

Scientist calls for catch share moratorium

By Richard Gaines

Staff Writer

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Brian Rothschild, a nationally influential research biologist revered in most New England's ports, has proposed a one-year moratorium in the regional imposition of catch shares, a re-engineering of the fishing industry that is to start May 1 when cooperatives will begin working off allocations.

The catch share system, innovated and championed by the Environmental Defense Fund and made the Obama administration's panacea for the ails of the fishing industry, gives fishermen catching rights and encourages the development of an investor-strengthened commodities market, but also has a track record in American and foreign fisheries of bringing about radical consolidation — fewer big businesses supplanting the large numbers of small boats that for centuries have made up the New England industry.

"Many of our fishermen feel that the catch share system will not be economically viable," Rothschild said. "They feel that various sectors will become bankrupt in a relatively short period of time because the quotas of fish assigned to the sectors are too small to be economically feasible.

"They feel that the system being imposed on them will disrupt in an irreversible way the economy of our ports and eliminate many businesses and jobs," Rothschild said in remarks prepared for delivery to an emergency meeting of the New England fishing industry Wednesday night.

Called to make logistical, transit, strategic and communications plans for next week's mass gathering of the fishing industry from all three coasts to lobby for congressional relief from federal law and regulatory actions in Washington, D.C., more than 100 people met at the state fisheries laboratory here, including owners of the regions's two major fish brokerage auctions, and representatives of the groundfish industry based in Gloucester and the scallop industry based in New Bedford.

Mary Griffin, the Massachusetts commissioner of marine fisheries, and Paul Diodati, the division director, as well as Mayor Carolyn Kirk, state Sen. Bruce Tarr, R-Gloucester, and state Rep. Ann-Margaret Ferrante, D-Gloucester, mixed with fishermen from as far away as Point Judith, R.I., in the informal batting about of message points and travel options.

A fixture in New Bedford and at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's School of Marine Science and Technology which he helped build, Rothschild was

cheered as he moved to the podium. He said he brought a message of solidarity from New Bedford Mayor Scott Lang.

"I'll give you a capsule summary of how New Bedford thinks. New Bedford thinks just like you do," he said.

In his comments, Rothschild said he saw "a pernicious breakdown in government."

The phrase recalls U.S. Sen. Olympia Snowe's description of the relationship between the government and the industry as "dysfunctional" during the Maine senator's questioning at the January 2009 confirmation hearing of Jane Lubchenco as head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Rothschild's public critique of the federal fisheries regime marked the end of a yearlong silence he imposed on himself while Congressman Barney Frank, who represents New Bedford, Lang, and fishing industry participants, centered in New England but spread along all coasts, conducted a fruitless campaign to convince Lubchenco to name him the nation's top fisheries administrator as head of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service.

Last week, Eric Schwaab, a career Maryland bureaucrat and non-scientist who is little known in the fishing world, got the NMFS job. Rothschild was told of Lubchenco's decision by Schwaab, who has a master's degree in geometry and environmental planning.

At the end of his remarks Wednesday night, Rothschild said, "We have a worry, a deep worry, that the catch share system may not be economically viable, and if not that, what?"

"Now I know why Lubchenco didn't want him for the position," bellowed Richie Canastra, an owner of the Whaling City Seafood Display Auction in New Bedford and an East Coast industry leader.

Rothschild made no reference to Lubchenco or the selection of Schwaab to head the National Marine Fisheries Service. But in his prepared remarks, he said, "We need to give him a chance to get started. We hope he can come to New England soon so we can begin a new dialogue."

His prepared remarks contained a lengthy analysis of the stressed state of fisheries management.

Among his pointed remarks, Rothschild complained that no regime has yet found a way to end the massive waste in fish that must be pushed from the boats rather than be landed as punishable violations.

"Each year hundreds of millions of dollars of fish that could be caught under rigid conservation regulations are either not caught or thrown back into the sea as dead bycatch. How can such waste be tolerated in a climate of severe economic and employment challenges?"

He also argued for a more flexible approach to the final steps toward full restoration of once badly overfished stocks. Now, most of these stocks, such as Gulf of Maine cod which fill daily quotas in a single tow and allow Gloucester-based day boats to go out and return in half a day, are nearing mandated optimal mass, but as he noted Wednesday night, regulating to the weakest stock in the mixed groundfish off New England leaves much harvestable fish out of reach.

He told the meeting Wednesday night that he agreed on the need for writing flexibility into the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The law now requires the entire ecosystem to be brought to optimal strength at one time, a goal that Rothschild said was unrealistic, and led to reduced allocations that are cited as likely to shutdown the fishery in mid-season next summer.

Rothschild, whose field is biological oceanography, put the lost harvesting opportunity at, at the least, \$300 million a year.

"I personally have nothing per se against a catch share system," he said in his prepared remarks. "Theoretically, property rights such as catch shares provide incentives to increase the economic efficiency of a fishery management system. On the other hand, it is well known that their use can substantially modify the fabric and integrity of fishing communities.

"Because of this, I feel that the folks in these communities should have a say in the 'who gets what' of the fishery resource."

Rothschild noted that the European Union is backing away from its version of catch shares and some "conservation groups" have also registered concerns about the potential of catch shares to disrupt social stability and unemploy working fishermen.

"It appears to many that we are rushing to put into place a major revision of the way we manage our resources — a revision that affects communities, jobs, our economy, welfare — without the analysis, the planning, the budgetary considerations, the costs and benefits, the statements of conservation consequences that typically accompanies federal actions of this magnitude."

He told the Times in an interview that the prudent course of action is to stop the institution of catch shares in May and freeze the system in place for at least a year while the catch share program is further examined, researched and developed.

"Why don't we take a step back and try and understand what we are doing and create a fishery management regime of lasting value?" Rothschild said. "At this point in time, a more deliberate and measured approach may not be possible and will certainly require political intervention—but it is the right thing to do."

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