

Allowing lobster sales could help Fish Exchange

Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

Friday, November 10, 2006

For all the talk of the threat posed to the groundfishing industry by federal conservation rules, state laws are also putting the Portland Fish Exchange in a bind that threatens to chase much of the state's fishing fleet to Massachusetts.

These are hard times for the exchange. Federal regulations aimed at conserving dwindling stocks of cod and other species have reduced the number of days at sea for fishermen. These restrictions have created pressure on the fishermen, and, in turn, the exchange. Now, every expense and every missed opportunity to earn extra money loom large.

The solution, contrary to what some in the industry have advocated, is not to loosen controls on fishing. The risk that fish stocks might collapse is real. For all the debate about the relative health of the fishery, the best course is to take a conservative approach.

That doesn't mean there aren't regulatory barriers that can be lowered to help the fishing fleet and the exchange weather this period.

The state could provide some targeted relief, for instance, by waiving the tax on fuel used by groundfishermen.

A more controversial change being sought by managers of the Fish Exchange would allow groundfishing vessels working offshore to keep and sell the lobsters that get caught in their nets at the exchange.

On one side of this debate are the state's 6,000 lobstermen who form a formidable political force in Maine. They worry that groundfishing vessels will target lobsters, tearing up the sea floor in the process. They're concerned as well that damage caused to lobsters when caught in nets would harm Maine's reputation for producing the best lobster in the world.

On the other side is Thomas Valleau, president of the exchange. Valleau notes that Maine groundfishermen can already sell the lobsters they catch; they just have to land them in other states. This provides a strong incentive for boats to bring their catch to Gloucester, Mass., rather than Portland.

Also, Valleau notes that federal rules limit groundfishermen to taking 100 lobsters a day and no more than 500 per trip, so it's not likely the groundfishermen would target lobsters. Besides, he says, groundfishermen are already selling their lobsters; they're just not landing the catch here.

The worries expressed by the lobster industry are understandable. However, if the state determines that ground fishermen can sell their lobsters here without undue harm to Maine's lobstermen, then this would be reasonable to allow.