The Bottom Line Project

Protected Species Bycatch Reduction
Maine Groundline Exchange Program

06/01/2006 - 03/31/2011
NOAA Award
NA06NMF4520121

Final Report
For the Full Period of the Grant

Submitted 6/29/11
Revision submitted 8/10/11

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Background and Purpose of Project

The Maine Groundline Exchange Program, better known as the Bottom Line Project, is a federally-funded economic assistance program for Maine lobstermen administered by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation (GOMLF) and now complete\(^1\). Funding for the program has been secured since June 2006 through a variety of congressional appropriations and earmarks, all of which were disbursed through NOAA-NMFS-NEERO either directly to GOMLF or through a sub-contract from the Maine Department of Marine Resources (ME DMR) (see Table 1, below). NOAA Award NA06NMF4520121, which extended from June 1, 2006 through March 31, 2011, has been closed out and this is the final report for that award.

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Table 1 – Funding History of the Maine Groundline Exchange Program

Since the program’s inception, GOMLF has accomplished or exceeded the three original stated goals of the Bottom Line Project:

1 – reduce the entanglement risk to large whales in the Gulf of Maine by facilitating the removal and recycling of over two million pounds of floating groundline from the Maine lobster industry;

2-- mitigate the economic hardship for the Maine lobster industry of complying with the federal groundline regulation of the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan (ALWTRP) by issuing nearly three million dollars in vouchers toward the purchase of replacement sink rope in exchange for the removal of floating groundline; and

3-- work with contractors to ensure all collected float rope is recycled or re-used in value-added products; and that no rope is put in a landfill, sent overseas, or returned to the ocean.

GOMLF conducted extensive outreach to the Maine lobster industry, conducted needs assessments, identified rope manufacturers and distributors who participated in the

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\(^1\) While the Bottom Line Project is officially over, individual groundline exchanges may occur through 12/31/11 with funding through another federal award, NA09NMF4520418.
exchange program, conducted collections of floating groundline at regional exchange events, and cultivated contractors to recycle or re-use all of the floating line.

The Bottom Line Project has provided substantial economic assistance to the Maine lobster industry as it has come into compliance with the federal sinking groundline regulations: over $2,800,000 of federal funds have been distributed in voucher form directly to lobstermen toward the purchase of replacement sinking groundline.

Over the course of the project, GOMLF hosted fifteen regional groundline exchanges and several individual collections; removed over 2,000,000 pounds of floating groundline from active use by the Maine lobster industry; and assisted over 1,150 Maine lobstermen in the purchase of replacement sinking groundline.

Project Significance

In 2006, the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation (GOMLF), a 501(c)3 non-profit research organization founded by members of the lobster industry, sought Congressional support and federal funding to assist the industry in complying with federal whale regulations. GOMLF received strong support for this program from the lobster industry, ME DMR, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the conservation community as a possible means to reduce the risk of injury to large whales by providing a mechanism for lobstermen to convert to whale-safe gear while offsetting the enormous expense to the industry.

The anthropogenic threats facing Atlantic large whale populations include ship strikes and entanglement in fishing gear. With fewer than 500 North Atlantic right whales and 1000 Gulf of Maine humpback whales, these populations require protection. Approximately 80% of large whales display entanglement scars from ropes or nets, implicating fishing as a threat to these animals. Entanglement in groundline is considered to be a serious risk posed by the lobster industry.

The federal government currently protects large whales through the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Plan (ALWTRP) under NMFS. The plan relies primarily on gear modifications to reduce the likelihood that whales will be harmed by fishing gear. The plan originally sought to protect unpredictable aggregations of three or more right whales as they are observed through a Dynamic Area Management program (DAM). This management measure allowed lobstermen to fish a DAM area only if they adhered to more restrictive gear modifications requiring all groundline to be comprised of sinking line within 48 hours of the implementation of the DAM. This approach was viewed by many to be an inefficient and ineffective protective action, often impossible
for lobstermen to comply with due to weather and timing, and served only as a stop-gap measure while the ALWTRP underwent significant revisions.

In 2007, the ALWTRP announced the phased-in requirement of “whale-safe” or sinking groundline for a large portion of the Maine lobster fishery, requiring rope that does not arc up in the water column in order to reduce the risk of entanglement to large whales. This requirement resulted in increased protection of large whales, but at significant economic and operational cost to lobstermen.

Many Maine lobstermen would not choose to use sinking groundline due to the nature of the rocky bottom they fish. It greatly increases operational costs and can pose a safety hazard. The industry standard for groundline has been floating rope because it is not prone to chafing or hanging down under rocks as it moves with the tides and currents. Chafed rope leads to an increased loss of gear due to weakened rope breaking off, and rope that is hung down on rocks is extremely dangerous for lobstermen to haul. Sinking rope does not last as long when used for groundline, and must be replaced much more frequently than floating line in order to be reliable.

It is no surprise, then, that the final whale regulations caused tremendous strife for Maine lobstermen as they phased in the sinking groundline. The Bottom Line Project, over its four-year implementation, significantly reduced the start-up costs to individual lobstermen purchasing replacement sink rope.

**Approach to the Bottom Line Project**

*Bottom Line Project Governed by Regulations*

Despite a delay in the publication of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and ensuing final rule, GOMLF proceeded with the Bottom Line Project and began collecting floating groundline in May 2007, targeting fishermen directly affected by prior DAM actions and federal permit holders who were likely to be affected by any likely groundline regulation. The final rule mandating the use of sinking groundlines was issued in October 2007, allowing a year for the phase-in of the new line.

Most elements of the Final Rule amending the ALWTRP went into effect on April 5, 2008, but in early June 2008, NMFS announced that implementation of the sinking groundline regulation, which was to have been effective on October 5, 2008, would be delayed until April 5, 2009, in response to intense petitioning by the Maine lobster industry and its representatives. This delay in the groundline regulation required GOMLF to re-evaluate the ensuing schedule of rope exchanges, as it would technically allow lobstermen to
continue fishing with floating groundlines for an additional six months beyond the original implementation date.

Given the general tendency of many lobstermen to wait until the last minute to make disruptive changes to their fishing regimen, and wanting to accommodate the fishing schedules of as many of the thousands of license holders as possible, GOMLF moved ahead with groundline exchanges in three regions of the state throughout the regulatory process and even after the rule went into effect. Using survey responses and considering the general seasonal fishing schedule, exchanges were offered in a variety of locations and in all four seasons, to allow the maximum number of lobstermen to take advantage of the exchange program.

Needs Assessment/Surveys

It was important from the early stages to assess the interest level of the industry in the exchange program. Bulk-mail surveys to all Maine commercial lobster license holders (n = +/-6200) were issued four times throughout the program. The initial needs assessment survey documented each fisherman by zone, license type (state and/or federal permit), configuration of traps fished, amount and type of groundline fished, and preferred rope distributors. All lobstermen were asked to respond, regardless of whether they were already fishing sinking groundline, allowing us to quantify existing compliance and not mistake compliance for a lack of interest in the groundline exchange program. Subsequent surveys requested information about sink rope brands used and preferred time of year for bringing in line. GOMLF tallied the estimated floating groundline amounts, and also registered the concerns and comments of the respondents through these surveys.

An Access database was created to house all of the survey responses, managed by the GOMLF Database Manager, which allowed for targeted mailings based on lobster fishing zone, preferred dates and locations, fishing configuration and rope weight estimates. Concerns were quantified in the database, as well, providing information for discussion with federal and state managers, media, and industry.

An easily-updated Excel spreadsheet waiting list was established and maintained throughout the program based on responses to the surveys as well as contacts with individual fishermen, and as additional funds became available for additional rope exchanges, the Project Manager was able to contact individuals on the waiting list to involve the maximum number of lobstermen.
Licensed commercial lobstermen were considered eligible for the program if they fished anything other than single traps in waters outside the exemption line. A matrix of typical float rope weights was devised to assist in determining maximum poundage for various lobstering configurations. This reference was useful for perspective when surveys came in with estimated poundage ranging from 500lb to 15,000lb. For example, a full-time lobsterman fishing all 800 traps year-round with large diameter polysteel groundline would fall at the upper limit of that range, while a lobsterman fishing polypropylene tailer warps during summer months might have less than 500 lbs of groundline to exchange.

As the program progressed, GOMLF became aware that despite efforts to provide a groundline exchange program that was fair and equitable, a few lobstermen were taking advantage of the economic assistance but did not actually need the program because they did not fish outside of the exemption line, or because they fished single traps. Therefore, mid-way through the program, GOMLF began requiring registered lobstermen to sign an eligibility form verifying that they fish some or all of their gear outside of the exemption line and confirming the amount of rope they estimated for exchange.

*Poly-based Rope Recycling Research and Development*

From the beginning of the program, GOMLF conducted extensive rope recycling research, networking within the state of Maine and beyond to identify potential users of used lobster rope made of polypropylene (PP) and/or polyethylene (PET). Because of the huge amount of waste rope generated by the groundline regulation, it was important for the success and ownership of the program that the rope not be disposed of in a landfill, as happened with much of the rope collected during earlier exchanges in other states; and that the final product made from the recycled rope be produced and/or distributed in Maine or New England.

Many companies contacted by GOMLF were interested in some facet of the rope exchange process, so GOMLF published two Requests for Proposal (RFP) in recycling trade publications, websites, and newspapers. The RFP was also sent directly to 48 different companies and was divided into two biddable components: collection and transport; and recycling and disposition.

Of the six formal proposals originally received through the RFP process, GOMLF staff and board members elected to contract with Conigliaro Industries, of Framingham MA, who had received rope from exchanges in other states, and whose proposal covered all components of the RFP.
The RFP process was extremely time-consuming for a small organization such as GOMLF. During its official audit, GOMLF discussed the process and was informed by its auditors, controller and Board members that as a private non-profit organization it is not required to issue an RFP, and bids can be solicited directly from providers. That is the process GOMLF followed for all ensuing rope disposition contracts, which allowed for a quicker contracting turnaround. GOMLF hired a lawyer to create a basic contract which was used as a template for all contractors.

