

NORTHEAST SEAFOOD COALITION

March 27, 2012

Statement of the Northeast Seafood Coalition on Gulf Of Maine Cod Catch Limit Announcement

The announcement today by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) of the Gulf of Maine (GOM) cod catch limit for fishing year 2012 presents some of the most far reaching economic, scientific and policy implications for NE groundfish fishermen in years.

For the many small fishing businesses who may survive, this decision represents a remarkable result when viewed in comparison to where this process began. Shortly after the results of the new GOM cod assessment became known, the prevailing expectation was that the entire GOM groundfish fishery would be shut-down through the strict application of arbitrary statutory rebuilding and end-overfishing requirements. This assessment unexpectedly concluded the GOM cod stock was both overfished and subject to overfishing; completely reversing the conclusions drawn only 3 years prior in 2008 that the stock was very healthy and nearly fully rebuilt. When viewed in this context, the announcement today of a 6700mt catch limit for 2012 represents an extraordinary result for the GOM groundfish fishery which otherwise had been facing certain annihilation.

For many other fishermen, however, even a 6700mt fishery will not be sufficient to sustain their operations. The new catch limit will mean a 22% reduction from the commercial fishery allocation made in 2011. This is a substantial reduction for a fishery that is already in a state of severe financial stress due in significant part to a painful transition to the sector allocations and management system put in place in 2010 to meet the new statutory requirements for Annual Catch Limits and Accountability Measures. Virtually all vessel sizes, gear types and ports-of-call will suffer including, of course, those that depend most heavily on GOM cod and have the least operational flexibility to target other stocks in other areas.

Over the past six months, NSC took a series of strategic steps aimed at helping to alleviate the catastrophic result of a full closure of the GOM fishery. Recognizing the extreme importance of this stock to the region, NSC partnered with the Associated Fisheries of Maine and the Gloucester Fishing Community Preservation Fund to engage one of the world's most highly respected stock assessment scientists, Dr. Doug Butterworth, to work through the assessment and subsequent multiple reviews including the upcoming review by the Scientific and Statistical Committee on March 28th. This effort has led the scientific community to identify a range of critical questions that will now be their focus over the coming year and which we hope will substantially improve our understanding of the true status of this stock.

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“We have excellent scientists in the NMFS Northeast Science Center doing the very best work they can with what they’ve got. It’s nothing personal, but either the new assessment is dead wrong or the old assessment was dead wrong. There are a number of crucial scientific questions that must be answered and we hope everyone involved will make a positive commitment to continually improving our scientific understanding of this vital stock,” said NSC Executive Director Jackie Odell who attended the 2011 stock assessment. “The only thing we’re sure of is that our fishermen complied 100% with the regulations, and the regulations were developed in full compliance with the science that was provided to the managers,” she added.

In fact, many in the fishery management community, including NSC, question whether current law places demands on science that far exceed its capacity to predict nature years into the future. In response, a growing number of Members of Congress have led the call for a thoughtful legislative reform of the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) rebuilding requirements; a process in which NSC is fully engaged.

Perhaps the most critical breakthrough on the GOM cod catch limit came when NMFS, in an exceptional display of flexibility, agreed to a request first made by NSC to implement a somewhat obscure and never used provision of the MSA to address the crisis. The provision allows a temporary catch limit to be set at a level that will reduce overfishing but would still enable the industry to survive until fundamental scientific questions can be answered.

Use of this authority was endorsed by 19 Members of Congress in a January 31, 2012 letter to Commerce Secretary John Bryson and by the New England Fishery Management Council when it made its formal recommendation to NMFS the following day. As a result of this collective effort, the new catch limit for the upcoming 2012 fishing year beginning on May 1 is nearly 5-times higher than what was initially feared.

“Avoiding this economic catastrophe without jeopardizing the stock would not have been possible without a coordinated effort on the part of many; not the least of which was the foresight and flexibility exhibited by NOAA Fisheries Assistant Administrator Sam Rauch who agreed to use this interim catch level authority for the first time. We are grateful to Sam for his leadership on this issue and for providing a notable level of transparency and stakeholder access to this process. Of course, central to this result was the steadfast support our industry continues to receive from many Members of the New England Congressional Delegation,” said Odell.

Also at NSC’s request, the agency conducted a series of special public meetings to provide managers, scientists and virtually all stakeholders including NSC a direct voice in designing a

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creative response to this crisis. This transparent approach proved to be highly constructive for all involved.

“This certainly represents a major accomplishment. But, make no mistake, a 22 percent reduction in the GOM cod allocation will still force many of our good fishermen over the edge at the hands of science that will remain extremely uncertain until a new benchmark stock assessment is conducted that puts all elements of the science back on the table for review and revision. For this reason NSC is also calling on all the Governors in the region to fully coordinate a request to the Secretary of Commerce to provide disaster assistance to the affected fishermen in each state. We need to pull together and do everything we can to mitigate this crisis,” said NSC Policy Director Vito Giacalone.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the Secretary of Commerce is authorized to declare a “commercial fishery failure” and provide financial assistance to fishermen through an affected state when requested by the Governor. In a letter dated March 26, 2012, NSC’s Odell urged the Governors of Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and New Jersey, to view this as “truly a regional crisis” in requesting assistance. “With this in mind, we feel strongly that this crisis requires a coordinated regional response by all affected states,” the letter continues.

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