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December 29, 2005

TO ALL INTERESTED IN STATE WATERS MANAGEMENT OF GULF OF MAINE COD:

The Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (*Marine Fisheries*) has provided greater protection for what it considers the last vestige of the Gulf of Maine cod stock. *Marine Fisheries* created and closed a *Cod Conservation Zone* within state waters of Massachusetts Bay from December 1, 2005 to January 15, 2006 to all fisheries capable of catching cod. Based on agency ongoing work and growing knowledge of cod distribution, abundance, and spawning condition in this area, this cod fishing closure will be extended until February 28, 2006.

The New England Fishery Management Council has expended considerable efforts to sustain and improve health of the Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank cod stocks. Despite these Council initiatives, at this time the condition of both stocks - especially for Gulf of Maine cod (GOM) - is not what is required for the Council to reach its high GOM cod biomass target.

The last GOM assessment showed that 2004 fishing mortality was well above the target mortality, and spawning stock biomass had dropped 10% from the previous year. The Georges Bank assessment showed continued very low spawning stock biomass, almost the historical low, caused by many years of poor recruitment and high levels of fishing mortality. Even though Georges Bank rebuilding is on the predicted trajectory and there are promising signs for recent recruitment, present spawning stock biomass is still far below the target.

Cod congregate in Massachusetts Bay on well-defined grounds 3 to 10 miles offshore. Bigelow and Schroeder in their classic 1953 text *Fishes of the Gulf of Maine* documented the extent of cod distribution in the western Gulf of Maine during winter when most spawning was thought to occur. They noted the state and federal waters of the Ipswich Bay region as the most important center of production for the inner part of the Gulf of Maine north of Cape Ann. The Ipswich Bay area today lacks these cod aggregations. More recently, the extent of historic cod fishing grounds throughout the range of coastal Maine has been documented, but these areas, similar to Ipswich Bay, are now mostly devoid of cod. Massachusetts Bay appears to have the only remaining important coastal breeding ground within this part of the Gulf.

Protecting cod in coastal areas is an extremely significant action given the need to increase spawning potential. Current age structure of the Gulf of Maine cod stock includes good numbers of mature fish capable of contributing to sustained and successful reproduction. It's both fundamental and crucial to help create and maintain spawning momentum and resulting recruitment to propel the Commonwealth and Council towards biomass targets.

Reopening the *Cod Conservation Zone (CCZ)* would be contrary to our rebuilding objectives and efforts to protect aggregations of spawning cod that continue to persist in the *CCZ*. Furthermore, it is predicted that commercial landings for the 2005 fishing year will exceed significantly the target catch. With these considerations even a stringently controlled fishery might prevent attainment of regional management objectives for this valuable public resource.

In addition to extending the closed fishing period until February 28, *Marine Fisheries* is implementing new commercial fishing permit requirements to be effective March 1, 2006. For vessels without federal groundfish permits, a State Waters' Multispecies Groundfish Endorsement will be required to catch and possess for commercial purposes more than 75-lbs. of Multispecies Groundfish in any combination (cod, haddock, pollock, redfish, white hake, winter flounder, yellowtail flounder, windowpane flounder, American plaice, witch flounder and monkfish).

New restrictions on permits are warranted because the state is seeing substantial growth in landings and fishing effort in its waters attributable to: 1) fishermen seeking to capitalize on local nearshore abundance of key groundfish species and 2) some federal permit holders seeking refuge in state waters from federal rules. To be issued a Groundfish Endorsement, applicants must have held a Massachusetts commercial permit prior to and on November 4, 2004 and have landed at least 1,000 pounds of groundfish in any year during the period 1992-2004, or 500 pounds in any two consecutive years during this same period.

Permit holders fishing aboard vessels authorized to take multispecies groundfish under a federal permit shall not be eligible to obtain the State Water's Multispecies Groundfish Endorsement, nor shall landings associated with such federal permits be used to qualify for the state's Groundfish Endorsement. Moreover, new permit rules will require fishermen fishing aboard a vessel to be covered by one of the state's "boat" permits. All commercial fishing activity conducted from a boat, regardless of the size of boat or the directed fishery will require one of several boat permits; the rod and reel permit will continue to be issued as a commercial fishing permit only for individuals fishing from shore. These changes will allow easier tracking of landings attributable to state and federal permits.

While these actions are sudden, they should be expected as successful management of cod has continued to elude the New England region. Massachusetts is contributing to regional efforts to protect cod throughout its range and rebuild historic cod fisheries.



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