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Thursday, July 17, 2003

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EDITORIAL:

Groundfish rules key to saving the industry

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There are no pleasant choices when it comes to adopting new rules to prevent overfishing of groundfish stocks off New England's coast.

New restrictions must be adopted to comply with a U.S. District Court ruling that required the government to do more to prevent overfishing.

Even without the federal requirement, though, it's clear that aggressive conservation measures are appropriate. Catches of Georges Bank cod and some other species are historically low and those stocks appear to be genuinely threatened.

This week, the New England Fisheries Management Council has been meeting in Portland to review options such as closing fishing areas, drastically cutting fishing days, adopting tight quotas and setting rules for fishing in certain geographic areas.

Environmental groups are calling for total allowable catch limits on certain species of fish rather than cutting days at sea. Cutting the days at sea isn't good for either the fish or the fishermen because it doesn't ensure that overfishing of troubled species won't continue, and it prevents fishermen from focusing on healthy species.

The council should take this into consideration as it decides on the options for new restrictions, also called Amendment 13. If the council is confident that the scientific data show fish stocks are at dangerous levels, it shouldn't be shy about defending new restrictions and implementing them.



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Most importantly, though, is once the new restrictions are adopted, the council should seek federal emergency aid to help the industry deal with the severe impacts they will have on the fleet. The council estimates that the industry could sustain up to 3,000 fishing-related job losses and lose up to \$88 million in revenue, depending on the proposal.

Not adopting the strict rules, however, could be even more detrimental to the future of the industry as well as the health of New England's coastal environment.

Rules that limit catch on certain species while still allowing fishermen to keep their days at sea likely would be the least detrimental to the industry and the most beneficial to the fish population.

Just as the fishing industry is held accountable for the health of the groundfish population, though, so should the federal government be accountable for the health of the industry.



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