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Marine Fisheries Advisory

**MARINEFISHERIES SEEKS PUBLIC INPUT ON
2010 COMMERCIALBLACKSEA BASS RULES**

Marine Fisheries is giving the public an opportunity to provide written comments with suggestions for managing the state's limited commercial black sea bass quota for 2010. This "scoping" process will provide the agency and the Marine Fisheries Advisory Commission with ideas and rationale before crafting management proposals that will be aired at late winter public hearings. Comments will be accepted through December 31, 2009 *via* e-mail (marine.fish@state.ma.us), fax (617.626.1509), or mail (251 Causeway St., Suite 400; Boston, MA 02114).

Due to recent federal actions, the black sea bass quota will remain unchanged next year, approximately 140,000 lbs., among lowest since the adoption of quotas in 2003. Massachusetts receives just 13% of the commercial allocation. During the first five years of quota management from 2003 - 2007, the annual quota averaged 462,000 lbs. ranging as high as 558,000 lbs. in 2006. The low quotas during 2008-09 represent a 72% decline from that period.

Nevertheless, the extraordinarily low quota prevents a continuation of past management objectives. Since 2003 through 2008, the quota was managed in two distinct seasonal components: spring and late summer with 50% of the annual quota allocated to each season with opportunities for viable directed commercial fisheries, and a curtailment of the fishery during the peak spawning season of mid-June to early-July. The current quota allocation and season & trip limit scheme was the product of numerous meetings with pot fishermen and other commercial sectors. The arrangement split the quota into two sub-quotas: spring and late summer/fall.

In 2009, the fishery was managed with 10 open-fishing days in May (3 per week) and the quota was practically consumed in just 7 of those days with catches still rising when the fishery was closed on May 24.

This low quota makes it more difficult than ever to satisfy the varied interests among the commercial participants. Last year’s public hearing testimony revealed how divided commercial fishermen were seeking various management strategies that would favor the landing of fish by certain gear types, seasons and locations.

One of the most challenging management issues facing us is the fate of the spring black sea bass fishery prosecuted primarily by potters who participate in the limited access black sea bass pot fishery. This fishery has landed the vast majority of the state’s commercial sea bass landings since its inception in the early 1980s. The fishery is characterized by a rapid rise in the catch rates during May to a peak in early June as fish migrate into the nearshore waters of Buzzards Bay, Vineyard Sound and Nantucket Sound. Fish are aggregated, vulnerable to capture, and the fishery is remarkably efficient: even unbaited pots successfully catch sea bass – and daily state-wide landings reach as high as 25,000 lbs. by the peak of the fishery (late May – early June).

| | Gear | Season Open-Close | Size Limit | Open Fishing Days | Possession Limit |
|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Black Sea Bass | | | | | |
| | All | Jan 01 - Apr 30 | 12 in | M - F | 100 lb |
| | Fish pot & weir | May 01 - May 24 | | Sundays, Tuesdays, & Thursdays | 500 lb |
| | Lobster bycatch | | | | 200 lb |
| | All others | | | | 200 lb |
| | Fish pot & weir | August 1, Quota Dependent | | TBD | TBD |
| | Lobster bycatch | | | | TBD |
| | All others | | | | TBD |

Finally, the multispecies nature of our fisheries should be considered. Scup and sea bass co-occur seasonally in our south coastal waters. Black sea bass are commonly caught by vessels and gears in the spring & summer scup fishery. However, the state’s scup quota is four to five times as large as the black sea bass quota. Once the sea bass quota is exhausted, then all sea bass by-catch would be discarded.

Options for 2009 and beyond:

1. **Status Quo:** To manage the limited sea bass quota, DMF could repeat last year’s management scheme which would likely consume the quota by the end of May.
2. **Postponement of Fishery to Post-Spawning:** DMF could consider postponing the opening of the sea bass fishery until the period of post-spawning (after mid-July) when

fish are dispersed, and catch rates are lower. Lower daily catch limits for one or more gears could be considered as well.

3. **By-catch only fishery allowance:** DMF could consider very low sea bass catch limits as by-catch allowance in other fisheries. Trip limits could be adopted that are too low to maintain a directed fishery but allow sea bass retention by gears in pursuit of other species.
4. **Individual Fishing Quotas (IFQs):** Increasingly popular in national and international fisheries are “catch shares” where eligible fishermen are given for a season - or longer - exclusive fishing rights to a share of the overall quota, usually based on some past measure of performance such as landings history.