August 21, 2013

MS. Dorothy Lowman, Chair
Pacific Fishery Management Council
7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 101
Portland, Oregon 97220-1384

RE: G.9 Trawl Rationalization Trailing Actions Scoping, Process, and Prioritization

Dear Ms. Lowman:

Our organization strongly supports the Council taking action to prioritize developing a plan for the Adaptive Management Pounds (AMP) set-aside in the next suite of trawl rationalization trailing actions. At this time, there is no program to manage the AMP. Our concern is that the longer we go without a plan, the less likely the Council is to bring the AMP back for the intended purpose.

When the Council decided to move ahead to implement the trawl rationalization program with no plan or program for AMP, we were concerned. However, the Council indicated a strong commitment to develop an AMP plan by did setting a date to have a program in place—January 2015. At that time, we trusted that Council members would follow through on their commitment to have a program in place and be ready to implement management of the AMP by January 2015. We understand that to meet the January 2015 implementation date the Council will need to begin work on the program immediately. We ask that you prioritize the work, and get started right away so the Council can follow through on your commitment to the public.

We trust that the Council will follow their intent to develop a program for the AMP that will mitigate unintended consequences from the trawl rationalization program and benefit fishing communities.

Our community has spent the past 2 years developing a Community Fishing Association. We have a strong business plan, community sustainability plan (as referenced in the Magnuson Act), bycatch and discard reduction plan, and seafood marketing program. As the Council moves forward to develop an AMP program, we would like to be included in any committee appointments or industry workshops.

Please take action at the September Council meeting to prioritize developing a management program for AMP.

Thank you,

Leesa Cobb, Executive Director
On a collision course

From U.S. Coast Guard reports

One late June morning the skipper and sternman of a 43-foot fiberglass lobster boat were working about 20 miles from their northern New England home port until about 11:30 a.m. before heading north for home.

That same day, around midmorning, the skipper and sternman of a 34-foot lobster boat left the same port for their day’s second trip to set 10 traps along a southerly course. They then headed east to set another string of traps.

On the northbound boat, the skipper manned the helm as the sternman napped, cruising at about 18 knots. The boat planed at cruising speed, requiring the skipper to stand to see over the bow.

The skipper sat on a stool near the helm to eat lunch. After motoring for 45 minutes, he stood up to scan for traffic and saw one vessel off his port bow that appeared to be setting traps about 1.5 to 3 nautical miles away. He sat back down to finish his lunch.

Across the bay the eastbound boat’s sternman was preparing traps for the next set while the skipper manned the helm. At around 1:30 p.m., the sternman heard the diesel engine’s supercharger whistle and felt the boat slow down as if it was taken out of gear. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the northbound boat bearing down.

The northbound boat’s bow struck the eastbound boat’s starboard side amidships. It ran across the eastbound boat’s beam, crushing the wheelhouse and breaching the hull. The eastbound boat’s sternman grabbed the northbound boat’s trap rack and pulled himself aboard to avoid being tossed overboard.

The sinking boat’s skipper was quickly spotted near the helm of his wheelhouse. The sternman on the 43-foot leapt into the water and retrieved the skipper, who was hauled aboard, unconscious.

The northbound vessel’s skipper then called the local Coast Guard and notified them of the situation. He also called the harbormaster’s office before steaming for his port.

Ten minutes later, emergency medical personnel, the marine patrol and National Park Service rangers met the boat at the dock. Attempts to resuscitate the unconscious skipper were unsuccessful.

Lessons learned

The northbound boat was the stand-on vessel, and the eastbound boat was the give-way vessel. Still, under Rule 8 of the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, both boats were required to take action to avoid collision.

If you’re near another vessel and are unsure of its intentions, contact them via VHF to bring attention to your boat and discuss collision avoidance strategy.

Don’t assume the other vessel sees you. Even in perfect weather, use every means possible to detect other traffic, including radar.

Whatever your boat’s size, you’re bound by the navigation rules. Share the nautical road and fish safe!

