



Fishermen saw drastic drop in groundfish quotas coming

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When previous catch reductions have been rolled out by the New England Fishery Management Council, fishermen have reacted with some degree of anger.

This time, though, the council's announcement of a stiff drop in the allowable catch of cod and other groundfish has been met by many on the Cape with something else: resignation.

Fisherman Greg Walinski of Dennisport was one who saw this coming, but he said there's more to the problem than just overfishing.

A year ago, Walinski and his crew caught 2,000 to 5,000 pounds of groundfish during a typical trip to the Gulf of Maine. This year, on the same 35-foot boat, they average about 1,000 pounds per haul.

Over Walinski's three decades in the business, cod and haddock from Georges Bank and, more recently, the Gulf of Maine were typically where he made his living.

But that's changed.

"There are not a lot of fish around," he said, calling the reason for the dearth a "complex issue" — including global warming, overfishing and a huge seal population feasting on the fish.

So, Walinski said, while a drastic drop in groundfish quotas set by New England fishing regulators this week will hurt, the lack of fish to catch is the problem.

The quota reductions will "put a lot of people out of business, but they are going to be out of business regardless of the cuts," said Walinski, who's changed his focus to bluefin tuna and dogfish.

"I know everyone else is going to do the same thing," he said. "Either that or go out of business."

Major cuts

The regional council voted Wednesday to cut the available catch of Gulf of Maine cod by 77 percent for the 2013 fishing year, which starts May 1. The Georges Bay cod catch was cut by 61 percent.

Tom Dempsey, Cape Cod's representative on the council, said the move "doesn't guarantee codfish will come back" but said the move had to be done.

"As difficult as it is, both cod cuts were necessary," said Dempsey, who serves as policy director for the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association. "Both of those stocks were depleted."

Still, Dempsey doesn't mince words about what the cuts could mean for some fishermen next year.

"It's a significant cut. Codfish in the Gulf of Maine has been a target stock and a central part of making their fish business work," he said.

'Not making a living'

Eric Hesse, a fisherman based out of West Barnstable, said cod grew increasingly difficult to find on Georges

Bank, so he moved to the Gulf of Maine a few years ago. That's also dried up.

"I get it," he said about the quota reductions. "They are doing what they need to do. There are no fish. I do it for a living, and I'm not making a living. It's like sitting on a bulldozer with no holes to dig."

Hesse has turned to dogfish and tuna this past year.

"In a span of few years, there is a solid chance (groundfish) will make a comeback," Hesse said.

Tony Jackett, a Provincetown shellfish warden, said many fishermen in town have focused more on lobster and scallops as their moneymakers versus cod in recent years.

Orleans resident Mike Russo, a Cape fisherman for three decades, said he has never seen a drop in the cod population like this past year.

He attributed it partly to warmer waters driving the fish away.

"I think it's more water temperature. We need some cold weather in the winters and get this turned around," he said.

Russo expects the stocks will come back this year; in the meantime, he's focusing on scallops and tuna.

"If you live on Cape Cod, you better know how to do other fisheries. It's part of the business."

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