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Fishermen hope Congress will decide to overturn groundfishing restrictions

By Steve Adams

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QUINCY — A summer of idle commercial fishing fleets looms if new catch limits are allowed to stand, industry sources predict.

Massachusetts fishermen this week appealed to Congress to overturn new catch limits and new costs imposed on the industry for monitoring of fisheries.

The catch limits, imposed by the New England Fishery Management Council, apply to groundfish such as haddock and flounder and are scheduled to take effect May 1. They will reduce the cod catch in the Gulf of Maine by 77 percent and on Georges Bank by 61 percent.

None of the half-dozen groundfishing boats based in Scituate Harbor plan to work this summer, said Frank Mirarchi, a longtime commercial fisherman. The boats' owners discussed pooling resources and quotas to stay in business.

"We thought we could consolidate our efforts and tighten things up, but it's just impossible," Mirarchi said.

A decade ago, nearly 15 commercial fishing boats were based in Scituate Harbor. The number has declined to six.

Most of the other boat operators retired, Mirarchi said. Some switched to lobstering and the rest have gotten out of the industry. What remains is a small fleet of family-run boats with two-man crews.

Most face monthly costs of \$5,000 to \$10,000 for boat mortgages, insurance and dockage fees. That doesn't include variable costs such as repairs and gear replacement.

In Chatham, most groundfishermen have switched to dogfish and skate in recent years, said John Our, a fisherman for three decades.

The so-called "trash fish" only fetch about 30 cents a pound, about 10 percent of what cod are worth in a good year, but the catch is more reliable, Our said.

"It's a steadier check. The volume of the product is there, where with groundfish it's hit or miss," he said.

The dogfish catch is shipped to England for fish and chips, while most of the skate catch goes to France.

Attempts to allocate funding for fishing relief have been stalled in Congress. The Senate approved \$150 million for fishermen in the Northeast, Gulf Coast and Alaska last fall, but the measure has stalled in the House.

U.S. Rep. William Keating, D-Quincy, said he will continue to lobby for financial relief.

"I will continue to advocate for increased coverage of at-sea-monitoring costs, an end-to-end review of the inadequate stock assessment process, and urgent appropriation of financial assistance," Keating said in a statement released by his office this week.

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