

# ***THE MIAMI HERALD***

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## **Florida Keys fishermen won't endorse controversial federal catch share program**

**Keys fishermen spoke out Thursday against a controversial federal program designed to put an end to overfishing and boost stocks.**

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Keys fishermen said a resounding “no” at a public workshop Thursday in Key Largo to a controversial federal proposal to use catch shares to manage the commercial snapper-grouper fishery in the South Atlantic.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council says nine stocks of snapper-grouper from North Carolina to the East Coast of Florida are either overfished or about to be depleted to unhealthy levels. Since 2008, the council has been discussing the use of catch shares as a tool to stop overfishing and boost stocks.

Already in place in the Gulf of Mexico, Alaska and New England, catch shares mean allocating a percentage of a fisheries quota to individuals, fishing groups, or communities. The aim, federal fisheries managers say, is to eliminate “derby” fishing, where harvesters rush to catch their quota during shortened fishing seasons, and instead spread the harvest out, keeping markets stable and making seafood available year round.

Shares of the fish can be divided equally or awarded based on historical catch data, and they can be bought or sold. Fishermen typically bring their catch to an approved landing site and their boats must be equipped with a tracking mechanism. To keep the program going, the government levies a management fee. But before a catch share program could be implemented, a referendum would be conducted among the affected fishers.

If that referendum were held today in the Keys, it would be thumbs down – if comments at Thursday’s meeting are any indication.

“There’s probably going to be two-thirds of the fishermen now are going to be out of business,” warned Bill Kelly, executive director of the Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen’s Association. “We are talking in excess of 2,000 people. You would literally collapse the economy of the Florida Keys.”

The problem with existing catch share programs, Keys fishermen say, is that they reward large fishing operations while squeezing out the mom-and-pop commercial businesses.

“It takes the small operator out of it,” argued Lee Starling, a Key West commercial fisherman who participates in the Gulf of Mexico catch share program. “What I saw in the Gulf, it rewarded people who overfished. People who fish sustainably were kicked out of the industry.”

Keys fisheries are unique, fishers say, in that there is no “derby” fishery and most operators target multiple species throughout the year, such as snapper, grouper, lobster and stone crab.

“The Keys are different. They ought to be regulated differently,” lower Keys commercial fisherman Don DeMaria said. “The fish we target are bycatch in the Carolinas. Their season is summer; ours is winter. What works for them up there doesn’t work for us.”

Joe Gilbert, a commercial fisherman in Stonington, Conn., who spends his winters in the Keys, said he has had bad experiences with catch shares in New England.

“Stay away from this program,” he said. “It’s dangerous, insidious, and I consider it downright evil.”

Tom Hill, owner of Key Largo Fisheries, said he believes catch shares will lead to an increase in illegal fish sales.

“It’s more of a business program than a conservation program,” Hill said. “It’s going to create a tremendous black market.”

About the only attendees to speak in favor of catch shares were members of the small golden crab fishery and Eileen Dougherty of the Environmental Defense Fund.

“The current way of managing fisheries – with closures, trip limits and other restrictions – is bad for business and isn’t a successful long-term strategy for healthy ecosystems,” Dougherty said. “We urge the council to move swiftly to implement catch shares and include fishermen input into the process.”

Kate Quigley, an economist with the South Atlantic Council, assured fishermen that any catch share program in the region is one to two years away, and that eliminating the Keys from the program is an option.

“This is, ‘let’s mull it over,’ ” Quigley said. “There’s no march forward to a deadline.”

However, the South Atlantic Council is under a deadline to establish annual catch limits and accountability measures for several species not undergoing overfishing by the end of 2011. The deadline is part of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation Act, which says all species have to have catch limits and methods to make sure those limits are not exceeded. Affected species include some in the snapper-grouper complex, along with dolphin and wahoo. The council is expected to vote on what those amounts will be at a June meeting in Key West.

Several fishermen at Thursday’s meeting were upset that the federal government would impose stricter regulations on stocks that are not in trouble.

“Unless there’s clear evidence of a decline, let’s maintain the current harvest,” said Michael Kennedy of the recreational fishing group CCA-Florida.

Council member Ben Hartig of Hobe Sound told the gathering he didn’t like the strictures of the law any more than they do.

“You guys have scraped to stay in business. Now we’re going to kill you,” he said. “That’s where I have problems with this whole process. Talk to your congressional people to change this law.”

Read more: <http://www.miamiherald.com/2011/02/05/v-fullstory/2052929/florida-keys-fishermen-wont-endorse.html#ixzz1DHgVs8xY>