

RESTRICTIONS ON FISHERMEN ARE CREATING A DISTURBING EFFECT -- WASTE.

CATCHING LIMITS OF FRUSTRATION

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A year ago, the fishermen working in the Gulf of Maine and their regulators seemed to be looking at different oceans.

Federal biologists, armed with evidence that the gulf's cod population was collapsing after years of overfishing, called for a drastic cut in fishing in the gulf, which extends from Cape Cod to Canada. Angry fishermen cited only what they saw in their nets and said cod stocks were in the midst of a strong recovery.

The gulf was so full of cod, the fishermen said, that even the lobster traps were full of the fish.

Today, both sides agree on one thing.

The restrictions enacted by the New England Fishery Management Council, a compromise criticized by both sides, have filled the gulf with cod. Dead cod.

Since last summer, New England fishermen have dumped hundreds of tons of dead cod back into the gulf to stay below their daily catch limit for the fish -- 30 pounds a day for most of the summer -- while they continued to fish for other species. Thirty pounds would be one or two fish, fishermen say.

That profound waste of New England's trademark fish helped drive the cod population to yet another historical low, as shown in the annual stock assessment released by management council scientists two weeks ago.

The report calls for a 58 percent cut in the Gulf of Maine cod mortality and recommends draconian measures to save the stock, including cutting by 50 percent the number of days fishermen are allowed to work the gulf. Other alternatives would close vast areas of the gulf to fishing.

Environmentalists from the Conservation Law Foundation, the Environmental Defense Fund and the Center for Marine Conservation are calling on the council to adopt the severe restrictions.

"We are in this situation because the council and the National Marine Fisheries Service keep approving plans, year after year, that exceed the ability of these fish populations to survive over time," said Anthony Chatwin, a marine scientist with the Conservation Law Foundation. "Only major, year-round area closures or major reductions in allowable days-at-sea -- or a combination of both -- will get us out of this mess."

But fishermen continue to argue that cod stocks are on the rebound and blame the council's rules for the continued waste of the fish so valuable it lured the Pilgrims to Gloucester.

"It's a crime against God, it's a crime against nature, it's a crime against mankind

and it's a crime against the American people," said Gloucester fisherman Paul Cohan, president of the Gulf of Maine Alliance. "We're witnessing the greatest discard of a public resource that's ever happened."

Ten years ago, fishermen in the gulf could catch as much cod as their small boats could hold on as many days of the year as they wanted. On a good day, a fisherman brought more than 2,000 pounds of the fish ashore.

Today, in addition to limits on virtually every species they catch, the fishermen are only allowed to fish for 88 days a year for all species. Large areas of the gulf are closed to most fishing for months at a time. Days at sea are now the fleet's most precious resource, and fishermen must make as much money as they can with each of them.

Cohan says fishermen couldn't make a living with the 44 days-at-sea that a 50 percent cut would leave them.

"That would eliminate virtually everybody," he said, adding that many fishermen think that is the real goal of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

"They're waging a war of attrition. They're just trying to get rid of boats."

Cohan said that if fishermen were allowed to land 700 pounds of cod a day -- enough to pay for a day at sea -- they would actually kill fewer fish because they could stop fishing when they met their cod quota rather than catching and discarding more cod while they pursued enough other fish to make their trips worthwhile.

The New England Fishery Management Council set the quota at 200 pounds in May, then dropped it to 30 pounds less than a month later when fishermen had already brought in two-thirds of the total allowable catch for the year.

But the waste of cod resulting from the low quota spurred the council to change course, and in June it requested emergency action from the Secretary of Commerce to raise the quota to 700 pounds. In August the quota was raised to 200 pounds, but has since been lowered to 100 pounds.

Each side has an explanation for the radically different measures of the condition of the cod stock.

Fishermen criticize the "voodoo science" used to assess the condition of fish stocks. Fisheries Service boats, they say, often measure the stock in areas that have not historically had a cod population, are run by scientists with little fishing experience and use antiquated fishing equipment.

Federal biologists, on the other hand, say cod gather in dense concentrations to spawn when their overall numbers are diminishing. Those concentrations off the coast of Cape May have given fishermen the impression that the stock is rebounding, the scientists say, while elsewhere the cod population is dwindling rapidly.

And other species are declining in the gulf as well, according to the council's report.

"Serious overfishing is no longer just a problem for traditional New England cod and haddock stocks," said Sonja Fordham of the Center for Marine Conservation in Washington. "A whole host of lesser-known flounders, as well as alternative species such as monkfish, dogfish, and even some skates, are now overfished and their protection is grossly inadequate."

Although a wooden cod welcomes visitors to the Massachusetts State House in

Boston, shoppers in nearby fish markets complain that cod are becoming rare and expensive. Restaurants on Cape Cod last summer complained of a shortage of the cape's namesake fish.

But nowhere is the disappearance of the cod felt more keenly than in Gloucester, where the New England council will meet this week to consider the options for saving both the fish and the fishing industry in the Gulf of Maine.