



2015 Needs Assessment for N.H. Groundfishermen

Summary

Given severe cuts in allowable catch and uncertainty about the future of groundfishing for N.H. fishermen, it is critical to understand the current situation, perspective and needs of N.H. groundfishermen in order to inform action that will address their circumstances. This information must accurately reflect the voice of fishermen and make its way into the hands of fishermen, extension agents and politicians who can collectively search for resources, support and actions that can help.

Methods

A needs assessment was conducted through individual informal interviews with all groundfish permit holders in N.H. during April and May 2015. Results are summarized here in a document that will be shared with individual fishermen, the N.H. Groundfish Sector, Community and Economic Development Specialists, and N.H. Senators Ayotte and Shaheen, Representatives Guinta and Kuster, and Governor Hassan. Interviews were conducted by N.H. Sea Grant/UNH Cooperative Extension Specialist Erik Chapman. Each interview was recorded and results were transcribed into a data sheet.



Results

Nine fishermen were interviewed; all will be actively fishing this year. However, three will not be fishing their groundfish permit and instead will be fishing in alternative fisheries (e.g. lobster). Three of the interviewed fishermen fish out of Seabrook/Hampton, two out of Rye and four out of Portsmouth. One N.H. fisherman who will be fishing out of Seabrook/Hampton and another that fishes out of Portland, Maine, were not interviewed.

In general, where possible, fishermen will be moving into alternative fisheries this year, including fishing for lobster, scallops, dogfish, whiting and tuna. In addition, several fishermen will be fishing further from shore or further south, near-shore, to avoid Gulf of Maine cod. Some fishermen are concerned about the safety of these adjustments because smaller boats are not as well equipped to safely travel longer distances offshore (approximately 80 miles) or to handle large, steel scalloping gear.

Most fishermen expect that their ability to groundfish will be significantly reduced and there is tremendous uncertainty over their fishing prospects given that it is not known how the lease price of Gulf of Maine cod will affect their ability to buy or sell their quota this year. The first offer for leased Gulf of Maine cod was \$6/lb., which is about two times a typical

auction price for cod, suggesting that the lease market could lead to sales of quota from smaller boats (such as those in the N.H. inshore fishing fleet) to larger fishing operations that can afford it.

Greater allocation or access to catch Gulf of Maine cod is the greatest need expressed by fishermen, followed by money. Many have outstanding or accumulating bills on loans for homes, insurance, boats and children's education. With limited access to fishing, most are continuing to pay overhead costs for their boats, along with other costs of living, without revenue.

The leading frustration directly associated with fishing is the perceived inaccuracy of the science that informs stock assessments. The assessments they receive from NOAA do not match up with what they see on the water and they would like to see changes that allow data from their fishing activity used to inform stock assessments. In general, the fishermen would like to be more involved in fisheries science and would like industry-based surveys and better use of the observer program to collect data that can be used to inform fisheries science.

An overall concern seems to be that the small, inshore boats are less able to take steps to adapt to the changing fishing environment. These changes include buying new permits, fishing further distances from port, leasing quota, or shifting into new fisheries. Generally, fishermen expressed frustration, concern and sadness that these constraints may threaten the continued existence of the inshore fishing fleet in N.H.

Fishermen are also worried about loss of historical fishing grounds to lobstermen with lost fishing effort by draggers. This is less of a concern for gillnetters since lobster gear can cause costly disruption of dragging operations when lobster traps are caught in the nets.

Buy-outs – the selling of permits and/or fishing vessels through a government program – were attractive for a few fishermen, but in general there is a feeling by many fishermen that they are too young to retire and too old to do something else. Any buy-out would need to offer significant value to fishermen given their loss of income and the years remaining in their careers. There was a strong concern that a buy-out should somehow include steps to ensure that fishing access remain in N.H. into the future.

Several fishermen voiced dissatisfaction with sector management and prefer the previous days-at-sea model, which, in their opinion, allowed inshore fishermen more exclusive access and more sustainable fishing in near-shore areas. Also, fishermen expressed a concern for the fate of smaller boats and dockside infrastructure, such as the Yankee Fishermen's Cooperative in Seabrook and Heidi Elisabeth, LLC in Portsmouth, because their loss will make it impossible for fishermen to land in N.H., forcing them to go to either Portland or Gloucester.

Overall, it appears that fishing will continue with between six to nine boats in the N.H. Sector as fishermen take steps to adapt in 2015. However, there is pessimism over the short-term and long-term viability of inshore fishing in N.H., though several remaining fishermen expressed some hope that things could eventually get better and that if they stay positive and work hard, they will be able to keep fishing. Among alternatives to groundfishing, fishermen were most interested in switching to alternative fisheries, research and a buy-out, and were least interested in working in education, aquaculture or ecotourism.

