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Catch share group pushes private forum

By Richard Gaines
Staff Writer

MRAG Americas, a major contractor for NOAA and a provider of on-board monitoring services for the rollout of catch shares in New England's groundfishery, is hosting an invitation-only workshop next Monday as part of a project to create methods for evaluating the success of the new fishery management system.

MRAG a for-profit company whose president is Andrew Rosenberg, a former high official at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's fisheries service was contracted for the catch share study by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, which has steered millions of dollars in grants to groups promoting the catch share system, including the Environmental Defense Fund and the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, the MRAG website notes.

Together, grants to the Hook group and EDF related to New England catch shares have totaled more than \$4 million.

Efforts to reach Robert Trumble, the MRAG vice president in charge of the program, were unsuccessful Tuesday.

The invitation-only day-long meeting on New England catch shares is set for Monday at the Sheraton Portsmouth Harborside Hotel in Portsmouth, N.H., according to copy of the invitation obtained by the Times.

Invitations were received by many groundfishermen and marine scientists, including critics of the catch share system.

One of those, David Goethel, who sits on the New England Fishery Management Council, and has been a fierce opponent of the approach, said he planned to attend.

Goethel said he believed the workshop would have about 15 participants.

"I don't know who the others are," he said. "I'm going, I figure somebody from the 'anti'-(catch share) sector should be present."

The MRAG event comes during a fierce scientific and political debate about the efficacy of catch shares that was raised to the desk of President Obama last week by Gov. Deval Patrick, who wrote to his friend with a plea for the president to "set your agencies ... on a course of cooperation with the commercial fishing industry."

Patrick wrote to Obama after Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke and Eric Schwaab, who heads NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, refused to recognize findings in a scientific report from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth that the catch share program for the groundfishing industry had sent the industry into an economic death spiral, with small boat fishing businesses selling out and becoming inactive while equity in the fishery consolidated in the biggest businesses.

The catch share system was launched last May, the start of the fishing year, at the same time the industry was burdened with ultra conservative allocations dictated by new provisions written into the 2006 reauthorization of Magnuson-Stevens Act that mandated hard catch limits.

The approach shows the influence of a 2007 MRAG report, "Setting Annual Catch Limits for U.S. Fisheries," which was supported by the non-profit Lenfest Ocean Program and made a case for large buffers to catch limits to ensure that overfishing couldn't occur.

The research paper written for the governor and sent to Locke made the case unsuccessfully that the buffers were unnecessarily large and denied the fleet fishing opportunities that could have been safely granted.

The multi-billion dollar Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, established on the West Coast by founders of Intel Corp., has distributed grants to various entities dedicated to promoting catch shares and marine protected areas high priorities of NOAA chief Jane Lubchenco, who before joining the Obama administration was a marine scientist and a linchpin in a global network of agenda-driven, and foundation-financed scientists.

Among the foundation's favorites have been the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association which innovated the system of fishing cooperatives, or sectors, to which the catch share approach is welded under the New England council's deliberations and EDF, which has led the push for catch shares spanning the Bush and Obama administrations.

A policy paper during the transition, co-written by Lubchenco, advocated catch shares as a key tool to help end overfishing. The initiative was powered by a vivid prediction that, without catch shares, swarms of "jellyfish" would rule the seas after fishermen rid them of fin fish.

The Hook Fishermen's Association which now fishes primarily with gillnets, not hooks received three Moore grants totaling \$1,943,548 between December 2005 and September 2007. The largest, for \$912,953 in 2007, was to support implementation of catch shares in New England through promoting regulatory reform and leading the region in sector governance and monitoring.

In 2007, EDF received \$1,980,192 to bring catch shares to "the entire groundfish fishery and ... the offshore sea scallop fishery, and (evaluate) feasibility of implementation in a nearshore locally-managed bay scallop fishery.

"Through implementation in the carefully chosen portfolio of fisheries, targeted political advocacy work, and scientific knowledge around DAP performance and biological assessments, Environmental Defense will help to make (catch shares) the default management mechanism for New England fisheries."

A number of fishermen and scientists said Tuesday they would not attend the MRAG event because they consider the event to be staged to provide credibility for the catch share regimen, which was written over more than three years in the council and then approved by the council in June 2009 under heavy pressure from Lubchenco.

She came before the council meeting in Mystic, Conn., just days after her confirmation by the Senate, and challenged the panel to enact the system without delay. The council did so, but in the months that followed revisited different elements in the re-engineering of the 20-stock system and, even last month at its meeting in Portsmouth, agreed finally to put limits on the accumulation of catch shares in individual hands.

The process has been criticized by Goethel for favoring the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, and favoritism is a core issue in

a landmark lawsuit filed against NOAA by the cities of Gloucester and New Bedford and fishing interests from Maine to North Carolina.

The commonwealth last month filed amicus papers with U.S. District Judge Rya Zobel to join the plaintiffs. Also seeking to join are Reps. Barney Frank and John Tierney and the consumer group, Food & Water Watch.

Richard Gaines can be reached at 978-283-7000, x3464, or at rgaines@gloucestertimes.com.