Apart from working with Conigliaro, GOMLF also initiated and developed plastics recycling contacts with the University of Maine’s Advanced Engineered Wood Composites Center (AEWC Center), Correct Building Products (Biddeford, Maine), Plante’s Lobster Escape Vents (Somerville, Maine), Corcoran Environmental Services (Kennebunk, Maine), Nicos Polymers (Nazareth, Pennsylvania), Fountainhead Engineering (New Buffalo, Michigan) and others in the effort to connect the processors with manufacturers and to broker the processed rope. Four tons of used rope was sent directly to potential processors, and samples of ground, densified or pelletized rope were sent to plastics and wood composite manufacturers.

GOMLF’s efforts to introduce the recycled polypropylene into the wood composite or recycled use stream have come to naught, despite regularly revisiting the concept with various industry representatives. The process to render the rope into a consistently usable feedstock is multi-faceted and cost-prohibitive, especially in comparison to raw polypropylene, which is the additive of choice in certain composite manufacturing.

*Rope Re-purposed to Make Doormats*

In August 2008, a Maine cordage manufacturer approached GOMLF requesting to take some of the collected groundline for use in making hand-woven doormats. Since then, virtually all of the rope collected during this program was secured by Custom Cordage and the Maine Float Rope Company, the two primary contractors, and several small cottage weavers, who weave the rope into rope doormats or other woven products.

It was suggested that GOMLF should charge interested companies for the rope and thus make money to re-invest in the exchange program, but the cost savings associated with the doormat company arrangements – whereby the contractors absorb all costs except for the scale and two laborers – is greater than the potential sale value of the used rope. Both of the major mat companies involved with the Bottom Line Project implied that they would not be interested in the rope if they were required to purchase it.
Rope Collection Contractors and Disposition

As described above, there were two different end-uses for the collected rope during this program: recycling and re-using. GOMLF’s long-standing contract with Conigliaro Industries, to take all of the rope to their plastics recycling and brokerage facility, incurred the standard costs for trucking and recycling (20% of the total poundage). With the Maine doormat companies, there was therefore no need to ship the rope anywhere, for which GOMLF realized a cost-savings that went back into the budget.

Ultimately, 1,163,000 lbs of floating groundline was shipped by Conigliaro Industries to their processing plants in Massachusetts for shredding and pelletizing, recycling the rope into low-grade plastic planters and pots or using it as a lightweight aggregate in their PlasCrete© “jersey” barriers. 871,500 lbs was received by the Maine doormat companies, Custom Cordage, Inc., and the Maine Float Rope Co. (MFR Co.), where it will be woven into rope doormats. Individual artists in Maine and Massachusetts secured a few thousand pounds of rope for their weaving initiatives, as well. (See attached All Exchanges Summary for end disposition of all collected rope.)

If during the course of the grant timeline any rope used to make doormats was deemed “unusable” due to degradation or size, GOMLF recovered that waste rope and either delivered it to another cottage weaver who could use it in their products, or disposed of it in the EcoMaine waste-to-energy incineration plant in Portland.

None of the collected rope was sent to a landfill, shipped overseas, or returned to the ocean for any purpose.

Groundline Exchange Mechanics and Logistics

Rope collections were generally held at large parking lots easily accessible from the main roads in each of three coastal regions: Scarborough in the west, Rockland area in mid-coast, and Ellsworth downeast (see attached Bottom Line Project Site Map). The Project Manager worked closely with site representatives well in advance of each exchange to ensure all details were covered, including electrical power source, shelter and restroom facility options, traffic coordination, equipment use, duration of site usage, publicity, and other site-specific concerns.

Directions were sent to all participating lobstermen, indicating their assigned date, time and location. Large "Bottom Line Project" signage and a banner were used to direct local traffic, displayed prominently along the route and at each site. GOMLF followed the same general arrangement each time for collecting the floating groundline:
• posting directional signage,
• setting up cardboard Gaylord boxes on pallets,
• pre-positioning empty tractor trailers for loading the boxes,
• positioning the pallet scale to optimize forklift operation,
• checking in the lobstermen as they arrive,
• displaying charts, rope samples and information,
• arranging an on-site “office” to process vouchers, and
• coordinating traffic flow.

Fully loaded Gaylords were forklifted by the contractor’s staff to a pallet scale and weighed. Originally GOMLF had intended to assume an average weight of a fully loaded Gaylord, as was done at prior collections in Massachusetts and in the mid-Atlantic; but availability of suitable numbers of uniformly sized Gaylords was not assured, so a scale was sourced by the Project Manager and rented for the duration of the exchange. Depending on the contracted arrangement, the fees for scale rental, Gaylords, and pallets was paid for either by GOMLF or the contractor.

If shipping was involved in the disposition of the rope – whether to a plastics recycling plant or a mat-maker’s storage facility - tractor-trailers were hired by the contractor and/or GOMLF, and the forklift would load the trucks either by stacking Gaylords (closed box trailer) or loosely dumping the rope (open-top trailers). If the collection was held at the rope’s final or temporary resting place, the loaded Gaylord boxes or the rope dumped loose was stored on-site at the collection venue.

The one exception to that general outline was for the collection on Vinalhaven, an island 18 miles off the coast of Rockland. In April 2008, GOMLF worked closely with island residents to create an arrangement unique to an island collection, working carefully with ferry schedules, fishing schedules, tides, and existing infrastructure. GOMLF calculated the amount of rope that could be packed onto the flat-bed truck and limited on-island registration to the number of lobstermen who filled that quota; 19,600 lbs of floating groundlines were collected in the Xactics, which were then weighed on a pallet scale brought out by GOMLF expressly for that purpose, then loaded onto a flat-bed truck by the Vinalhaven Co-op forklift operator, then ferried over to the Rockland collection site the following day, where they were emptied into waiting Gaylords using a borrowed side-dump forklift.

In all instances, rope was prepared by the lobstermen as per the project guidelines -- it was all floating groundline (polypropylene or a polysteel mix); free of any sinking rope (such as gangions), metal hog rings (sometimes used to bind the bitter end of a cut line)
or plastic weights or floats; and it was all coiled or bundled – no “spaghetti” rope. The bundles and coils were readily tossed into the Gaylords by lobstermen and hired staff from GOMLF, the recycling contractors, and occasionally NMFS or congressional volunteers.

Several of these logistical components were challenged by weather conditions – signage was difficult to post and even trickier to see due to high winds and even blizzard conditions; boxes could not be pre-built due to the wind blowing them over or out of the staging area, which meant on-demand box construction and positioning by the workers; occasional last-minute obligatory location or date shifts confused some attendees; rain, ice or blowing dust could make the work area treacherous for the forklift operators and uncomfortable for the participants.

No exchange was ever cancelled due to weather. For date or location changes due to weather (once in Ellsworth and once in Waldoboro), the Project Manager informed as many participants as possible by phone prior to the collections, and then relied on signage at the old site and word-of-mouth to reach others. Heaters, tents and/or mobile offices were rented so that the voucher transactions could take place despite inclement weather. With the volume of rope being handled and the number of lobstermen receiving vouchers during any given day, it was important that the process be as smooth as possible.

Three GOMLF staff members were the “A-Team” of the groundline exchanges: The Project Manager checked in each arrival and directed them to the staging area, and also ran interference wherever necessary – fulfilling impromptu equipment needs, maintaining a running list of arrivals, calling contractors and shipping agents, arranging meals and breaks for laborers, and answering myriad questions of lobstermen, media and visitors. She also made reminder calls to those who had registered but hadn’t appeared by an hour before the scheduled day’s end. The GOMLF Fisheries Liaison took the post at the scale, recording weights of each box of rope per individual lobsterman on an NCR pad, tearing off the top sheet to give to the lobsterman, who would then bring it to the voucher table. The GOMLF Director maintained the voucher station, tallying pounds and dollars, recording them on the spreadsheet (see attached Field Tally Sheet sample) and filling out the voucher to give to the lobsterman.

Sink Rope Vouchers

Two thousand and eighteen (2,018) vouchers were distributed during the course of the Bottom Line Project, each of them pre-printed, filled out with the lobsterman’s name, address, license number and amount, signed, and embossed with a GOMLF seal.
GOMLF received useful recommendations and advice from NMFS/NERO staff prior to the first collection in 2007, and modeled the voucher format on earlier groundline collections conducted in other states. The attached Sample Vouchers show the evolution of the voucher language, including changes in the stipulation of rope diameter and expiration timeframe.

Some vouchers were mailed to recipients after the collection due to running out of pre-printed vouchers during an exchange – even though GOMLF brought blank pre-printed vouchers to each exchange, often there would be more unregistered lobstermen who showed up than there were vouchers. Vouchers were also mailed to lobstermen requesting their total be split between vouchers, or when rope was received through an individual collection at a remote site, or to replace lost vouchers. In total, 1152 Maine fishermen received sink rope vouchers in exchange for their floating groundlines, including the rope that was pre-delivered by lobstermen in the recycling investigation stage early in the program. (See attached All Individual Participants.)

As per the protocol established by the original workplan budget, Maine lobstermen received $1.40/lb toward the purchase of sink rope for each pound of the floating groundline turned in.

Marine Rope Suppliers

Rope dealers from Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts were informed about the Bottom Line Project in 2007 and were required to register with GOMLF in order to participate in the voucher program. (See attached All Marine Supply Participants.) They submitted proof of their retail license, and agreed to ensure that the vouchers would be redeemed for the purchase of sink rope only, with a minimum diameter of 11/32” (9-thread). They were instructed to only accept authentic vouchers, with a blue color GOMLF logo and an embossed seal in the lower right corner.

Prior to each collection, GOMLF sent a list of pre-registered lobstermen to all rope dealers along with their assigned voucher number; dealers found this to be helpful in preparing for potential sink rope orders from their customers. After each collection, the final voucher list was sent out with actual voucher amounts. This was one way of preventing voucher abuse by any fisherman.

GOMLF invited rope manufacturers and suppliers to attend the groundline exchange events throughout the program, and many took advantage of the opportunity to showcase their wares, talk with lobstermen about their rope questions and needs, and give out sample rope. Several marine suppliers opted to offer lobstermen incentives to
use the voucher at their store, though GOMLF had no involvement with this strategy. (See attached *Sample Voucher Incentives from Dealers*.)

Lobstermen were required to redeem their vouchers at participating rope dealers within 60 days of voucher issuance date, which was extended to 90 days during the third phase of exchanges, to accommodate rope delivery delays. To be reimbursed for the vouchers, dealers submitted an invoice to GOMLF accompanied by a copy (or original) of the voucher/s and a copy of the receipt for each sink rope purchase. GOMLF issued a check to the rope dealer for the invoiced amount within thirty days. GOMLF worked closely with the dealers on any questions they have regarding the voucher redemption.

