

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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New fishing plan offers success

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THE CHANCE that the nation's depleted ocean fish will return to healthy levels rose considerably Thursday when the federal government put its support behind a new way of managing fisheries. Traditional methods of limiting fishermen's days-at-sea and total catches encourage dangerous fishing-derby tactics and often result in crews discarding many excess fish. The methods have also failed to reduce overfishing. Under the new approach, officials assign annual quotas to individual fishermen or to groups of fishermen in cooperative sectors.

With divvied-up annual quotas, known as "catch shares," fishermen are not under pressure to go out to sea in hazardous weather. By banding together, they can save on boat costs and have more flexibility in ensuring that all the fish they catch can be brought to dock and not simply discarded as excess. Another plus of the quotas: They provide fishermen with an incentive to help stocks grow, since increased stocks would lead to increased quotas.

In its draft policy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is encouraging the use of the new management methods, but not mandating them. Regional marine fisheries councils that opt for catch-share will receive training from Washington in shifting to the new approach.

Most of New England's fishermen for groundfish species like cod, flounder, and pollock will be working in catch-share sectors in the season that begins next May. Public comments on final ground rules are due Dec. 22. Officials should ensure that quota allocations fairly reflect the catch histories of fishermen and not just boat size.

Fishermen on Cape Cod have used catch-share programs in recent years with considerable success. Now, with the right ground rules for the new system, the region has an opportunity to make even more of New England's fishermen true stewards of the ocean's bounty. ■