This article is based on U.S. Coast Guard reporting and is intended to bring safety issues to the attention of our readers. It is not intended to judge or reach conclusions regarding the ability or capacity of any person, living or dead, or any boat or piece of equipment.

Next steps for West Coast catch shares

By Shems Jud

Shems Jud is the Pacific deputy regional director of the Environmental Defense Fund’s Oceans Program based in Portland, Ore.

Perhaps the only thing more complicated than multispecies fishery management is multispecies fishery management reform, and the only thing harder than that is writing about it. National Fisherman is to be commended for its ongoing reporting about our nation’s catch share programs, including the one we are involved with on the West Coast.

NF’s recent article on this fishery (“Catch shares by request,” NF June 2013, p. 26) covered some of the good news resulting from groundfish catch share management — such as dramatically reduced discards and increased flexibility for fishermen — along with a few of the significant challenges that fishermen and policymakers still face.

Not surprisingly, those challenges boil down to fishing opportunity and profitability. In order for the conservation benefits of the program to be secured for the long term, fishermen need to prosper. That’s why we are working to reduce cost burdens on the fleet and enable access to productive fishing grounds.

I’ve been involved with West Coast groundfish for six years, including serving on the Pacific Fishery Management Council’s Groundfish Advisory Panel and Groundfish Allocation Committee. Here are EDF’s priorities as we work alongside fishermen:

Cost recovery & restructuring the buyback loan: As NF’s reporting pointed out, NMFS plans to impose a maximum 3 percent cost-recovery fee on West Coast fishermen to administer the catch share program. Fortunately, based on public comment, NMFS recently decided to provide fishermen with a brief respite by delaying implementation until 2014. When cost-recovery is eventually imposed, however, it will come on
top of a 5 percent ex-vessel fee fishermen now pay to cover the 2003 federal loan that funded the fleet-reducing boat and permit buyback. EDF advocates for restructuring the existing buyback loan (currently at a relatively high 6.97 percent fixed rate) and adjusting the cost-recovery fee to reduce the combined ex-vessel hit to no more than 5 percent of landed value. At a time when many fishermen measure profit margins in single digits, 5 percent of landed value is still significant, but 5 percent is better than 8 percent. House and Senate bills introduced in mid-July seek to refinance the loan to current market rates. Along with the trawl fleet, we wholeheartedly support these efforts.

Reducing observer costs: Most West Coast fishermen recognize the value of full accountability, but the costs of 100 percent observer coverage threaten to sink smaller operations. From a current effective level of roughly $200 (the day-rate paid by fishermen after the existing federal cost-share), the daily expense is expected by some industry observers to reach as much as $800 — just as the cost-share expires. For many fishermen, that number will not pencil out, and some may have no choice but to leave the fishery. That’s why we’re working with the council to develop a solution that maintains high levels of catch accountability at a dramatically reduced cost. We believe an appropriate blend of electronic monitoring and reporting — coupled with human observers on some vessels — can maintain 100 percent accountability without threatening the financial viability of fishing businesses.

Fishing opportunity: The Rockfish Conservation Area was established more than 10 years ago to minimize trawl catch of overfished species. With 100 percent observer coverage and hard-by-catch caps under catch shares, however, we now have more direct ways to ensure catch limits for low Quota species. This has led to a call to open up closed fishing grounds, especially where fishermen believe they can fish “cleanly” for target stocks. The key to profitability is fishing opportunity, so EDF is working with a range of industry, NGO and agency partners on mapping and fieldwork projects to explore where the council might increase access to productive grounds without creating undue risk to the catch share or rebuilding programs.

Although the challenges described in NF’s reporting and expanded on here aren’t the only ones fishers face, they are the most immediately significant, and they must be overcome in order for the West Coast groundfish industry to recognize its remarkable potential. It will take a lot of work, but given the focus and goodwill demonstrated by stakeholders during the nearly decade-long process of developing and implementing this catch share program, I am confident that future reporting about West Coast groundfish will include more good news.

Email Dock Talk submissions to jhathaway@diycom.com, or fax them to (207) 842-5603. Submissions should be approximately 600 words and include daytime phone number and Social Security number. Authors published in Dock Talk receive $150.