Dealers were not required to offer a discount on the rope. Because of the discrepancy between the $1.40/lb offered for the float rope, vs. the per-pound cost of sinking rope (which can exceed $2.50/lb), lobstermen were essentially required to provide matching funds on their purchase – the vouchers were redeemed at face value toward the purchase of acceptable sinking rope, but the lobsterman was responsible for any cost beyond the value of the voucher. If the total purchase price for the sink rope was lower than the value of the voucher, the balance was forfeited – no refunds by the rope dealer or GOMLF were made and the remainder was redirected back into the pool of rope funds.

If there were outstanding vouchers that were not redeemed by the expiration date, GOMLF called the individual lobstermen holding those vouchers and gave them a reasonable drop-dead date for using the voucher, and communicated with the intended rope supplier to expect the late voucher. While this occurred only rarely, it was an effective method for ensuring voucher redemption.

*Outreach and communication with industry*

The Bottom Line Project Manager spent a great deal of time communicating with members of the lobster industry and their families, rope manufacturing companies in the US and elsewhere, marine supply stores in New England, Maine lobster co-ops, regional rope distributors, and international recycling companies throughout the duration of this program. GOMLF sought updates from NMFS and from congressional representatives in order to provide accurate information to concerned parties.

Information regarding the specifics of the Final Whale Rule, the exemption line, the definition of “neutrally buoyant” vs. “sink rope”, the “sliver waters” area, and the implementation details of the whale rule were shared by the Project Manager on many occasions to help get current, accurate information to the stakeholders. GOMLF used
the original NMFS exemption line map and blew it up to a 9-foot four-color chart of the Maine coast, displayed at every groundline exchange to exhibit the exemption line with respect to the state waters line, greatly facilitating lobstermen’s understanding of the affected fishing bottom.

The Project Manager issued press releases to an extensive media contact list (approximately 70 outlets) for each groundline exchange event, and was often interviewed for articles and film coverage. (See attached Bottom Line Project Press Coverage links.)

The Project Manager presented information about the Bottom Line Project at annual events such as the Maine Fishermen’s Forum, the Massachusetts Lobstermen’s Weekend, GOMLF board meetings and the Right Whale Consortium, as well as at various industry association meetings, lobster zone and advisory council meetings, entanglement and rope workshops, lobster conferences and school or non-profit organization functions.

_Sinking Groundline Rope Initiatives_

As part of a holistic approach to understanding the sinking groundline regulation impacts after the rule went into effect in 2009, GOMLF elected to document the experience that the fishery was having with the new groundline, both to educate other members of the industry and to share information with rope manufacturers, managers, and marine suppliers. Various sinking groundline documentation initiatives were embarked upon during the latter part of the grant period (2009-2011).

GOMLF began a collaborative effort in May 2009 to document the experiences lobstermen had when using the sinking groundline, many for the first time. With support from the Maine and the Downeast Lobstermen’s Associations, GOMLF created a tracking form for all Bottom Line Project participants wherein they could document their experiences, both positive and negative. Only 57 lobstermen participated in this tracking effort, but of the 418 daily haul reports, gear was lost 260 times (62%), all on hard, rocky, boulder bottom.

Since 1996, each lobster trap must by law contain a tag indicating the current fishing year. In anticipation of gear lost during a fishing year, ME DMR traditionally issued 10% of current tag holdings in replacement tags to licensed fishermen, with more allowed for documented catastrophic loss. Beginning in 2009 (and coinciding with the commencement of the sinking groundline regulation), in a nascent attempt to get information about latent effort and trap loss authentication, ME DMR began requiring
lobstermen to submit a signed affidavit each time they requested replacement tags, to document the trap loss numbers, location and suspected reason for loss. At the suggestion of and with assistance from the Maine Lobstermen’s Association, the GOMLF Project Manager was able to mine these affidavits for statistics regarding the reasons for trap loss. Not surprisingly, one of the main causes listed for trap loss was “whale rope” (see Table 2, below).

The affidavits are 8.5x11 sheets of paper, filled out by hand by the lobsterman or a Marine Patrol officer and signed by both parties on the date of submission. Each page is filed by ME DMR licensing office personnel in large filing cabinets, though the information regarding cause of trap loss is not recorded during the filing process. It required the Project Manager and two assistants a total of 80 hours to parse the two years’ worth of paperwork. GOMLF suggested to ME DMR that with a small modification to their database they could easily track the trap loss causes in the future.

![Table 2 – Number of Traps Lost, by Cause – data mined from the ME DMR affidavits required since 2009 for lobstermen to request replacement tags](image)

GOMLF Database Manager teased out the tallies of the investigation in a number of ways, looking at it by zone, season, and federal vs. state permit. Traps lost due to use of
sinking groundline was the 2nd-most touted reason given by the lobstermen who requested replacement tags in 2009 - 2010. During those two years, approximately 70,000 replacement tags were requested thru the affidavit process (far fewer than the automatic 10% replacement tags purchased by an individual in years past, when there was an assumed 10% trap loss).

A one-day educational sinking groundline workshop was hosted by GOMLF, a workshop whose genesis was in conversations with NOAA-NERO staff and fishermen, to share possible strategies and successful techniques for fishing sinking groundline. Held in Rockport, Maine, in June 2010, eight industry members and seven rope manufacturers from the US and Canada brought questions, information, and samples of used and new rope to discuss.

GOMLF Project Manager presented all of the collected information about sinking groundline during a special session at the Maine Fishermen’s Forum in March 2011 (see attached Sink Rope Session MLA Summary).

Additional Activities

Throughout the course of the groundline exchange initiative, GOMLF participated in state-wide initiatives related to fishing gear and whale entanglement prevention. In addition to working with the contractors, lobstermen, rope dealers, media and colleagues on Bottom Line Project exchanges, the Project Manager was involved in other activities related to the issue of floating and sinking groundlines, endlines, or entanglement in fixed gear, including:

- writing articles about the Bottom Line Project for the GOMLF quarterly newsletter;
- sending informational bulletins and/or press releases about the Bottom Line Project for use in association newsletters and news publications;
- granting interviews with news media about the Bottom Line Project, the rope doormats, and the Final Rule’s implementation;
- updating and curating articles and photos on the GOMLF Bottom Line Project website, www.gomlf.org;
- discussing potential future derelict fishing gear initiatives in Maine with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and NOAA Marine Debris Division;
- collaborating with ME DMR and Maine Lobstermen’s Association to research sinking groundline impacts;
- attending lobster science and management conferences and disentanglement and rope workshops in Canada, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine;
• engaging in sink rope discussions regarding specific gravity, durability, availability and disposal with industry, Marine Patrol and manufacturers;
• reviewing gear research opportunities with ME DMR and establishing priorities for the use of additional federal funding;
• documenting the issue of derelict fishing gear created by the use of sinking groundline;
• working closely and diligently with one of the Maine doormat companies, who required fairly substantial intervention in order to fulfill their obligations to contractors involved in the collections;
• consulting with an organization in Rhode Island as they embarked on their own groundline replacement program for Area 2/3 lobstermen;
• responding to requests from recycling concerns in Maine and Ontario regarding the disposition of polypropylene, polyester and/or polysteel rope;
• assisting at a series of lobster conferences for lobster scientists and manager, held to discuss lobster industry issues including the ALWTRP.

In February 2009, GOMLF requested a reprogramming of funds through the Maine Groundline Exchange Program. Funds were shifted from the Rope Voucher line item into travel and contracted labor, to host three Lobster Conferences on the future of the lobster industry. These conferences allowed federal and state managers time to discuss potential additional federal regulations within the industry. Through a series of three workshops, the conferences developed a common understanding of the challenges facing the lobster industry, management of other fisheries around the world, and possible solutions to address the changes facing the Gulf of Maine lobster industry. Lobstermen have shown concern about the resource and GOMLF wanted to offer an opportunity for fishermen to share their ideas with managers to develop tools to use in response to the current and upcoming regulations.

Results

Bottom Line Project

When GOMLF originally submitted a work-plan to NOAA for the Maine Poly Groundline Exchange in 2006, the goal was to remove one million pounds of floating groundline from active use in the Maine lobster fishery. Through the outreach and needs assessments conducted during the first eighteen months of the program, it became clear that there was at least twice that amount of rope that would need to be swapped out for sinking groundline. The sweeping scope of the project – engaging lobstermen from every corner of the Maine coast, and ultimately inviting fixed-gear gillnetters into
the mix toward the end of the project – went far beyond the intended goal and eventually doubled the anticipated outcome of the exchange program.

Fifteen separate regional exchanges were hosted over a four-year span (May 2007 – August 2010) and were attended by 1,152 Maine fishermen, many of them more than once as they phased out their floating groundline over time. That reflects participation by approximately one-fifth (19%) of all Maine commercial lobster license holders. Of the total participants, over half (n=682) held federal lobster permits – a full 50% of all Maine licensed federal permit holders.

Because the protocol for the rope collections involved carefully weighing each container of groundline, GOMLF is able to report a fairly accurate figure of 2,034,657 lbs of floating groundline removed from use in the fishery. That equates to approximately 11,525 miles of line, which would have filled over 51 tractor-trailers if it had all been shipped. All of the rope was recycled or re-purposed, and none of it went to a land-fill or was returned to the ocean.

For a breakdown of dates, locations, number of days, number of participants, voucher value, pounds of rope and rope disposition, see attached All Exchanges Summary.

Sinking Groundline

A predicted result from the use of sinking groundline in certain rocky areas was an increase in the number of lost traps due to parting rope. Lobstermen lose gear regularly in the course of a season, and there are many causes for the trap loss (see Table 2 above). Sink rope is often made of polyester and nylon combinations, and is essentially a fabric that comes in contact with the substrate. In areas of mud, gravel or sand, the chafing element is not as pronounced (though abrasion issues abound). However, in areas of rocky bottom – along much of the Maine coast – the chafing is immediate, constant, and often debilitating to the rope.

