks of groundfish on Georges Bank are overfished and are being rebuilt by the actions taken under the Multispecies FMP. Although some rebuilding has occurred, most stocks have not yet approached B_{MSY} . Projections indicate that cod and haddock, two primary stocks managed by the Multispecies FMP, are well below the B_{MSY} targets and may decline unless recruitment increases soon. Yellowtail flounder, another primary stock, is projected to exceed B_{MSY} by 2000 if fished at or below target levels. Fortunately, cod and haddock are not very vulnerable to capture by scallop dredges, at least during the season proposed by this action. Allowing access to smaller portions of the groundfish closed areas could help to limit bycatch of finfish.

Other species of concern include winter flounder, summer flounder, and monkfish. Since the distribution of these stocks occurs largely outside the closed areas, the net impact of the shift in scallop fishing effort is uncertain. Another management measure that would help minimize the impacts is to increase the twine top mesh to allow more small fish to escape. Preliminary studies show that larger twine top diamond mesh significantly reduces the catch of flounders.

During the 1999 annual review, the Multispecies Monitoring Committee (MSMC) examined the access to groundfish closed areas by vessels fishing for scallops, in light of the groundfish target TAC recommendations for the 2000 fishing year. Increases in fishing mortality associated with scallop dredge bycatch, coupled with potential increases of groundfish fishing effort as stock recover, could push the total catch above the biological limits set by the Northeast Multispecies FMP. The committee recommended that bycatch be minimized to the extent practical and that access should be allowed only in ways that are conservation-neutral for important groundfish stocks.

In the 1999 report on the status of the resource, the MSMC made the following recommendations for the scallop access program:

“The MSMC recommends against increasing fishing mortality on Southern New England and Cape Cod yellowtail flounder. Any program to provide access to the Nantucket Lightship Closed Area and Closed Area I should be demonstrated as conservation neutral with respect to scallop vessel bycatch of these stocks. For Georges Bank yellowtail, the MSMC notes that the target TAC will approximately double from 1999 to 2000. It does not have a recommendation on what portion of that TAC should or could be allocated to the scallop vessels.”

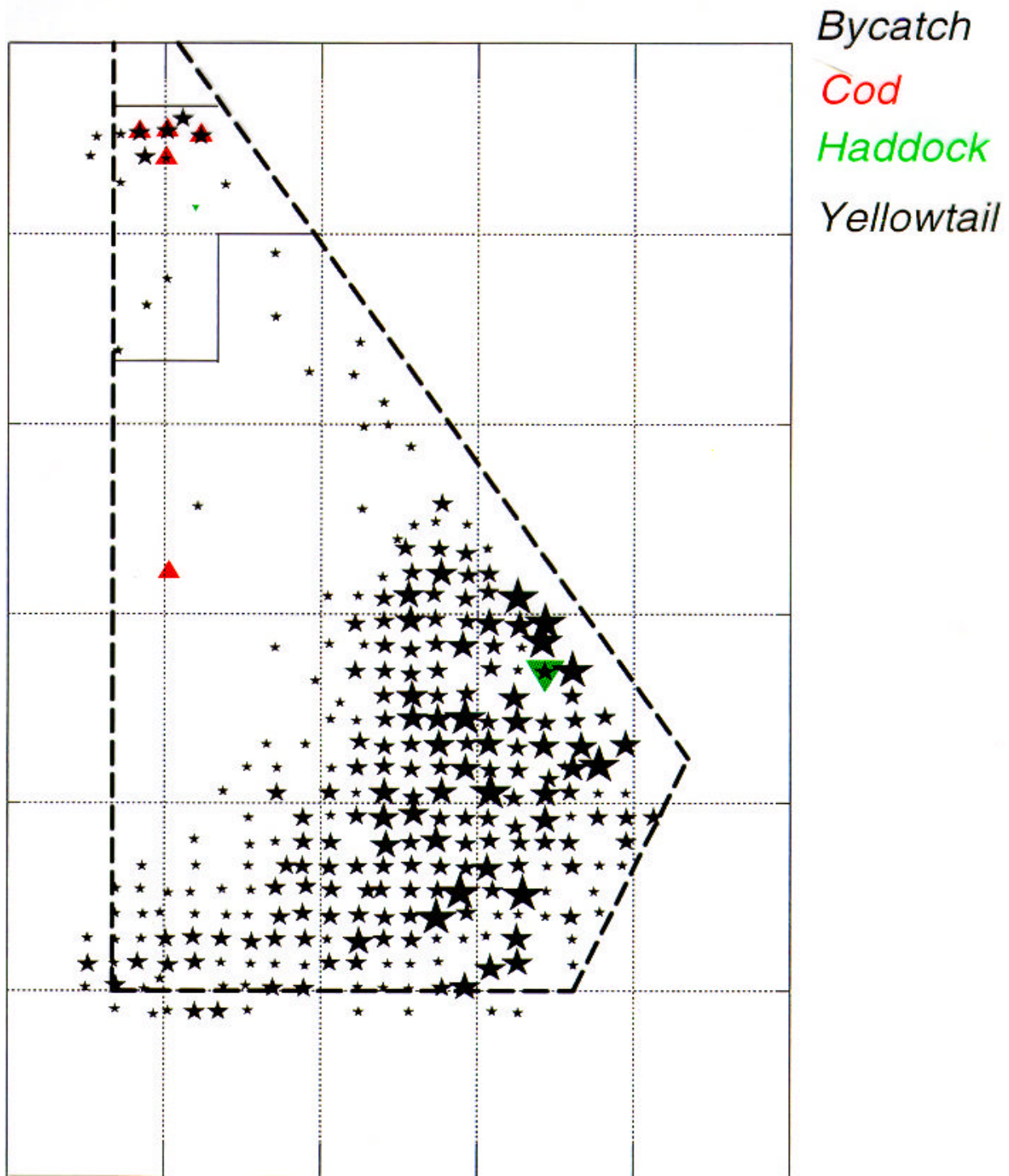


Figure 14. Distribution of cod, haddock, and yellowtail flounder catches in the CMAST – Cooperative Industry experimental scallop fishery during August to October 1998. The dashed lines show the outline of Closed Area II. The maximum number of fish per tow were cod – 2; haddock – 16; and yellowtail flounder – 253. The size of the markers is proportional to the number of fish observed in a standard 10-minute tow. [Graphics prepared and developed by the NEFSC, Population Dynamics Branch.]