



Minimum Mesh Size Restrictions and Rationale for Management Measures

This summary is not a substitute for the regulations; rather it provides a broad overview of restrictions and requirements. You are strongly encouraged to read the regulations in conjunction with this information.

Under current regulations and proposed Amendment 16 measures, sectors may apply for an exemption from Northeast multispecies regulations regarding minimum mesh size by requesting the exemption in their operations plans and providing a justification and analysis in their environmental assessments. This document provides a description of minimum mesh size regulations from which a sector may seek an exemption and explains the need to justify such an exemption.

I. Current Regulations

Minimum Mesh Size Restrictions by Gear Type and Regulated Mesh Area

GEAR TYPE	Regulated Mesh Area			
	GOM 50 CFR 648.80(a)(3)	GB § 648.80(a)(4)	SNE § 648.80(b)	Mid-Atlantic § 648.80(c)
NE Multispecies gillnet	6.5" mesh all nets			
Trawl gear, codend-only mesh size*	6.5" diamond or square mesh			
Monkfish vessels**	10" mesh			
Large Mesh Category, entire net	8.5" diamond or square			7.5" diamond or 8.0" square
* When fishing under a NE multispecies DAS				
** Monkfish Category C and D vessels, when fishing under a monkfish DAS				

II. Exemptions

Minimum mesh size restrictions have been used with other management measures to reduce overall mortality on groundfish stocks, as well as to reduce discarding and improve survival of sub-legal groundfish. Due to the proposed allocation of Annual Catch Entitlements (ACEs) to sectors, minimum mesh size restrictions may no longer be necessary to control overall mortality resulting from sector operations. However, a sector's ACE does not control the age composition of a sector's catch. Therefore, an exemption for sectors from minimum mesh size restrictions could result in sector catch being composed of a larger proportion of sub-legal fish than if sectors are not exempt. Should an exemption from minimum mesh size restrictions increase sub-legal groundfish bycatch by sector vessels, juvenile escapement, stock age structure, and overall mortality reduction objectives could be undermined. An exemption could raise additional equity

concerns if sub-legal bycatch triggered management actions affecting the entire fishery, including non-sector vessels. Furthermore, an exemption from minimum mesh size restrictions could be difficult to enforce at sea, because it would require enforcement personnel to differentiate the appropriate mesh size applicable to exempt vessels from that applicable to non-exempt vessels.

For an exemption from minimum mesh size restrictions, sector operations plans and environmental assessments would need to provide justification that an exemption will not undermine objectives to reduce mortality, reduce bycatch and increase survival of sub-legal groundfish, and expand stock age structure. Sectors would also need to address equity and enforceability concerns in justifying an exemption.