As a result of reviewing the ME DMR replacement tag request affidavits, there is a slightly more refined understanding of why trap loss occurs, at least anecdotally. The greatest cause of trap loss, according to individual lobstermen’s affidavits, is boat traffic (propellers cut off the buoys, leaving the traps stranded with no hauling line); sinking groundline is listed as the second most common cause. According to information revealed by the affidavit review, approximately 21% of the total reported loss of traps was attributed to sinking groundline. While this information may not directly assist industry in losing fewer traps due to the use of sinking groundline, it highlights the reason a lobsterman may adjust his fishing practices to avoid certain bottom type
(rocky, jagged, boulders, hard bottom) to minimize gear loss – even though this adjustment may result in catching fewer lobsters.

This replacement tag request mechanism could be improved by requiring a more detailed description of the gear loss event (location, gear configuration, rope type used, depth, etc.), and by logging the information in a database upon receipt. GOMLF has discussed that possibility with ME DMR personnel, though there are no plans to review or redesign the affidavits further at this time because there has been no funding directed at this initiative. GOMLF does intend to continue to document lost gear through future at-sea derelict fishing gear recovery projects, many of which are federally funded and will be reported on semi-annually to the funding agency.

The increased loss of traps due to parting line is an area of growing concern among fishermen and managers and will likely lead to more effort to evaluate the impact of derelict fishing gear – traps and rope – on marine resources and habitat. GOMLF is working with ME DMR, the National Fish & Wildlife Foundation and NOAA’s Marine Debris Division to prioritize the research and recovery needs spawned by the sinking groundline regulation, particularly in light of upcoming vertical line risk reduction measures which may impact the way lobstermen configure their gear.

GOMLF does not have a formal work plan for future sinking groundline testing as a result of the June 2010 workshop or the March 2011 groundline session at the Fishermen’s Forum. Because available funds were redirected to develop and implement lobster conferences (both pre- and post-scoping), there was no ability for GOMLF to focus on testing sinking groundline. Since the issuance of the most recent federal funding award (through ME DMR), GOMLF has been contracted to participate in state-initiated gear studies that have focused on other aspects of the entanglement issue, namely the vertical line issue.

However, it is likely that some of the ideas about rigging gear with sinking groundline (such as moving three-year-old sink rope endlines down to be used as tailer warps, or using a steady-clip at the top of the trap to keep the rope from chafing along the trap edge, e.g.) have been picked up and tried by lobstermen in attendance at the workshops. The Maine Lobstermen’s Association was able to follow up on one of the suggested investigations that arose from discussions at the Forum session (related to where the chafing on a groundline most commonly occurs) and will be working with the New England Aquarium and others to pursue it.

Evaluation
The Maine Groundline Exchange - Bottom Line Project is viewed by Maine lobstermen and others as an extremely popular, helpful and successful economic assistance program which eased the mandatory transition from floating to sinking groundline, a gear transfer which incurred a potentially overwhelming economic burden for many individuals. GOMLF has received feedback throughout the entire program reflecting the gratitude of the industry and highlighting how important this financial assistance has been in helping the industry comply with the Final Whale Rule.

Logistically speaking, GOMLF became well-versed in organizing and hosting the groundline exchanges, and had the opportunity to work with diverse providers throughout the course of the project. The flexibility provided by the evolving work plan – necessitated by the extended regulatory process schedule - allowed for some creative solutions to the problems of polypropylene rope disposition, and many varied vendors have benefited from the procurement of rope through the program.

The breadth and scope of work allowed under this federally-funded program is a testament to the agency’s ability to recognize the need for flexibility when administering a state-wide industry-based “gear” project. The lobster industry in Maine impacts and is impacted by a wide array of influences, and GOMLF has been able to approach and address important gear-related issues under the umbrella of this grant.

Attachments to the Final Report, June 2011:
  - All Exchanges Summary
  - All Individual Participants
  - All Marine Supply Participants
  - Sample Vouchers Phases I-IV
  - Bottom Line Project Site Map
  - Field Tally Sheet_sample
  - Sample Voucher Incentives from Dealers
  - Sink Rope Session_MLA summary
  - Bottom Line Project_Press Coverage
### Total Groundline Exchanged Through the Bottom Line Project:

**Dates, Locations, Figures and End-users**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Collection</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th># days</th>
<th>No. Lobstermen (some 2+ times)</th>
<th>Total Pounds Collected</th>
<th>Total Vouchers Distributed</th>
<th>End-use of Rope</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>5/21/2007</td>
<td>Scarborough</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>137,822</td>
<td>$192,951.00</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>Ellsworth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>93,700</td>
<td>$131,179.00</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4/15/2008</td>
<td>Rockland</td>
<td>4 (incl Vhaven)</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>181,052</td>
<td>$253,491.00</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5/14/2008</td>
<td>Scarborough</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>162</td>
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<td>$249,396.00</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Ellsworth</td>
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<td>168</td>
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<td>$284,011.95</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>196,960</td>
<td>$275,858.00</td>
<td>Conigliaro Industries - most to Conigliaro; 4000 lbs to Custom Cordage for testing out doormats</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>153,248</td>
<td>$214,552.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9/9/2009</td>
<td>Waldo-Warren</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>113,010</td>
<td>$158,215.00</td>
<td>49,772lbs to MFRCo; 61,238lbs to Cust Cord; 20,000lbs to rope scuptor</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>158</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>12/11/2009</td>
<td>Waldoboro</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81</td>
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<td>$102,129.00</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>98,578</td>
<td>$138,008.00</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>Rock-Waldo</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>95,824</td>
<td>$134,155.00</td>
<td>split Cust Cord - Maine Float Rope Co - cottage weavers</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>8/24/2010</td>
<td>Ellsworth</td>
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<td>80,986</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>92</td>
<td>78,315</td>
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<td><strong>Individual Exchanges</strong></td>
<td><strong>various dates</strong></td>
<td><strong>various locales</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6,479</td>
<td>1,933</td>
<td><strong>$9,070.00</strong></td>
<td>various cottage weavers</td>
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| Total | 1,933 | 2,034,657 | **$2,847,556.95** |

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Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation  
Final Report for NOAA Grant NA06NMF4520121  
June 29, 2011
## The Bottom Line Project
### Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Physical Locations</th>
<th>Mailing Address</th>
<th>City/State/Zip</th>
<th>Registration Rec'd</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bath Lobster Supply</td>
<td>Joe Pono</td>
<td>West Bath</td>
<td>340 State Rd</td>
<td>West Bath, ME 04530-6244</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brooks Trap Mill</td>
<td>Stephen Brooks</td>
<td>Thomaston</td>
<td>Beechwood St</td>
<td>Thomaston, ME 04818</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>C- Rose Trap Co.</td>
<td>Don Jackson</td>
<td>6 Banagher Way, Scarborough</td>
<td>6 Banagher Way</td>
<td>Scarborough, ME 04074</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Downeast Fishing Gear</td>
<td>Alison Holmquist</td>
<td>Ellsworth, Blue Hill</td>
<td>PO Box 1283</td>
<td>Ellsworth, ME 04605</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendship Trap</td>
<td>Jimmy Emerson</td>
<td>13 Indian River Rd., Columbia Falls</td>
<td>13 Indian River Rd</td>
<td>Columbia Falls, ME 04623</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendship Trap</td>
<td>Mike Wadsworth</td>
<td>570 Cushing Rd., Friendship</td>
<td>Route 97 Box 477</td>
<td>Friendship, ME 04547</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamilton Marine</td>
<td>Evan Kohl</td>
<td>100 Fore St.</td>
<td>100 Fore St</td>
<td>Portland, ME 04101</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamilton Marine</td>
<td>Randy Emerson, Rick Gagne</td>
<td>20 Park Drive, Rockland</td>
<td>20 Park Dr</td>
<td>Rockland, ME 04841</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamilton Marine</td>
<td>Denis Hall</td>
<td>Route 1, Searsport</td>
<td>PO Box 227</td>
<td>Searsport, ME 04947</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hamilton Marine</td>
<td>Beth Gronros</td>
<td>165 Clark Point Rd., Southwest Harbor</td>
<td>165 Clark Pt Rd</td>
<td>Southwest Harbor, ME 04679</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>Hamilton Marine</td>
<td>John Church</td>
<td>Jonesport</td>
<td>174 Main St</td>
<td>Jonesport, ME 04649</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMP Fishing Gear Ltd.</td>
<td>John Reardon</td>
<td>New Bedford MA (will deliver)</td>
<td>44 South St</td>
<td>New Bedford, MA 02740</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>Industrial Marine Mktg. Inc.</td>
<td>Roger Smith</td>
<td>Maine Coast (will deliver)</td>
<td>28 Blanchard Place</td>
<td>Wakefield, RI 02879</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>Island Fishing Gear</td>
<td>Jenni Steele or Su</td>
<td>8 West Main St., Stonington</td>
<td>PO Box 292</td>
<td>Stonington, ME 04681</td>
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<td>Island Lobster Supply</td>
<td>Joe Lazaro</td>
<td>Vinalhaven</td>
<td>PO Box 334</td>
<td>Vinalhaven, ME 04863</td>
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<td>Jonesport Fishing Supply</td>
<td>Vicki-lee Johnson</td>
<td>51 Hopkins Pt Rd, Jonesport</td>
<td>51 Hopkins Pt Rd</td>
<td>Jonesport, ME 04649</td>
<td>2008</td>
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<td>Maine Marine Supply</td>
<td>Dave Violette</td>
<td>416 Commercial St., Portland</td>
<td>416 Commercial St</td>
<td>Portland, ME 04101</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>Midcoast Marine Supply</td>
<td>Larry Wheelis</td>
<td>153 New County Rd., Thomaston</td>
<td>153 New County Rd</td>
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<td>2007</td>
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<td>Midcoast Marine Supply</td>
<td>Jeremy Young</td>
<td>1805 Atlantic Hwy, Waldoboro</td>
<td>1805 Atlantic Hwy</td>
<td>Waldoboro, ME 04572</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<td>New England Marine &amp; Industrial</td>
<td>Mike Richardson</td>
<td>Portsmouth NH</td>
<td>200 Spaulding Tpke</td>
<td>Portsmouth, NH 03601</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>New England Marine &amp; Industrial</td>
<td>Bob Jones</td>
<td>Stonington; Brant Rock</td>
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<td>Stonington, ME 04681</td>
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<td>Noel Marine Supply</td>
<td>Jolette Rossi-West</td>
<td>Milbridge</td>
<td>409 Wyman Rd</td>
<td>Milbridge, ME 04658</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offshore Marine Outfitters</td>
<td>Matt Nagy</td>
<td>York</td>
<td>15 Hannaford Dr</td>
<td>York, ME 03909</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<td>Portland Trap</td>
<td>Arnie McCray</td>
<td>Portland</td>
<td>26 Union Wharf</td>
<td>Portland, ME 04101</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shay's Trap</td>
<td>Vern Shay</td>
<td>209 Thome Rd., Sullivan</td>
<td>PO Box 272</td>
<td>Gouldsboro, ME 04607</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Maine Lobstermen's Assn Co-op</td>
<td>Kathy &amp; Charlie Garnache</td>
<td>Biddeford</td>
<td>754 Pool Road</td>
<td>Biddeford, ME 04005</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Trap Barn</td>
<td>David Poland</td>
<td>8 Sand Hill Drive, Nobleboro</td>
<td>8 Sand Hill Drive</td>
<td>Nobleboro, ME 04555</td>
<td>out of business now</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tyler Marine</td>
<td>Evans Tyler</td>
<td>6 Narrows Rd., Addison</td>
<td>6 Narrows Road</td>
<td>Addison, ME 04606</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Groundline Exchange Vouchers**

