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## Enviro group launches input sessions on catch shares

By Richard Gaines  
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Ecotrust, a nonprofit organization known for its cautious opinion about catch shares as a fishery management system, is today announcing plans to undertake its own national research study of the controversial Obama administration policy that took effect in New England on May 1.

Typically, catch share conversions create hyper-consolidation for the fishing industry, and the system is expected to squeeze at least half the practicing fishing boat businesses out of operation in New England.

The New England groundfishery, the first industry of the colonists that took root in Gloucester and has sustained coastal cultures for nearly 400 years, is now three weeks into the new regulatory format after being converted amid widespread protests and a lawsuit.

The national rally of fishing interests at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., last February was motivated in part by fear and anger at the administration's catch share policy.

A \$45 million non-government organization based on the West Coast, Ecotrust said it would name a panel of national and regional experts to take testimony from coastal communities on the way to a national report to be released next spring.

Ecotrust said the first panel would meet in Boston next Tuesday and Wednesday. The research effort moves to New Orleans in July and on to Portland, Oregon, in August. The sessions, with invited fishing industry participants, are closed to the public.

"This is not a dog and pony show; this is not propaganda," Ecotrust Vice President Astrid Scholz said Monday in a telephone interview. But she said

Ecotrust wanted the public to know in advance of the effort that "there's a lot to learn."

On this point, Ecotrust parts ways with the Obama administration and the Environmental Defense Fund, which has been the primary cheerleader for catch shares.

As EDF's vice chairwoman, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chief Jane Lubchenco helped write a manifesto for catch shares in 2008. Named to the top NOAA post a year ago, she has consistently made clear catch shares were her top priority.

Lubchenco has claimed repeatedly that the benefits of catch shares have been established.

In her budget proposal to Congress, which proposes shifting about \$10 million from cooperative research — government scientists working on fishing boats, the acknowledged gold standard — to create the \$54 million catch share kitty, Lubchenco asserted that the "scientific evidence is compelling that catch shares can also help restore the health of ecosystems and put fisheries on a path to profitability and sustainability."

Yet the only paper she cited was a policy proposal by EDF.

Last June, after Ecotrust released a cautionary report on catch shares in British Columbia, EDF considered the report an endorsement and set off an angry exchange.

"What struck me most is that we seem to be moving beyond the debate about whether catch shares provide conservation benefits," EDF's Johanna Thomas blogged. "In the paper, Ecotrust affirms the conservation benefits of ITQs, Individual Transferable Quotas, one form of a catch share. ... Our goal, which we share with Ecotrust and many other fishery stakeholders, is to maximize the positive socio-economic outcomes and minimize the negative ones — once conservation performance is assured."

Ecotrust Canada representatives, however, read the EDF blog with consternation, believing EDF had misrepresented its finding, and responded:

"... Your blog posting makes our report sound like a glowing reference for ITQs and minimizes our critique of some fundamental problems as experienced in British Columbia, Canada.

"We are also not in agreement that catch shares alone will conserve fish stocks: other factors, like restricting destructive gear, ensuring proper enforcement and stock assessment, are perhaps even more important," wrote Eric Enno Tamm, communications manager of Ecotrust Canada. "In fact, we have seen fish stock declines in catch share fisheries in BC, including abalone, halibut and hake.

"A proper and more balanced reading of our report," Tamm continued, "would suggest that, as implemented in BC, catch shares have created huge market distortions and have missed the mark in achieving a number of objectives."

Starting with the surf clam and quahog fishery in the Mid-Atlantic in 1990, about 10 percent of U.S. fisheries have been reorganized under catch share principles, replacing the notion of the wild prey as commonly owned with a system that divides and assigns the allocation into shares that can be bought, sold and leased.

Virtually all U.S. and foreign catch share systems have encouraged consolidation of local fishing fleets, and investment from outside the markets.

On behalf of far-flung fishing interests, Gloucester and New Bedford, the co-capitals of the New England fishing industry, have filed suit against NOAA in federal court, arguing that the catch share system imposed in New England would ruin port economies up and down the coast.

Lubchenco told the Times a year ago that her goal was to see a "sizable fraction" of the boats removed from the fishery.

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