

Statement by John Bullard
Regional Administrator, Greater Atlantic Region
On Gulf of Maine Cod and Haddock Interim and Emergency Actions
NOAA Fisheries
November 10, 2014

The Gulf of Maine cod stock, a historic icon of the New England fishery, is in the worst shape we have seen in the 40 years that we have been monitoring it. Abundance is only 3-4 percent of levels deemed sustainable for the stock.

This scientific information was presented to the New England Fishery Management Council, a multi-stakeholder body that develops management measures for federal fisheries, which NOAA Fisheries then implements. It underwent a peer review by members of the council's scientific and statistical committee. The committee recognized that based on this scientific data, significant reductions in fishing effort were needed to protect the cod stock -- Their preliminary acceptable biological catch recommendation for the fishing industry would be 386 mt in 2015 down from 1550 mt this year.

The council's Groundfish Oversight Committee voted 8-1 to implement seasonal area closures to protect cod. While the full council could not agree on a specific plan for moving forward, they did vote 14-3 to request that NOAA Fisheries take immediate steps to address overfishing of the cod stock.

The interim measures we are announcing today expand on measures discussed the council. We are announcing this action now because the council's Groundfish Oversight Committee has an important meeting scheduled for Wednesday and Thursday of this week to begin working on the long-term measures needed to protect and rebuild cod. We wanted to announce these interim measures in time to inform those discussions.

Through this action, we are restricting commercial and recreational fishing in areas where the highest concentrations of catch has occurred in recent years as well as those areas identified as spawning aggregation areas in the fall, winter, and spring.

We have solid information, much from fishermen themselves, that tells us where cod have been caught and where they are spawning. We believe protecting these, remaining aggregations of fish provide our best chance to prevent a cod stock collapse and a complete fishery closure. We want to avoid the situation that Canada found itself in when its cod stock collapsed in the 1990s.

We realize that these closures will likely displace fishing effort into open areas. So we added vessel trip limits, which are intended to discourage fishermen from targeting cod in areas where they may be fishing for other species. These trip limits are a short-term measure and should not be part of the more long-term measures being developed by the council for next fishing year.

When developing these measures we considered but did not take action on adjusting annual catch limits. The fishing industry urged us not to go in that direction because it would affect their business planning. The council is also considering quota cuts next year in their follow-on action.

NOAA and the council must take these actions because under U.S. law we are required to do what is necessary to immediately end overfishing when it is occurring and to rebuild federally managed fish stocks when they are depleted. For cod, we have no choice but to cut fishing effort by 75 percent!

The measures we are implementing are a start, but they will not get us to the place we need to be right away. Because the fishing year is half over, we cannot immediately end overfishing, but we can lay the groundwork that the New England Fishery Management Council can build upon to achieve this goal and we can take firm steps, now, to try to prevent further stock decline.

We know that these closures will have profound effects on small vessels that fish these inshore waters, particularly fishermen from New Hampshire and Massachusetts ports like Gloucester.

At the same time that we are implementing these measures for cod, we are implementing a quota increase for a healthy groundfish stock, Gulf of Maine haddock. Unfortunately, the magnitude of the necessary protection measures for cod largely offset the benefits of the haddock quota increase.

However, there are two points I want to emphasize about this...

- We hope this demonstrates that we are just as willing to respond quickly to good news, which leads to more fishing opportunity, as we are to react to bad news, which forces us to restrict fishing effort; and
- By increasing the haddock quota, we are attempting to help moderate the overall negative impacts of the cod measures.

We are committed to continuing to work with the fishing industry and the council to develop and approve new technologies and ways of fishing that allow fishermen to better target healthy stocks and avoid unhealthy stocks.

We will also work to modify existing fishing regulations, where possible, so fishermen can better capitalize on new businesses opportunities -- whether that be for abundant stocks of haddock, redfish, pollock or flounders or more southern species that may become more prevalent in our waters due to the impacts of a changing marine environment.

We know these changes are not going to be easy for communities like Gloucester that have continually relied on cod. But, time and time again, fishermen and communities have shown that they are adaptive. While cod has been the mainstay for Gloucester and other New England ports, there was a time when halibut was also abundant and even caught frequently in Gloucester harbor – but conditions changed - so Gloucester shifted its focus to other species.

Already in the past few years, cod has become less of an economic driver for Gloucester than it was. It has been replaced by lobster, herring and pollock.

Our job as fishery managers will be to help fishing communities through these changing times.

As we enter this new era, managers, scientists and fishermen are going to have to work together, perhaps more closely than ever before, to find ways to adapt to the changes that are happening and capitalize on the new opportunities they present.

In closing, I want to thank the staff at the Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office and the Northeast Fisheries Science Center who have worked tirelessly over the past couple of weeks to meet this important deadline and deliver this action to the council as requested.