**Participant Marine Suppliers**

2007-2011
This voucher is issued to ________________ in the amount of ______________________ (maximum value) for the purchase of non-buoyant groundline at a participating distributor. This voucher may be used exclusively toward the purchase of new sinking line and under no circumstances will the distributor be reimbursed by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation for more than the maximum value of this voucher. ________________ will pay any additional amount over the value of the voucher required to purchase the rope.

It is a violation of federal law for any person to tender or accept this voucher in connection with the sale of any gear other than non-buoyant lobster line. This voucher and associated sales of non-buoyant line may not be exchanged for cash, credit, or other products. Reimbursement will be made under this voucher only for purchases of non-buoyant line covered by the Bottom Line Project. Use or attempted use of this voucher for any other purpose shall void all obligations to honor this voucher and may subject the user to federal penalties and fines. This voucher is only valid for the purchase of non-buoyant groundline at a participating distributor for 60 days after the date of issuance.

___________________________________________________
Lobsterman Signature

Issuance Date

COPY ONLY – NOT VALID FOR REDEMPTION

Patten D. White
GOMLF Board President
Pay To The Order Of STEVEN HANSON

This voucher is issued to Steven Hanson in the amount of $ (maximum value) for the purchase of non-buoyant groundline at a participating distributor. This voucher may be used exclusively toward the purchase of new sinking line and under no circumstances will the distributor be reimbursed by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation for more than the maximum value of this voucher. Steven Hanson will pay any additional amount over the value of the voucher required to purchase the rope.

It is a violation of federal law for any person to tender or accept this voucher in connection with the sale of any gear other than non-buoyant lobster line. This voucher and associated sales of non-buoyant line may not be exchanged for cash, credit, or other products. Reimbursement will be made under this voucher only for purchases of non-buoyant lobster line covered by the Bottom Line Project. Use or attempted use of this voucher for any other purpose shall void all obligations to honor this voucher and may subject the user to federal penalties and fines. This voucher is only valid for the purchase of non-buoyant groundline at a participating distributor for 60 days after the date of issuance.

COPY ONLY – NOT VALID FOR REDEMPTION

Patten D. White
GOMLF Board President

Steven Hanson
273 Long Island Ave.
Long Island ME 04050
Permit # 72788

Pay To The Order Of  Steven Hanson

This voucher is issued to Steven Hanson in the amount of $ (maximum value) for the purchase of non-buoyant groundline at a participating distributor. This voucher may be used exclusively toward the purchase of new sinking line and under no circumstances will the distributor be reimbursed by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation for more than the maximum value of this voucher. Steven Hanson will pay any additional amount over the value of the voucher required to purchase the rope.

It is a violation of federal law for any person to tender or accept this voucher in connection with the sale of any gear other than non-buoyant lobster line. This voucher and associated sales of non-buoyant line may not be exchanged for cash, credit, or other products. Reimbursement will be made under this voucher only for purchases of non-buoyant lobster line covered by the Bottom Line Project. Use or attempted use of this voucher for any other purpose shall void all obligations to honor this voucher and may subject the user to federal penalties and fines. This voucher is only valid for the purchase of non-buoyant groundline at a participating distributor for 60 days after the date of issuance.

Lobsterman Signature  Issuance Date
Pay To The Order Of: SEAN CARICOFE

This voucher is issued to SEAN CARICOFE in the amount of ONE HUNDRED FORTY-TWO DOLLARS (maximum value) for the purchase of sinking (non-buoyant) rope at a participating distributor. Rope must have a diameter of 9-thread (11/32") or greater. This voucher may be used exclusively toward the purchase of new sinking line of 9-thread or greater diameter, and under no circumstances will the distributor be reimbursed by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation for more than the maximum value of this voucher. SEAN CARICOFE will pay any additional amount over the value of the voucher required to purchase the rope.

It is a violation of federal law for any person to tender or accept this voucher in connection with the sale of any gear other than sinking lobster line. This voucher and associated sales of sinking line may not be exchanged for cash, credit, or other products. Reimbursement will be made under this voucher only for purchases of non-buoyant lobster line covered by the Bottom Line Project. Use or attempted use of this voucher for any other purpose shall void all obligations to honor this voucher and may subject the user to federal penalties and fines.

This voucher expires 90 (ninety) days from the date of issuance.

Pay To The Order Of: SEAN CARICOFE

This voucher is issued to SEAN CARICOFE in the amount of ONE HUNDRED FORTY-TWO DOLLARS (maximum value) for the purchase of non-buoyant groundline at a participating distributor. Rope must have a diameter of 9-thread (11/32") or greater. This voucher may be used exclusively toward the purchase of new sinking line and under no circumstances will the distributor be reimbursed by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation for more than the maximum value of this voucher. SEAN CARICOFE will pay any additional amount over the value of the voucher required to purchase the rope.

COPY ONLY – NOT VALID FOR REDEMPTION

It is a violation of federal law for any person to tender or accept this voucher in connection with the sale of any gear other than sinking lobster line. This voucher and associated sales of sinking line may not be exchanged for cash, credit, or other products. Reimbursement will be made under this voucher only for purchases of non-buoyant lobster line covered by the Bottom Line Project. Use or attempted use of this voucher for any other purpose shall void all obligations to honor this voucher and may subject the user to federal penalties and fines. This voucher is only valid for the purchase of sinking groundline at a participating distributor for 90 (ninety) days from the date of issuance.

Patten D. White
GOMLF Board President

10/13/09
Issuance Date
NAME:  STRE:  TOWN, ZIP:  Maine License #

Pay To The Order Of: ______________________________

This voucher is issued to __________________________ in the amount of __________________________ DOLLARS (maximum value) for the purchase of non-buoyant rope at a participating distributor. Rope must have a diameter of 9-thread (11/32”) or greater. This voucher may be used exclusively toward the purchase of new sinking line of 9-thread or greater diameter, and under no circumstances will the distributor be reimbursed by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation for more than the maximum value of this voucher. __________________________ will pay any additional amount over the value of the voucher required to purchase the rope.

It is a violation of federal law for any person to tender or accept this voucher in connection with the sale of any gear other than sinking lobster line. This voucher and associated sales of sinking line may not be exchanged for cash, credit, or other products. Reimbursement will be made under this voucher only for purchases of non-buoyant line covered by the Bottom Line Project. Use or attempted use of this voucher for any other purpose shall void all obligations to honor this voucher and may subject the user to federal penalties and fines.

This voucher expires 90 (ninety) days from the date of issuance.

Patten D. White
GOMLF Board President

COPY ONLY – NOT VALID FOR REDEMPTION

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INCENTIVES OFFERED TO LOBSTERMEN W/ VOUCHERS BY ROPE SUPPLIERS

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Hyliner Steel Line

$2.17 LB

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Sink Rope Session, Maine Fishermen’s Forum 2011

Summary prepared by MLA

The Maine Lobstermen’s Association and the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation organized a session “Surviving the Whale Rules” at the Maine Fishermen’s Forum on the use of sinking line among Maine lobstermen. The purpose of the session was to hear specific issues from lobstermen as well as remedies which they have devised to cope with the line.

Laura Ludwig from the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation spoke about the foundation's efforts to document the effect of sinking groundline on lobster fishing in the state. With assistance from the MLA she studied the tag replacement affidavits held by the Department of Marine Resources to determine what percentage of lost traps was credited to groundline parting. The DMR trap tag replacement data showed that an average of only 35,000 were requested each year in 2009 and 2010, compared to 155,000 which were issued annually in previous years through the automatic 10% issuance. Nearly all of the trap losses reported due to whale rope occurred from April through September.

Data shows that in 2009 and 2010, 38% of trap tag replacements were a result of losses from boat traffic, followed by 21% of losses reported due to whale rope. Other reasons cited for trap loss included unknown (18%), gear molestation (11%), weather (8%) and mobile gear (2%). The number of individuals requesting tag replacements was highest in Zone D (250), followed closely by Zone C (200), Zone A (150) and Zone B (125).

In addition, GOMLF held an informational meeting among lobstermen, regulators and rope manufacturers in June, 2010, to discuss the characteristics of sinking groundline commonly used by lobstermen. GOMLF also has collected used sinking groundline from lobstermen in Maine. “Your safety concerns are real,” Ludwig stated.

GOMLF invited three lobstermen to speak about their experiences using the rope and their own adaptations to its flaws. Jason Mitschele fishes 20 trap trawls in Zone G. To make sinking rope work for him, he has spread out the line between his trawls to reduce strain on the rope in deep water, sized up his rope and moved off hard bottom.

Mike Myrick, who fishes triples in Zone D, has switched to float rope bridles, increased the size of the rope and now positions them higher up on the trap. He has also shortened his tailer ropes and sets his gear at 12 knots in an effort to keep the rope out tight on bottom.

David Horner, who fishes triples in Zone B, never fishes brand new sinking rope on his groundlines. He fishes new sink rope on his buoy line for a few seasons before rotating it as groundline. This tightens the lay of the rope and it seems to wear better. He is also careful to set his anchor trap to the S or SW with the tide to prevent excess chafing on bottom. He avoids hard bottom outside, and fishes singles inside in
areas of hard bottom. He has also found that cutting out trouble spots and knotting them seems to slow down the wear of the rope.

