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978-281-9175

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 16, 2010

Nation's Oldest Commercial Fishery Embraces 21st Century Technology
New Systems Benefit Entire Northeast Fishing Industry

Beginning May 1 the Northeast groundfishery, the nation's oldest commercial fishery, will become one of the best documented in the country as fishermen, seafood dealers and NOAA's Fisheries Service bring an unprecedented near real-time data collection effort online. With the clearest picture ever of how the fishery is progressing during the year, fishermen will be better able to plan their fishing effort to land their limit of fish and not exceed it.

In addition to information collected by fishery observers, at-sea and dockside monitors, a large volume of data will be processed and exchanged electronically between fishing operations and NOAA as the fishery occurs. Rapid and accurate data transfer is particularly critical to tracking the multiple catch limits that will govern groundfishing. To handle it, NOAA and the industry have worked closely together since last April to develop and upgrade software and hardware, train people to use the systems, create quality control teams, and develop the reports critical to monitoring effort.

"NOAA and the industry have invested in this to make it easier for fishermen to report and review the accuracy of catch and other required information, and to make sure the agency is working with the best and most current data possible as the fishery occurs," said Patricia Kurkul, northeast regional administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "Some of these new tools will also be useful in managing other fisheries in the region," she said.

One key innovation is added capability to account not only for the number of days a fishing vessel uses, but also how close a vessel is to its catch limits. This is important in the groundfishery, but also in the golden tilefish and sea scallop fisheries. For vessels fishing in a groundfish sector, timely information is essential for making prudent business decisions during the year. For example, knowing how close the sector is to catching its limit of a species informs decisions about whether to trade catch allocation with another sector to extend fishing opportunities.

A complementary tool, developed nationally by NOAA, has been customized for the Northeast groundfishery and will help to better match reports on a particular fishing trip generated by different sources (for example, observer reports, vessel trip reports, and dealer reports.) This will provide a much fuller picture of the fishery during the year than was ever available before.

Additionally, a new web-based, secure portal was developed that will make it easier for sectors to report vessel trip data and fish discard information, catch allocation balances and requests, and will speed approvals of allocation transfers among vessels and sectors.

NOAA also is taking steps to advance fully electronic vessel reporting. In 2010, some vessel reports will be able to be submitted online, thus reducing paperwork. An expanded pilot program to test a new electronic vessel reporting system is underway to document how the system works in real life situations onboard fishing vessels.

Another new product, Fish-on-Line, was activated last month. Fish-on-Line is a password protected, web-based portal that can be used by all vessel operators and owners to view and download

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up to six months of recent catch information, collected from vessels and seafood dealers and stored in the NOAA data base. The real benefit of Fish-on-Line is that the industry will be able to view their personal data more easily and address any discrepancies they see in the data.

“All of these innovations will make it easier for fishermen to run their business and demonstrate compliance with regulations. At the same time, we will be able to gather the information needed to effectively monitor the catch rates set to protect and restore groundfish stocks,” said Kurkul.

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