

New Cod Data Shaking New England Fishing Industry

BOSTON (AP) — A new look at the health of one of New England's most storied fish stocks is troubling the industry, with some saying the findings have got to be wrong.

Just three years ago, a federal study showed the Gulf of Maine cod was healthy and headed toward recovery.

Now preliminary data suggest the valuable species is in dismal shape and won't rebuild within the time set by federal law. In a worst-case scenario, that could mean a broad fishery shutdown to protect the cod. But that step would be drastic and a long ways away.

The preliminary data will first be reviewed, beginning next week, and fishery managers will have other alternatives before a shutdown. Still, anxiety is high.

"I think it keeps people up at night, honestly," said Patricia Fiorelli, spokeswoman for the New England Fishery Management Council, which advises federal regulators on local fishing rules.

To Gloucester fisherman Vito Giacalone, it's another instance of fishery science conflicting with what fishermen see on the water. He said cod isn't crashing, but is so plentiful fishermen are taking steps to avoid it so they don't exceed tough catch limits.

"There is a monstrous disconnect between that preliminary assessment result and all the other indicators of common sense," he said.

The regional importance of codfish is evident on a map of Massachusetts, where the famous cape named after the species hooks into the Atlantic Ocean.

Gulf of Maine cod has long been crucial to the small boat fishermen north of Cape Cod, who catch it during day trips out of ports from Provincetown to Port Clyde, Maine.

In 2010, fishermen caught about 3,700 metric tons of it, pulling in \$15.8 million — a figure second-highest behind Georges Bank haddock among the region's 20 regulated bottom-dwelling fish, known as groundfish.

Frank Mirachi, who fishes out of Scituate with his son, said Gulf of Maine cod makes up more than half the annual gross income for his boat. The 68-year-old worries about the new findings and is weary from uncertainty with the radically changing

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science affecting his livelihood, he said.

"Codfish is the dominant money stock" in his area, he said.

From a previous assessment, fishing cod should be considered a good bet. In that study of groundfish, released in 2008, the once-battered Gulf of Maine cod was no longer considered overfished and looked to be getting stronger. "Stock projected to rebuild rapidly," the report said.

But the story changes with the new data. Researchers now say cod has had weak reproduction and the earlier report may have included some bad projections, including a faulty estimate on the amount of spawning Gulf of Maine cod. They now say the estimate was nearly triple the actual amount.

The latest assessment concluded that the stock cannot rebuild by the federally mandated 2014 date. Under that forecast, regulators could end fishing on Gulf of Maine cod as a way to protect the species and meet the deadline. But such a decision could also shut down fishing for other species in the vast areas where cod commonly mix, devastating the local industry.

Fishery laws require regulators to consider the well-being of fishing communities when they pass rules, and one way to avoid a shutdown would be to push back cod's rebuilding deadline.

"Given the preliminary results, we are already exploring the flexibility in (federal fishery laws) to outline appropriate management responses," the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said in a statement earlier this week.

But the new data could be so wildly off that no desperate measures are needed.

Giocalone said fishermen are now catching more cod in less time, in broader geographic areas and at a wider variety of ages and sizes than ever before. He said many fishermen recently installed net sensors to detect cod because they were worried about catching too much and exceeding strict catch limits.

"How could they possibly have an assessment that says cod is at a historically low level?" said Giocalone, who is also a policy expert at the Northeast Seafood Coalition.

Giocalone and Mirachi both noted the NOAA recently switched to a new boat to collect the fish samples used in its stock assessment, and wondered if that was a factor.

NOAA said the preliminary information may be saying something radically different about cod for a few reasons, including the earlier report's reliance on data suggesting 2005 was a strong year for cod reproduction. That proved to be false. Also, NOAA blamed recent overfishing.

Independent scientists will start reviewing the new data at a workshop next week.

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Steve Cadrin, a University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth scientist who worked with the new data, said substantial changes can occur during a peer review.

"However, I think it's not likely that a much more positive result will come out of this," he said.

Still, he said, the fishermen's perceptions of strong cod health can't be dismissed, especially since NOAA's science was incorrect three years ago.

"Looking back, the 2008 assessment was clearly wrong," he said. "So, to me, we shouldn't be overly defensive of the scientific model because it's been shown to be wrong before."

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