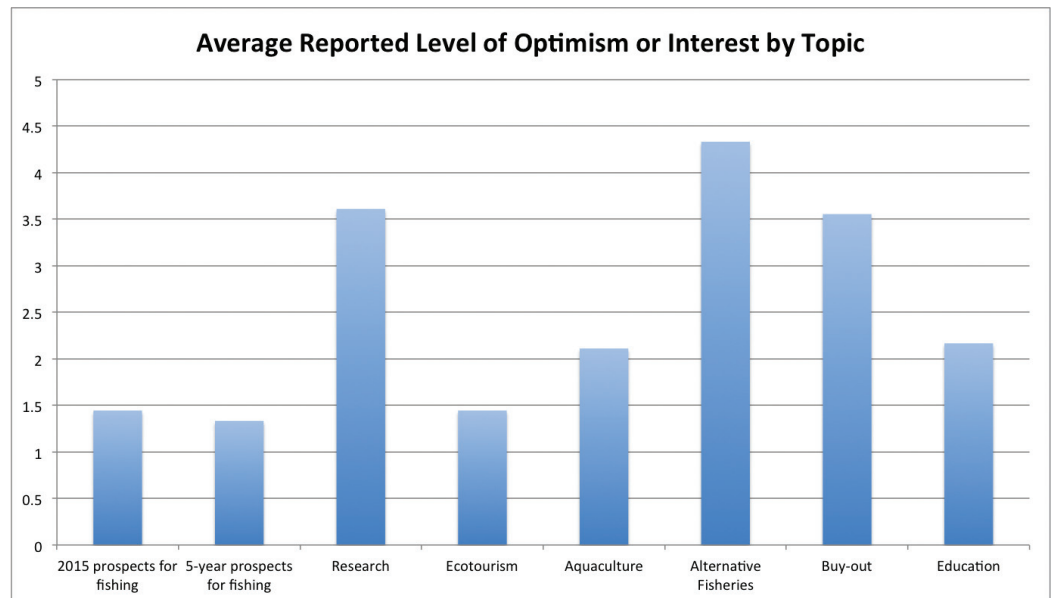


Figure 1: The average level of optimism (0 = not at all optimistic, 5 = very optimistic) and interest level (0 = not at all interested, 5 = very interested) in specific alternatives to fishing as reported by interviewed N.H. fishermen.

Q1:

What are your current plans for fishing in 2015 and how will it differ from previous years?

None of the fishermen reported “business as usual” in 2015. Fishermen who have access to alternative fishery permits and gear are diversifying their fishing to include lobstering, scalloping and targeting dogfish, whiting and tuna. Three of the fishermen reported a significant shift toward lobstering and overall five were shifting into alternative fisheries. Three fishermen reportedly will fish further offshore or south to avoid Gulf of Maine cod. Two fishermen expressed some safety concerns over their decision to scallop or move further offshore – decisions that can lead to greater safety risk given their smaller boats. Fishermen who were not shifting to alternative fisheries were expecting reduced effort in 2015 than in previous years. At least one fisherman is likely to sell all groundfish on their permit this year and, depending on lease price of cod, several others may either sell or buy significant quota that could either reduce or extend their fishing this year.

Q2:

What are your most pressing needs right now?

Eight of the nine fishermen reported that their most pressing need was for allocation of Gulf of Maine cod. More than half of the fishermen reported a need for money given payments on loans for their homes, boats, cars, children’s education, insurance and vessel costs (maintenance, mooring, etc).

Q3:

Do you have any ideas for practical ways that these needs could be met? Do you have any other thoughts/ideas of what might help given today’s problems in the groundfish fishery?

Seven of the nine fishermen made suggestions about ways to improve fisheries science that informs stock assessments. These suggestions included:

- Use observer data to inform stock assessments (three fishermen)
- Hire an independent group to do the fisheries science (one fisherman)
- Use fishing boats and alternative gears (gillnets and trawls) and fishermen to survey stocks
- Put scientists on fishing boats
- NMFS employees should spend 40 days a year on the water with fishermen
- Survey closed areas

Other ideas included getting rid of the observer program; taking steps to improve trust among scientists, regulators and fishermen; and taking steps to change the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to loosen targets for fish population and to strengthen targets for maintaining fishing businesses.

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Q4:

What are additional concerns or barriers you might have that affect your opportunities to fish this year (e.g. interactions with other fisheries, etc.)?

Five of the nine fishermen mentioned that lobstermen extending their trap lines into areas historically fished by draggers is a problem. Three fishermen who are doing additional or new lobstering are somewhat concerned about how lobstermen will respond to them trying to establish themselves in an already crowded and territorial fishery.



"In general, the fishermen would like to be more involved in fisheries science and would like industry-based surveys and better use of the observer program to collect data that can be used to inform fisheries science."



For More Information

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This publication is made possible by the National Sea Grant College Program of the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration grant NA14OAR4170083 to the N.H. Sea Grant College Program.
Publication #: UNHMP-IS-SG-15-22

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