

Subject: We don't need research, we're going to have catch shares

Another Perspective by Nils Stolpe

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***When you hear the whistle blowin' eight to the bar
Then you know that fishing heaven's not very far
Shovel all the coal in
Gotta keep it rollin'
Woo, woo, Catch Shares there you are***

(With apologies to the memory and the art of Glenn Miller)

First off, a disclaimer of sorts. I am not an opponent of catch shares, limited access privilege programs, individual transferable quotas, sectors, or any other management tool. However, I am seriously opposed to any form of management being forced on a fishery and the people in it and I am just as opposed to it being misrepresented to gain industry, public or political support for its imposition. To suggest that the people in charge at NOAA/NMFS aren't using their position in the Obama Administration to force catch shares on US fishermen would be tantamount to suggesting that black is white, night is day and foul is fair. And to claim that the New England groundfish fishermen have enthusiastically accepted catch shares, as the catch shares bully boys and girls have become so adept at doing, couldn't pass the straight face test with anyone who was actually following what's been going on in that fishery. So, with that taken care of...

It seems as if Dr. Jane Lubchenco, as the newly appointed head of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, didn't even stop off at her new digs in DC to check on the freshly printed stationery before traveling to Boston and announcing that her agency was going to solve the ills of our fisheries by instituting a national policy "encouraging" the use of catch shares as the management technique of choice. Boston, of course, is ground zero for ineffectual fisheries management revolving around the Northeast groundfish complex (to discover what ineffectual is really all about, read Chronic Underfishing at http://www.fishnet-usa.com/chronic_underfishing.htm).

This was hardly surprising. Dr. Lubchenco had been on the Board of the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), an ENGO that has been among the leaders in enthusiastically inflicting damage on fishermen, fishing-related businesses and fishing communities since doing so had become the rage among a handful of foundation funded "conservation" organizations. The people at EDF had been working towards the institutionalization of catch shares, and on establishing the financial infrastructure to capitalize on it, for years.

What has been surprising is the cynical manipulation of our federal fisheries governance system that has been ongoing for a decade or so that it reveals; a manipulation that seems to have reached its apex since the new regime took over at NOAA/NMFS.

This manipulation is most evident in the recently released NOAA/NMFS budget for Fiscal Year 2011 (available at http://www.corporateservices.noaa.gov/~nbo/11bluebook_highlights.html). Along with asking for \$36.6 million in new money for the Catch Shares campaign, it transfers \$11.4 million out of Fisheries Research and \$6 million – about half of last year's request - out of Cooperative Research into it as well.

At first glance this seems only a simple matter of robbing Peter to pay Paul – shifting funding from one program area to another. But the fallout is going to be much more significant than that.

It all begins with the fact that in recent years what is known as the “precautionary principle” has been zealously applied to fisheries management. Most simply, what this means is that the less is known about the status of a stock of fish, the more stringently fishing effort must be managed on that stock. Simplifying a bit, if a stock size is estimated with a 10% margin of error, it can be managed safely as if it's at 90% of the estimate. If it is estimated with a 40% margin, it must be managed at 60% of the estimate. Hence, the worse the data on a fishery is, the more the fishermen have to pay – in terms of foregone harvest – for its inaccuracy.

Needless to say, recreational and commercial fishermen realize this and are constantly striving for better science and better data, which can only be had through better research, i.e. larger research budgets. This is because at this point they know that the more that is known about fisheries, the better off they, and the fish, will be.

Considering the full spectrum of fisheries science, the gold standard – at least from a fisherman's perspective – is cooperative research. In cooperative research projects, a team of scientists goes to sea on a commercial fishing boat crewed by a commercial fishing crew using commercial fishing gear and measures, weighs, counts, and etc. the fish that are caught. I doubt anyone will be surprised to read that such sampling by professional fishermen just about always yields better results (as in more of the target species caught) than that done on research vessels by research crews. And more fish caught means more accurate estimates because while it's impossible to catch fish if they aren't there, it's fairly easy to not catch them if they are.

(I wrote about cooperative research in 2007 in ***Improving the best available science***. It's available on the FishNet USA website at <http://www.fishnet-usa.com/All%20Stolpe%20Columns.htm#Best%20Science>.)

I don't know of any fishery supported with a cooperative research program in which the harvest was reduced because of the data it provided. Cooperative research has been a win-win proposition for the fishermen, for the scientists and for the managers.

