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NOAA affirms catch share push in face of industry fire

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The Obama administration Thursday formalized its commitment to a national "catch share policy" — a system already drawing fire from fishermen, and one which NOAA's chief administrator has said will bring a significant new reduction in the size of the fleet.

Already in place in more than two dozen U.S. fisheries within the 200 mile exclusive economic zone along three coasts, catch shares have almost always triggered hyper consolidation of the number of boats and businesses, with fishermen encouraged to buy, sell or trade their "shares" of an allocated catch limit to other fishermen — or outside corporations and investors.

Catch shares are also the subject of two industry-driven federal lawsuits, on the west and east coasts — including one including the cities of Gloucester and New Bedford as plaintiffs.

For its fanfare in Thursday's announcement, a national the catch share policy mandates nothing.

The federal Magnuson-Stevens Act reserves for the eight regional fishery management councils the authority to decide on management systems for the dozens of distinct fisheries which often overlap and interweave with each other.

But National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chief Jane Lubchenco, who served as vice chairwoman of the Environmental Defense Fund — the prime designers of catch share management —

before taking the NOAA post, has demonstrated a hands-on commitment to advancing the reach of catch shares.

Within days of taking office, she traveled to New England to successfully challenge the regional council to complete work on catch shares without delay.

And soon after her confirmation by the Senate in early 2009, Lubchenco said her goal was to see a "sizeable fraction" of the fishing boats removed — a job-cutting plan that has drawn fire from state and federal lawmakers and leaders in several fishing communities, including Gloucester and Mayor Carolyn Kirk.

The 2006 reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act required the government to enforce catch limits, and debate has raged over claims by the administration that catch shares advance conservation.

Thursday's announcement of the policy again asserted the claim that catch shares can "end overfishing."

Yet federal lawmakers of both parties in coastal fishing districts have widely objected to catch shares on grounds the more efficient fishing industry would be shedding essential jobs, while opening the door for Wall Street investors.

Those critics also dispute the claim of a conservation impact from the commodity-market making — and recent data from NOAA has made it clear that fish stocks are, or have been, successfully rebuilt as opposed to any threat of "overfishing."

"Catch shares involve a complex reallocation of the wealth that accrues from our fishery resources," marine scientist Brian Rothschild wrote in an op-ed column. "It is difficult to paint the catch share system as having any function other than 'economic allocation as its sole purpose.'"

A professor at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, Rothschild was the industry choice to head the National Marine Fisheries Service, but for reasons unstated, Lubchenco looked elsewhere before picking a non-scientist — Eric Schwaab — out of the Maryland state government.

To encourage catch share innovation, the NOAA announcement also identified the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, a congressionally chartered nonprofit corporation, as offering to make more than two

dozen grants totaling \$2.2 million available for groups willing to experiment with the approach.

Partnering with the foundation for catch shares are two powerful philanthropies, the Walton Foundation, and the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. The Walton Foundation represents the family of the founders of Wal-Mart; the Moore Foundation the founders of Intel.

The wildlife foundation's other partners are Big Oil — including BP — and other global commodity conglomerates.

"I'm really encouraged by this new policy because it's about supporting regionally designed solutions for fisheries," said Amanda Leland, EDF's national oceans policy director. "The policy focuses on providing the technical support and policy guidance needed to make catch shares successful for those who wish to pursue catch shares."

Other environmental non-government organization see catch shares as a powerful destructive force.

"Such programs have done little to encourage sustainable fishing practices or stop fish populations from becoming depleted and in some cases have actually worsened these programs," wrote Food and Water Watch in a global study released in September. "Smaller historic fishermen are continually being forced out of fishing, and wages have plummeted for those able to find work.

"There has been a notable lack of analysis of the impacts of catch share programs on communities and a lack of effort to integrate fair transition policies to help communities handle fallout from some of these programs when capacity becomes consolidated," said Megan Mackey, a fishing policy associate at Ecotrust, a West Coast environmental group that studied catch shares in British Columbia and across the United States.

Last month, Schwaab's announcement of NOAA intentions to expand catch shares into the recreational sector drew howls.

"Mr. Schwaab has disregarded congressional testimony from real anglers and commercial fishermen who are opposed to any type of privatization scheme," said Jim Hutchinson, managing director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance.

"When you read this release and see how Mr. Schwaab is promoting catch shares through a \$2.2 million funding initiative supported by Wal-

Mart and Intel Corporation," he said, "it's hard to think how anyone in our recreational fishing industry can be anything other than outraged at this announcement."

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