Norbert Stamps, an Area 3 Offshore lobsterman fishes 50 trap traps in deep water on mud bottom. To cope with sinking rope, he has gone to 4-strand ropes which have held up much better than 3-strand. He bends a wire wear plate around the corners of his trap to cut down on wear. He fishes his bridles 3 inches from the top of trap, and finds that putting a weight in front of the drag helps when grappling gear back.

There was consensus among the group that the most significant wear and chafing occur near the leader or header trap, and that sinking rope has proven dangerous, expensive and difficult to fish with.

Seminar attendees filed out a survey card providing additional information about their personal experiences fishing sinking rope. Of the 39 lobstermen who filled out a card, 36% were from Downeast, 44% from Midcoast, 8% from southern Maine, 8% Area 3 offshore, and 5% from New Hampshire. The greatest number of traps lost by any individual in a single month was 60 in Owls Head, and several Downeast lobstermen reported losing more than 30 traps in a single month.

More than half the respondents state that the biggest challenge reported in fishing sinking groundline was hang downs, especially on long sets. Other significant challenges include the cost of the rope and the fact that it wears out quickly (31%), safety and operational issues (21%) such as changing out rope on deck, snarls, and the rope generally catching on everything. Lobstermen also reported lost traps (18%), chafing (15%), parting off gear (15%), and noise in the hauler (5%) as significant issues. Sixty-nine percent of lobstermen stated that soft bottoms such as mud and gravel posed the least challenge in fishing sinking groundlines.

Most lobstermen in attendance reported making changes to how they fish, in order to cope with fishing sinking groundlines. More than 1/3 of survey respondents reported that they have shortened the length of their groundlines, though several also commented that they have safety concerns with this. Nearly one quarter of respondents have moved their gear off hard bottom onto softer bottom or to the edges of hard bottom in order to get their traps back, 13% have gone to a larger diameter rope, and 5% have broken down gear to fish singles on hard bottom, and change their rope more often. A small number of respondents have shifted gear into shallower water.

When asked how long they expect sinking rope to last versus floating line, the average expected life of sink rope is less than 3 years in comparison to float rope at 8 years. The range of life for sinking rope was just a few months for some harvesters from Bass Harbor and Vinalhaven and up to a maximum of 10 years for a New Hampshire lobsterman. In comparison, the minimum life reported for float rope is 1 year up to a maximum of 20 years.

Sixty-four percent of lobstermen stated that they had encountered safety issues with sinking rope, with 23% of safety issues relating to rope handling which included difficulty handling rope on deck, broken haulers and windows, being hit in the face with snapped line, losing a boot that was caught up in rope,
loss of a thumb, lots of tangles, and rope wrapping around traps, boulder, vents and other things. Parting off in snarls, boulders in the hauler and grappling back gear were also listed as safety issues.

Buzz Carver of Jonesport provided a heartfelt account of how he lost his thumb as a direct result of fishing sinking rope, and said “I’m grateful to be alive”. The collective opinion of Maine lobstermen toward sinking groundline was best summarized by Bruce Fernald, a lobsterman from Islesford: “That stuff does everything you don’t want it to do”.
January 2010

**Trap Rope Switch a Snag for Fishermen and Suppliers**
by Fishermen's Voice Staff

The mandatory switch to so-called neutrally buoyant rope on lobster trap trawl lines has created a mix of difficulties. One of course is the expense, partially eased by the rope buy back program. There was a fair amount of confusion over just what lobstermen were supposed to be replacing the traditional float rope with.

Whale rules require lobstermen fishing outside the exemption line to replace float rope with a new designated rope that is supposed to float just off the bottom, out of the way of whales.

However, the choice is not as simple as it might seem. There are many options, and there are many more preferences that each lobsterman may have. It has been difficult for many lobstermen to decide what option works best for them.


GOMLF letter to the editor in response:

FishVoicecorrections.msg

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**Lobster fishermen shed floating rope**

Ellsworth exchange gathers 180,000 pounds

11/16/09 | 6 comments

*By Bill Trotter*

BDN Staff
ELLSWORTH, Maine — What do you do with 180,000 pounds of unwanted rope?

Most people never have to ponder this question, but for 150 lobster fishermen, the answer brought them to Ellsworth for two days last week as they traded in old floating rope for vouchers they can use to buy new whale-safe lines.

Though the new federal rule requiring lobstermen to use sinking rope on their multitrap trawl ground lines went into effect seven months ago, many still are trading in floating rope for the vouchers. Last Wednesday and Thursday, 150 fishermen, most from Hancock and Washington counties, arrived at a former auto dealership on High Street with the beds of their pickup trucks — and some towing trailers behind — piled high with used float rope.

Officials with the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation, who are operating the 4-year-old program with the help of federal grants, estimate they collected 180,000 pounds of float rope over the two-day period.

Rope Regulations Part 1

by WABI-TV5 News Desk - April 24th 2009

For years the right whale was a popular target for whalers but now it's believed there are only between three hundred and four hundred left.

Actions being taken to save these whales have a direct impact on many Mainers.

Floating rope was used by lobstermen when they set traps, but it posed a threat to the right whale. Many have died after getting caught and tangled in the lines.

A new regulation went into effect earlier this month that stops lobstermen from using floating rope - they now have to use sink rope.

But trading in the old ropes that are now illegal for new ones carries with it a financial burden too big for many to bare.

"It's a double edge sward. They're grateful for the financial assistance, they think the rule is cockamamie and they don't want anything to do with it, but they know it's a regulation they've got to comply with." says Laura Ludwig with the Gulf of Maine Lobster Association.

The financial assistance comes in the form of the Rope Exchange....Federal Grant money was used to fund it. For each pound of old rope that was brought in Fishermen were paid a dollar 40. The old rope will not go to waste, it will find a welcome new home.

Lobstermen line up for last chance at rope exchange
by Craig Idlebrook

It is a bitterly cold March morning. Pick-up trucks are clustered on a patch of frozen dirt behind the Marden's store in Ellsworth. The bed of each truck is loaded with brightly-colored rope; the cab of each truck is loaded with disgruntled lobstermen.

They're awaiting the start of a rope-exchange program sponsored by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation, where they will exchange floating groundline rope for their traps for vouchers to buy sinking groundline rope. It's one of four events the foundation will hold the week of March 23 to help Maine fishermen make the switchover before new federal regulations mandating sinking groundline go into effect April 5.

ELLSWORTH, Maine — A steady stream of pickup trucks and trailers flowed behind the Maine Coast Mall on Monday as area lobster fishermen took advantage of the last-ditch float rope exchange.

The two-day exchange, run by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation, was designed to ease the financial burden on fishermen from a new federal law that goes into effect next month. The law requires lobstermen to use sinking rope in order to protect the endangered right whale from getting entangled in the old type of rope, which floats between traps.
ELLSWORTH (NEWS CENTER)-- Tucked in behind the Maine Coast Mall in Ellsworth you'll find several trailers packed with old fishing lines. For the past two days local lobstermen have been delivering used floating lines in exchange for a discount on new ropes that will meet federal guidelines.

Starting April 5th, federal fishing restrictions require everyone fishing for lobster more than 3 miles off shore to use sink lines. The government says the change is to help protect endangered right whales and other marine life. The Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation, a federally supported program, is running the buy back program, giving fishermen $1.40 for every pound of rope they bring in.


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The Bottom Line
By Bill Trotter, BDN Staff
Posted March 20, 2009, at 9:25 p.m.

Nick Lemieux is getting rid of a lot of perfectly good rope.

It's not new, but much of it he has been using for a few years and would use for a few years more, if not for a new federal law that restricts what kind of rope lobstermen can use as ground lines for their traps.

Lemieux has been working for the past several weeks in the garage of his Cutler home switching out the old rope, which floats toward the surface to keep it from getting tangled on the jagged ocean bottom, and getting the new rope ready. Starting April 5, lobstermen must start using the new rope, which sinks to the ocean bot-tom, as a way to help keep whales from getting tangled in their gear.

http://bangordailynews.com/2009/03/20/uncategorized/the-bottom-line/

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Lobstermen trade line in Rockland rope swap
By Shlomit Auciello
The Courier-Gazette Reporter

ROCKLAND (Sep 9, 2008): Brian Fellows of Cushing has been lobstering since high school. Now in his 30s, Fellows understands the concerns that are driving the rule mandating the use of so-called sinking rope between traps along the sea floor.
Some marine conservationists believe that the potential for whales to be trapped in the arc created by floating line between traps can be mitigated by a change in gear.

When the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation held a rope exchange event on Tuesday, Fellows was there early with a pickup load of polypropylene line to trade for vouchers worth $1.40 for each pound of rope he left behind in the big cardboard boxes set along the side of Harbor Park.

This was not his first rope swap. Fellows began setting traps six weeks ago with the new federally required neutrally buoyant rope that some lobstermen believe will chafe and snag on the rocky bottom. The new rope costs $2.10 per pound and weighs more than the floating line.

"So far, it's not a problem," Fellows said. "We'll see what happens this winter when the weather gets rough."

Thurin Benner has a different perspective. "I think it's stupid," said the St. George lobsterman who has been setting traps all his life. This was his second rope swap, but he hasn't yet purchased new line with the vouchers he's received.

"I'll just fish singles instead of pairs," Benner said. "That will mean more buoys, more hauling time and more fuel."

Chris Cash is in her third year of hauling traps off Monhegan Island, where she lives. She said that she's glad there's a program to help cover the cost of the transition to neutrally buoyant rope but she will miss the floating rope, which she said helps traps flex along the bottom.

Cash agreed that many lobstermen will respond to the rule by setting more single traps, which will add to the number of vertical lines in the water. "What I'm hoping for is better neutral buoyant rope, if that's not an oxymoron," she said.

The Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation’s Erin Pelletier, who was writing the vouchers at the event, wants lobstermen to keep checking their mail as the new deadline approaches.

"It's possible that we'll do this one more time next spring, but funds will be limited," she said. "It will be first come, first served."

