## NOAA Approves Reform of West Coast Fish Harvest Local News

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Washington State - NOAA's Fisheries Service on Tuesday approved a new approach to managing the harvest of certain West Coast fish that it says will lessen competition among fishermen and reduce overfishing.

NOAA officials said the new catch-shares system - expected to take effect early next year - allows fisherman to better plan their season and fish more efficiently while reducing bycatch.

"Catch shares can stop the race for fishermen to get out on the water and catch as many fish as fast as they can until a quota is reached," said Will Stelle Jr., NOAA Fisheries Service Northwest regional administrator.

The new system sets an overall catch limit for a fishery and divides the total catch into shares controlled by individual fishermen. Fisherman can catch their shares whenever they want without worrying about competitors, and ideally while doing a better job of conserving.

The system was developed by the Pacific Fishery Management Council and has the support of the trawl fishing industry.

"It's the step we need to take," said Brad Pettinger, director of the Oregon Trawl Commission. "It basically forces you to think about what you're going to catch and what you're not going to catch. In the old system, it was the tragedy of the commons - if it's everybody's stuff, nobody takes care of it."

Catch shares have been used in the U.S. since 1990 and are now used for fisheries such as Alaskan halibut, Gulf red snapper and Atlantic surf clams.

NOAA said it will make formal changes to an existing management plan that governs West Coast trawl groundfish harvests in federal waters off the coasts of Washington, Oregon and California.

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The Pacific groundfish trawl fishery includes species such as sole, sablefish and Pacific whiting and was valued at about \$40 million dollars to fishing communities from Bellingham, Wash., to Morro Bay, Calif. last year, according to NOAA.

The group of bottom-dwelling species known as groundfish has been rebuilding since 2000, when harvests were cut in half to protect overfished rockfish. Several such species remain overfished, despite limiting harvests and cutting the fleet through buybacks.

"For the first time, West Coast fishermen will be able to have a vested interest in the fish they catch," said NOAA spokesman Brian Gorman.

Edward Backus, who heads up the fisheries program for Portland, Ore.-based Ecotrust, a conservation and economic development group, said he's not opposed to catch shares in principle but is concerned this program sets up fishing privileges in perpetuity.

But Brent Paine, of Seattle-based United Catcher Boats, sees many benefits for both fishermen and fish.

"It's just a better way of fishing," said Paine, who heads the group of vessel owners who trawl for groundfish. "As a fisherman, you can figure out when you can get the most value, depending on the weather, the fish, the market. You can minimize your cost and maximize your value."

He said the biggest benefits will come from limits on bycatch.

"These bycatch species are also in a depressed state. They need to be rebuilt," he said. "Fisherman will have incentive avoid those bycatch species."

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