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Fishery council: No Amendment 13 option preferred

By JENNI GLENN

Staff writer

PORTLAND, MAINE -- The public will get its chance to comment on the final draft of the new court-mandated groundfish regulations, starting late next month, but New England residents won't know which of four sets of rules government regulators are leaning toward making "Amendment 13."

The New England Fishery Management Council voted 10-7 yesterday, the final day of a three-day meeting at the Holiday Inn by the Bay here, not to name a preferred alternative from among four scenarios. Council members wanted to give weight to public input before rendering a final decision, which the council expects to make in November.

The council is planning about 12 public hearings on the proposed regulations for late August and early September, and David Pierce, deputy director of the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, wanted all of the options to be on a level playing field until the public comment is heard.

"I don't feel comfortable going to ports in Massachusetts and saying, 'I've already supported this option, thank you for your comment, now prove me wrong,'" he said.

But the council's move worried members of the fishing community; among it, Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association President Angela Sanfilippo. As a result of the vote, the public will have to research all the alternatives contained in the 900-page draft in order to comment rather than focusing more on one option.

"They're putting it all on us to make a choice," she said after the vote. "It's much, much more work for everybody."

The decision disappointed fishing industry activists and environmentalists. Both groups had hoped the council would select their preferred set of rules. Fishermen feel an option that would cut allowed days at sea by up to 65 percent would have the least devastating economic impacts. Environmentalists believe ceilings for fish landings, known as hard total allowable catch, used in the other three options are the only effective way to halt over-fishing.

The draft environmental impact statement the council sent to public hearings yesterday said all four options would help rebuild fish stocks, but the days-at-sea reductions would have the least adverse economic effects on Gloucester and other ports. The study also indicated that, proportionally, Gloucester would suffer in all four options more than almost any other port.

The council's groundfish committee voted 5-4 last week to endorse the option that cut days-at-sea allocations. The council took up a motion to name the days-at-sea cuts option its preference yesterday, but tabled it.

Mark Amorello and Jim Kendall, who represent Massachusetts commercial fishermen on the council, made a motion for the council to name two of the hard TAC alternatives -- one that would allow fishermen in areas of the ocean to make their own rules and another that relies primarily on hard TACs without additional measures -- the least preferred.

But Chairman Tom Hill, a Gloucester resident representing recreational fishermen, ruled the motion out of order because the council had already decided not to select any preferences.

Kendall said members of the fishing industry who will be affected by the proposed rules would be able to give the council feedback in a more organized way, if the council showed its intended direction.

"It needs to be shown that the days-at-sea option is probably the poison of choice," said Kendall, who was attending his last council meeting before his term ends.

Environmentalists were pleased that the council didn't go with the days-at-

sea reductions as its preference. Over-fishing of cod and other species has continued. even though days-at-sea allocations have been cut before, said Geoffrey Smith, New England fish conservation manager for the Ocean Conservancy.

"Those are the tools that have failed us in the past and we don't want to see them used here," he said.

Many members of the fishing industry encouraged the council to endorse the days-at-sea alternative because it would take the least severe economic toll. Glenn Delaney, a lobbyist for the Gloucester-based Northeast Seafood Coalition, said fishermen would have a difficult time explaining their concerns with the four scenarios because each one has several alternatives within it. He thought the council's failure to name a favored alternative would exacerbate that problem.

"Otherwise, you'll get a useless pile of comments, and who's going to analyze that?" he asked the council members.

But John Nelson, chief of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department's marine division, said if the council chose a preferred alternative, the public comments would be focused on problems with that particular scenario and not looking at which of the four options will work best.

Fishermen also may object to all of the options presented, because no preferred option will be there to direct their comments, said Paul Howard, the council's executive director.

"You get public comment that says, 'I don't want anything,' and that's not good," Howard said. "That doesn't help you."

Gloucester resident Vito Calomo, executive director of the Massachusetts Fisheries Recovery Commission, agreed with the council's decision to hand the four options over to the public without selecting a preference. He said Amendment 13, which he sees as the most drastic amendment in the council's history, needs an emphasis on public input.

"They should give you a direction of what they choose," he said.

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