In fact, cooperative research had been so popular with fishermen and with NOAA/NMFS that last year's budget requested *"a net increase of \$1,247,000 for a total of \$11,455,000 for Cooperative Research to expand and fully implement a nationwide, regionally based cooperative research and management program as directed by the reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Act."*

While not so popular, at least with fishermen, and perhaps not so accurate, the research carried out by NOAA/NMFS through its recently upgraded fleet of research vessels is just as critical to the fishermen and to the fish. Keeping in mind the mandates of the precautionary approach to fisheries management, the more we know about the status of the fish stocks, the closer we can approach their ideal harvest levels. You would think that would be in everyone's interest, even the folks in the ENGOs and those at NOAA/NMFS.

So why the big cuts in the Research and Cooperative Research budgets?

Consider the fact that Dr. Lubchenco was wed to the almost completely untried concept of catch shares* through EDF before taking over as head of NOAA/NMFS and has continued in that union since she came to NOAA/NMFS. As I've written before, the plan to force catch shares on US fisheries will have revolutionary impacts on those fisheries, on the people in them and on the people, businesses and communities that depend on them. And, for many of those people, businesses and communities, those impacts will be devastating (as she put it a little more nicely though perhaps not quite as exactly, the shift to catch shares would result in "fewer jobs, but better jobs.") Obviously such a revolutionary change and such economic hardship couldn't be forced on millions of fishermen and the people and businesses that depended on them if everything was ok in their fisheries. There'd be no reason to, at least none that was acceptable to the public, to Congress or to President Obama's administration with its recently declared focus on jobs.

Now it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that better fisheries research means better fisheries data, nor that better fisheries data almost invariably means better catches for the fishermen. Taking two major Northeast fisheries, monkfish and sea scallops, as examples, a decade or so ago both were facing major cutbacks because the best available science indicated that the stocks weren't doing well.

In both fisheries, at the urging of the fishermen, who generally seem to have a good understanding of the status of the fish stocks they are fishing on, successful cooperative research programs were established that showed that the stocks weren't in as bad shape as had been believed. The drastic cutbacks that were planned were avoided and the fisheries, the fishermen in them and the businesses that depend on them have thrived. Without that cooperative research, there would be two additional fisheries appearing to need the salvation offered by the imposition of catch shares.

How many other fisheries could be brought back from the supposed brink of disaster, a brink enthusiastically manufactured by the ENGOs, by better science? That's impossible to tell, but as I wrote above, more and better sampling is never going to indicate fewer fish than are actually there, but less and worse sampling definitely will. Couple that with the precautionary principle and you have a recipe for a real disaster – and that's what NOAA and the ENGOs are going to need to sell their Catch Shares revolution.

That certainly puts the NOAA/NMFS leadership's decision to cut the research budgets so severely, otherwise an action that is really difficult to understand coming from a supposedly science-based agency, in a different light. Could it be as simple as “better research equals better data equals better fishing, and that's going to make it a lot harder to sell an imminent crisis, so we at NOAA/NMFS don't want anything to do with that?”

And we can't forget the carrot that this fiscal shuffle holds out to the regional Fisheries Management Councils. They're all in line to get big bucks for jumping on the Catch Shares choo choo as well. Can you imagine a bureaucrat or a bureaucracy that wouldn't enthusiastically accept a budget increase, particularly considering the current state of the economy? They're committed, not by force but by bureaucratic expediency.

Adding the icing to this particular cake, all of the pronouncements about the Catch Shares Nirvana that we're about to enter make it sound like all is known that needs to be known about catch shares, that all of the answers are in hand. It's just a matter of applying all of that knowledge gleaned from all of those other fisheries* (actually only 1.1% of all of the world's fisheries, and those undoubtedly pre-selected for success), and we're in business – at least a few of us - better than we've ever been before.

But the 2011 Budget Request justifying the \$50+ million for the Catch Shares program states *“the funding also increases NMFS' analytical capacity to evaluate and report performance of catch share monitoring programs with respect to economic performance, fleet behavior, annual catch limits, and bycatch reduction.”* Someone at NOAA/NMFS (or EDF?) knows that catch shares are going to make it better for some of us, but doesn't know any of those troubling specifics like which of “us” or how much better.

It's not a matter of robbing Peter, it's more like taking his watch and wallet, beating him severely and leaving him bleeding in the gutter on his way home after his last day on the job. And then of determining who Paul is going to be.

*I wrote in March 2009 of the EDF working group that put together the Oceans of Abundance report, a supposed justification for the universal imposition of catch shares, *“members (of the working group) Christopher Costello and Steve Gaines were two of the three authors of a paper in Science in 2008 concluding rights-based management might save the world's fisheries based on an analysis of 11,135 commercial fisheries worldwide, 121 - or 1.1% - of which used this form of management.”* Dr. Lubchenco was also a member of the working group. (see All hands on the stacked deck at <http://www.fishnet-usa.com/All%20Stolpe%20Columns.htm#Stacked%20Deck>).