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Recreational fishermen, party boat captains to join D.C. protest

By KIRK MOORE • TOMS RIVER BUREAU • February 15, 2010

As fishermen prepare for a Feb. 24 protest in Washington, they are finding more to worry about in the proposed 2011 federal oceans budget — including a cut in funding for cooperative research programs, which in some cases have reversed pictures of fishery decline, and helped maintain quotas to keep fishermen working.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's 2011 budget request seeks \$36.6 million to set up new management regimes, called catch shares, that will control fishermen's efforts by assigning them specific shares of annual quotas. Advocates of catch shares say it is a way out of New England's management morass, where captains and crews who work on cod and other groundfish species are squeezed by tighter limits on their working days at sea.

Disgruntled commercial fishermen will be joined Feb. 24 by recreational anglers and Shore party and charter boat captains, who have seen their access to fish like summer flounder and black sea bass severely cut back by mandates to rebuild those species to higher population levels within 10-year deadlines.

In a few cases — notably monkfish and sea scallops — harvests have actually increased as a result of cooperative research. Scientists and fishermen worked together to analyze catches, and biologists used the results to fine-tune population models.

Winter flounder could be another case in which shrinking catch limits are unwarranted, according to New England trawler captains and University of Massachusetts researchers who have called for a cooperative survey for the "blackback" flounder.

Yet, the 2011 budget request shows a proposed \$4.56 million reduction in cooperative research funding.

"This decrease is offset by increases in other fisheries research," the NOAA budget statement says, however.

The cutback is in sharp contrast to NOAA's 2010 budget plan, which called for more cooperative research funding, says Nils Stolpe, a writer and analyst who works with the Garden State Seafood Association and other commercial fishing groups.

"Without that cooperative research, there would be two additional fisheries (monkfish and scallops) appearing to need the salvation offered by the imposition of catch shares," Stolpe wrote online at FishNetUSA Friday.

Stolpe said the decision shows that NOAA is more determined to push through catch shares than to reassess scientific findings that define whether a species is overfished.

The budget request reflects other notable ideas the Obama administration and NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco have brought to the agency.

NOAA is seeking a \$6.77 million increase for its Coastal and Marine Spatial Planning program, an integrated effort to map and forecast the nation's needs for offshore energy, fish farming, commercial and recreational fishing and shipping. Many observers liken it to "zoning the ocean" for human uses, leading to speculation about how government planning could pick winners and losers when interest groups are at odds.

An additional \$4 million is sought for preparing coastal communities to address sea level rise and increasing exposure to storm damage. Climate change research spending would escalate to \$241 million from \$225 million.

By far the biggest increase in the \$907 million National Marine Fisheries Service portion of the budget is \$36.6 million in proposed new spending to implement catch shares, beginning with this spring's experiment in New England.

"This increase continues the transition of the Northeast groundfish fishery to sector management and provides for implementation of catch share programs in fisheries in the Mid-Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Pacific coast regions," according to the NOAA budget document.

Organizers of the "United We Fish" rally Feb. 24 expect up to 3,000 people at the Feb. 24 rally in front of the U.S. Capitol to demand changes to a federal fisheries law they say is killing jobs and eroding fishing communities.

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