On Aug. 29, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service extended the date for lobstermen to accomplish the change. Previously set for Oct. 5, the new deadline is April 5, 2009.
Fellows said he plans to be ready for the change, no matter when the deadline finally falls. "We'll do what we can if this is what it takes to keep us from a trap reduction," he said.

Lobstermen prepare for rule
Village Soup, April 2008
By Shlomit Auciello

Pickup trucks, their beds filled with colorful bundles of rope, lined up at Rockland’s Harbor Park on Wednesday for the second day in a row. And as fast as the trucks arrived, a group of people emptied them, throwing the rope into large cardboard boxes.

The scene was part of the rope buyback program, officially known as the Maine Poly Groundline Exchange Program, that the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation organized. The program aims to help Maine’s lobstermen replace the rope they use between their lobster traps with the new “sink rope” that lies flat on the ocean floor. Sink rope will be required by the National Marine Fisheries Service starting in October.

In October of 2007 the NMFS released a rule, known commonly as "the whale rule," saying that lobstermen would no longer be allowed to use floating rope between lobster traps due to the risk of right whales getting entangled in it. Instating the rule was necessary to comply with the Marine Mammal Protection Act. Right whales have been listed as an endangered species since 1970, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The GOMLF has been traveling the coast of Maine buying the soon-to-be-banned float rope back from lobstermen who fish in state waters, said GOMLF Executive Director Erin Pelletier on Wednesday morning while running the cash-out table at the buyback.

The rope was gathered on Wednesday in large cardboard boxes and then weighed before being loaded onto tractor-trailer trucks. The lobstermen are paid with vouchers they can use at one of 29 participating rope dealers and distributors statewide.

Staff at the GOMLF and the Maine Lobstermen’s Association, however, fear that the cost of implementing the whale rule will overburden lobstermen already struggling to make ends meet as the price of fuel continues to rise.

The organizations’ concerns are that beyond the startup costs associated with replacing the rope, using sink rope will require higher general expenses for gear from now on. Because the sink rope by definition rests on the ocean floor, the Midcoast’s rocky bottom will quickly chew up the rope. Not only will it need to be replaced far more frequently than the float rope, but lobster traps will also be lost when the ropes do give way.

The GOMLF is using earmarked funds from the NMFS to pay for the project and is paying lobstermen $1.40 per pound of float rope they bring in, Pelletier said.
The GOMLF received enough funds to buy back approximately 1 million pounds of float rope, Pelletier said. It is estimated, however, that the total amount of float rope used in state waters exceeds nine times that amount.

Vinalhaven delivered approximately 20,000 pounds to Harbor Park on Tuesday, Pelletier said. "That's nothing."

"It's going fast," Pelletier said of the program funds.

"We've put in for $14 million more," Pelletier told two lobstermen who lingered to chat while their rope was getting weighed and tallied. "We're asking for money all the time."

Lobstermen are bringing an average of 1,000 pounds of rope each, said Laura Ludwig, project manager for the program, though giving up all that rope this early in the season shouldn't pose a problem for most of them.

"I'll just fish singles till fall," said Josh Hupver of Martinsville, who brought a load of rope to the buyback. "That's what I usually do anyway."

In the summer when the lobsters move into the shallower waters closer to shore, many lobstermen fish singles, or one trap per buoy, Ludwig said. In the fall when the lobsters move back out toward deeper water, lobstermen move their gear with them and begin to put two or more traps per buoy. Because sink rope is only required on the lines between lobster traps, by fishing only one trap per buoy, lobstermen can avoid having to use the float rope at all, Ludwig said.

Everyone involved in the lobstering industry knew, Ludwig said, that putting the whale rule into effect would actually result in more rope in the water, rather than less, because lobstermen would fish singles to avoid using the sink rope.

And for those who do replace their rope with sink rope, she said, "it's going to cost them thousands of dollars every year," because the sink rope will break down so much more easily.

When the rope breaks, the traps are lost with it, not to mention the lobsters inside, she said.

Eventually fishing singles will be banned as well, Ludwig believes.

"It's a really scary situation," she said.

An exemption line has been established along the Maine Coast approximately three miles from shore, Ludwig said, so when fishing closer to shore along the ledges and in shallower waters where whales don't go anyway, float rope can still be used.

But because Maine's islands for the most part lie outside the exemption line, even those who fish the shallow ledges around an island will have to use the sink rope, which will be more likely to be destroyed in those ledges, Ludwig said.

"It's going to destroy these island families," Ludwig said.
Though the Maine Lobstermen's Association has filed a petition to push back the enforcement of the rule, lobstermen are still better off preparing for the rule to take effect in October, she said.

The GOMLF has contracted the Conigliaro Company to recycle the rope, said Pelletier. It will be ground up and used to make deck board and flower pots and other such things, she said.

Hupver asked Pelletier if he would have another opportunity to exchange more rope.

He learned that the GOMLF will hold another buyback in Scarborough in about a month. After that, Pelletier said, "we have enough funds for another buyback," but more will then be needed.

"I don't know what's going to happen," said Hupver. "I'll just wait until [the law takes effect] and then just do what they say."

"I'm all for tree hugging and saving the whales," said Pelletier, "but this is a little extreme."

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York’s lobstermen exchange trap lines, prepare for whale-friendly rule change

April 19, 2008

From Seacoast online- NH
By jonathan d. benton

In accordance with the Atlantic Large Whale Reduction Plan, lobstermen will be required by a new federal law, which goes into effect Oct. 5, to use only ground "sink" lines for their traps. The intention of the plan is to protect whales that are reportedly becoming tangled in floating lines.

In response, the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation is conducting voluntary rope exchanges that give sink line vouchers for old polyurethane float rope. Although appreciative, local lobstermen are still not happy with the new law.

"I'm pretty upset, poly-rope has worked fine in the past," said lobsterman Bob Donnell of York.

The first of three rope exchanges in 2008 occurred March 25-27 in Ellsworth. A full 93,000 pounds of used float rope was collected.

Donnell plans to turn in 1,000 pounds of float rope at the next exchange, and estimates it will cost him $10,000 to make the full transition to sink line.

Limitations
Fishermen are only allowed to use the floating rope within three miles of the coast, but no farther. In 30 years, Donnell said he has never seen a tangled whale and estimates a loss of thousands of lobster traps if he has to drag sink line across the rocky ocean bottom.

He also noted that it will be problematic when the lobsters migrate to deeper waters in fall and winter.

"The (exempt area) should be farther off shore," he said.

For every pound of polyurethane rope fishermen turn in, they receive a $1.40 voucher to be used within 60 days for sink rope at participating businesses. The standard price of vinyl sink rope is $2.40 a pound.

Lobster fisherman Jeff White of York is grateful for the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation's rope exchange and has accepted the new law.

"I think that (the exchange) was great," White said. "It was a pretty good deal for old used rope."

In May 2007, he exchanged a 16-foot trailer load of sink line.

"The regulation is going to happen whether we want it to or not," he said.

Pat White, Jeff's brother and executive director of the Maine Lobstermen's Association, agrees the "buyback has been going good."

He also noted that "locally at my end, people realize the rules aren't gonna change, but Downeast there has been much more resistance."

Dwight Carver of Beals, Maine, has yet to switch over his lines, and he sees the exchange as merely a "Band-Aid" that won't help fishermen in later years when the sink line wears out.

According to Carver, the sink line lasts only half as long as float rope, a difference of about three to four years.

"It blows me away they'd put us in this financial burden and it makes it more dangerous to fish," Carver said.

He was referring to damage that can occur when lines snagged on the rocky ocean floor jam the winches on boats.

Carver estimates a $15,000 loss including lost traps and a four-month installation period.

**Violation and enforcement**

Some lobstersmen are waiting to see if the law is enforced before changing their lines.
According to Susan Williams, assistant special agent in charge with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the statutory punishment for using float lines outside the exemption area could range from a written warning to a $13,000 fine, depending on the severity of the violation.

Come October, it will fall upon the shoulders of Maine's marine patrol to enforce the new federal regulations within the state's borders.

"We will be enforcing that law like all other laws," said Col. Joseph Fessenden, chief of marine law enforcement, Bureau of Marine Patrol.

"Working closely with fishermen, discretion and common sense will be applied. It's a difficult law for people to comply with," he said.

**Possible amendment**

In the meantime, a proposal has been submitted to NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service to allow use of a new type of rope that has a specific gravity to make it sink, but floats a meter above the ocean bottom.

Terry Stockwell, director of external affairs for the Department of Marine Resources, said, "We want to amend the rule to replace the sink rope. ... This state has long argued that fishermen need some new technology."

The proposal asks that the new type of rope be allowed outside the exemption area where there have been minimal whale sightings.

"The whole plan is equal protection of fishermen and whales," he said.

The proposal will be reviewed by the National Marine Fisheries Service at the end of April.

**ROPE EXCHANGES**

The next rope exchange will be held May 20-22 (2008) at the R.C. Moore Transportation Center in Scarborough.

All Maine lobstermen are welcome, but are asked to register with the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation first. For information, call Laura Ludwig at the foundation at 985-8088 or visit [www.gomlf.org](http://www.gomlf.org).

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**Commercial Fisheries News**

*Volume 35 Number 6*  
*February 2008*

**Surveys, exchanges, funding all now underway**
KENNEBUNK, ME – Lobstermen who received a survey from the Maine Bottom Line Project shouldn’t worry if they missed the Jan. 5 deadline for returning it.

“Basically, we want their survey whenever we can get it,” said Laura Ludwig, Bottom Line Project manager.

The Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation, which is administering the project, has nearly $2 million to pass on to qualifying lobstermen. The Maine Bottom Line Project is for poly groundlines and tailer warps only, not endlines.

http://www.fish-news.com/cfn/editorial/editorial_2_08/Surveys-exchanges-funding_all_now_underway.html

More funds available for Maine float rope exchange program

KENNEBUNK, ME – The Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation has received funding for Phase II of its Bottom Line Project, a voluntary groundline rope exchange.

The federal grant amounts to $680,300, which is being channeled to the foundation through the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The money will supplement the rope exchange project’s existing pool of funds, according to project Manager Laura Ludwig.

http://www.fish-news.com/cfn/editorial/editorial_10_07/More_funds_available_for_Maine_float_rope_exchange_program.html

Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation poly rope exchange starts May 21

KENNEBUNK, ME – The Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation’s (GOMLF) Bottom Line Project has announced the start of the rope exchange process for Maine lobstermen.
Commercial Fisheries News

Volume 34 Number 4

December 2006

GOMLF urging ME lobstermen to return rope exchange surveys

KENNEBUNK, ME – Any Maine lobsterman who has not received and returned a survey from The Bottom Line Project is being asked to contact the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation (GOMLF) to get one and fill it out.

The survey, which was recently mailed to Maine lobstermen, is key to the success of the voluntary poly groundline rope exchange program that the foundation is running to assist Maine lobstermen in complying with upcoming federal whale regulations.

Lobstermen say proposed rope ban will put their industry in a bind

By Bill Trotter
Friday, November 24, 2006 - Bangor Daily News

For many Maine lobster fishermen, a looming federal decision on what kind of equipment they’ll be allowed to use on their gear is giving them a sinking feeling.

They’re worried that the National Marine Fisheries Service will require them to use a type of rope that supposedly will reduce the threat of entanglement to whales, especially the federally protected North Atlantic right whale. Trouble is, lobstermen say, this type of rope is more expensive and is apt to get more of their gear stuck in rocky areas off the coast — and to put a significant financial dent in an industry that netted $290 million worth of lobster in Maine last year.

Fishermen who set traps in areas with a rocky bottom most often use a type of rope called "float" rope, which is used between traps that are tied together in a single line. The sections of rope float up toward the surface between each trap, creating vertical arcs that scientists say pose a threat to diving whales.

The option that many fishermen fear will become a requirement is "sink" rope, which sinks to the bottom. Sink rope may be less likely to get snagged by diving whales, but fishermen say it will eat into their economic bottom line.
Not only will it run up their equipment purchase costs, they claim, but it also will result in an increased amount of gear that gets snagged on the rocky bottom and lost, and it will force fishermen to spend more time and maintenance on keeping their gear in good repair.

And, according to David Cousens, a South Thomaston fisherman and president of Maine Lobstermen’s Association, there’s no indication that requiring such a switch in equipment will do right whales any good.

"I’ve never seen one," Cousens said Wednesday about the animals. "You’ve got a better chance of seeing a UFO around here than a right whale."

Cousens said lobstermen have been receptive to trying out gear modifications aimed at helping whales, such as breakaway lines on buoys and sink rope on traps set far offshore and in other areas with muddy bottom. Of the handful of right whales seen in Maine waters in recent years, he added, the only one found wrapped with Maine lobster fishing gear was successfully freed with the help of fishermen.

To tell fishermen not to use float rope close to shore is "crazy," he said, especially in eastern Maine where the bottom is rocky, currents are strong and whales are rarely, if ever, seen.

"We have to use float rope," Cousens said. "We can’t give up float rope for our groundlines."

Estimates for the number of right whales, which nearly were hunted to extinction in the 18th century, run between 300 and 400. Most of them have rope scars from getting entangled in fishing gear, according to scientists.

Cutler lobsterman Kristan Porter said Wednesday that if fishermen are forced to convert to sink rope, each one would face between $12,000 and $15,000 in additional operating expenses each year. He said the federal government is applying a "one-size-fits-all" philosophy to all types of fishermen on the East Coast, even though the practices, equipment and physical terrain differ from state to state, and sometimes within a state.

"I don’t know if we can survive this one," Porter said. "This isn’t going to help anything. I haven’t bought any rope for next year because I don’t know what they’ll do."

Or when they are going to do it. Federal regulators had been expected to release the final environmental impact statement on the issue sometime this week but now have put it off indefinitely.

"It’s still in the review process," Teri Frady, regional spokeswoman for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s National Fisheries Service said Tuesday.

Frady said the federal government has to wait at least 30 days after it releases the statement before it can adopt the recommendations as a rule.

While the NMFS is considering what to do, Sen. Susan Collins has urged the agency to minimize the effect the rule would have on Maine’s lobster industry. She indicated in a statement released Wednesday that the state industry would absorb $12.8 million of the annual $14.2 million cost of the proposed rule.
"[M]ore than 75 percent of the projected cost of the rule is expected to be incurred by lobstermen operating in the inshore and near-shore areas of Maine," Collins said in the release.

According to Frady, there could be exceptions to the expected federal ruling, but the service is considering banning all use of float rope throughout the Northeast.

"Yes," Frady said when asked if this was the case. "That’s the short answer."

If the rule is adopted, exceptions are what fishermen are hoping for. Cousens said most whales swim through the Gulf of Maine on a fairly straight line between Cape Cod and the Bay of Fundy and not within a few miles of shore, where 90 percent of Maine lobstermen set their traps.

An exception zone three miles out from all shore frontage, including islands, or a general zone extending roughly 15 miles out from the mainland would allow fishermen to keep operating as they do now and would target the area where right whales are most likely to travel, Cousens said.

"We’d just like a common-sense curve," he said.

One thing fishermen will get if the rule is enacted is help buying new rope. The Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation has been given $1.4 million by Congress to use in a rope exchange program called the Bottom Line Project.

Laura Ludwig, coordinator for the program, said Monday that fishermen would be given vouchers for float rope they turn in to the foundation. Fishermen will be able to use the vouchers to help them buy sink rope, she said.

The $1.4 million should cover only about 1 million pounds of float rope that is exchanged, according to Ludwig. How much total float rope actually is being used by the approximately 6,800 licensed lobstermen in Maine is unknown, she said, but there could be as much as 9 million pounds that has to be replaced.

"That’s a total ballpark estimate," Ludwig said. "Nobody has any better idea than anybody else."

Because sink rope tends to be more expensive than float rope, she said, fishermen likely will have to pay more than what they get through the voucher program to end up with the same total length of rope that they started out with.

Regardless of the funding limitation, not all fishermen are likely to participate in the rope exchange program. To protest the anticipated rule, the board of directors for the Down East Lobstermen’s Association earlier this month voted unanimously to recommend that the group’s 300 or so members not participate in the exchange.

Clive Farrin, a Boothbay Harbor fisherman and president of DELA, said Wednesday that banning float rope may well put many eastern Maine lobstermen out of business. For many of them, he said, there isn’t much else they can turn to.

"What will these guys do that have done nothing but go fishing since they were in diapers almost?" Farrin asked. "It just seems like every time we do something in good faith, we’re smacked with another regulation."
ME rope exchange starts with mail survey, sign-up

KENNEBUNK, ME – A program that will help Maine lobstermen pay the cost of replacing their floating groundline is finally underway, and lobstermen should keep an eye on their mail for information about how to participate.

That was the news coming from Laura Ludwig in mid-July. Ludwig has been hired by the Gulf of Maine Lobster Foundation (GOMLF) to manage its “Groundline Exchange Program.”

http://www.fish-news.com/cfn/editorial/editorial_8_06/Maine_rope_exchange_starts_with_mail_survey_sign-up.html
The Bottom Line Project
Protected Species Bycatch Reduction -- Maine Groundline Exchange Program
June 1, 2006 through March 31, 2011 (extended 11/2010)
Award No. NA06NMF4520121

Appendix I

List of Previously Submitted Support Documents
With Reference to Associated Progress Report

June 29, 2011
Laura Ludwig, Project Manager
Attachments to Progress Report, April 2011:
- Agenda of Maine Fishermen’s Forum workshop

Attachments to Progress Report, December 2010:
- Bottom Line Project Expenditures
- Summary of Groundline Workshop, June 2010
- Minutes from groundline workshop, June 2010
- Letter/registration form to fishermen, July 2010
- Custom Cordage contract – sample
- Maine Float Rope Company contract – sample
- Letter to Philip Reed, lobsterman, September 2010
- GOMLF Lobster Lines Summer 2010 newsletter
- Final Exchange Press Release
- Final Registration Advertisement

Attachments to Progress Report, June 2010:
- Letter/registration form to lobstermen 4/10
- Custom Cordage contract – sample
- ME Float Rope Company contract – sample
- Photos of Waldoboro rope collection, May 2010
- Lobster Conferences - Agendas and Summaries
- Rope Sculpture photos
- Press releases
- Bottom Line Project signs for Maine Fishermen’s Forum

Attachments to Progress Report, December 2009:
- Letter/registration form to lobstermen 8/09
- Custom Cordage contract 9/09
- ME Float Rope Company contract 11/09
- Photos of November exchange in Ellsworth (loading trucks)

Attachments to Progress Report, June 2009:
- Appendix 1 -- Links to media coverage of Bottom Line Project
- Lobster Lines newsletters (Fall 2008, Spring 2009)
- Sinking groundline tracking form and letter
- Mailings to participants
- Press releases

Attachments to Progress Report, December 2008:
• Fall 08 Lobster Lines Newsletter
• March 09 survey card
• Nov 08 Right Whale Consortium presentation
• Spring 09 info for industry
• Summer 08 EllsRockRegistrant letter
• Summer 08 Lobster Lines Newsletter
• Summer 08 Survey

Attachments to Progress Report, June 2008:
• Ellsworth American article 2.1308
• Kennebunk post article 5.16.08
• Letter from NMFS Harry Mears May 2008
• Mears letter response 5_13_08
• sink rope types from survey
• Survey 12_07 final
• York Seacoast-online article Apr 08
• Plus Nine Rope Exchange Photos:
  o Ellsworth, March 08
  o Vinalhaven, April 08
  o Rockland, April 08
  o Scarborough, May 08
  o Gaylord array
  o loaded Gaylords
  o full tractor-trailers
  o truck n trailer
  o truck of rope

Attachments to Progress Report, December 2007:
• GOMLF Letter to NMFS During Public Comment Period
• AEWC Center’s Report on R&D of Poly Rope

Attachments to Progress Report, June 2007:
• Survey II form
• Survey II letter
• Acknowledgment Postcard
• Letter to Lobstermen
• FAQ
• Project Guidelines
• Letter to Rope Dealers
• List of Participating Rope Dealers
• List of Participating Lobstermen
• Sample Voucher
• Press Clippings and Releases
• RFP
• List of all Recycling Contacts

Attachments to Progress Report, December 2006:
• Project Overview (published in MLA newsletter and elsewhere)
• Pre-survey Postcard (mailed to all Maine commercial lobstermen)
• Survey and Letter (mailed to all Maine commercial lobstermen)
• Press Releases
• Bangor Daily News article
• Commercial Fisheries News article
• Rope Meeting Minutes