

Mr. David Preble, Chair
New England Fisheries Management Council
Habitat Committee
50 Water Street, Mill 2
Newburyport, MA 01950

September 4, 2013

Re: Eastern Gulf of Maine habitat alternatives

Dear Chairman Preble,

As a groundfish fisherman out of Port Clyde, Maine I wanted to be at the Joint Habitat and Groundfish Committee meeting today but am preparing to go out fishing and must take every opportunity to be out on the water this time of year. I don't often comment on Council issues but I felt the need to express my concerns with the habitat alternatives currently being proposed for the Eastern Gulf of Maine.

Within the eastern region of the Gulf of Maine, the number groundfish fishermen fishing out of Port Clyde have dwindled drastically in the past decades. The remaining fishermen are primarily druggers, and every time they go out to their fishing grounds they battle with interactions with lobster gear. These interactions and the dramatic increase in lobster gear over the past decade provide the backdrop for the following comments regarding the alternatives for habitat management areas in the eastern inshore region.

A major concern with respect to fishing effort and bottom habitat protection is the proposed modification to the Jeffrey's Bank habitat closure. Modifying the Jefferies Bank habitat area would result in a significantly negative impact on the local fishing businesses sailing from Port Clyde with minimal habitat benefit. With the current orientation of the area, lobster gear is present throughout the current closure. If the management area were to be switched to the proposed modified version with the east/west orientation, it would be detrimental in two ways. First, the newly opened area to the north would not be accessible to historic groundfish tows, like skate tow, because the area is riddled with lobster gear. A similar disadvantage would be that the newly closed area to the east and west would soon be claimed by lobster pots. Once lobster gear is in an area, the groundfish tow cannot be reclaimed within a fisherman's lifetime, or at least it hasn't been yet. Fishermen are struggling with access to fishing grounds every fishing trip, and this modification would only benefit lobstermen. Second, the expansion westward to protect the sand/gravel bottom would prevent access to an area that currently provides 30-50% of the flat fish catch in the region, an important fishery for the small trawlers in midcoast Maine.

Additionally, the fish stocks that historically have been present in the northern area of Jeffrey's Bank are Blackbacks, for which there is very little history and allocation for fishermen in the Maine Coast Community Sector. In short, modifying Jeffrey's Bank would not actually provide a new open area for fishing due to gear interactions and limited allocation, and losing access to one of the few remaining flat fish tows would redistribute effort to the south when the younger, smaller fish are moving inshore. Redistributing fishing effort in this manner seems to be

counterintuitive to a management action that is focused on protecting essential fish habitat and juvenile fish.

It is my understanding that one of the goals is to reduced fishing activity in specific areas that could benefit spawning groundfish. There are spawning aggregations in the southwest corner of the current Jeffrey's Bank habitat area that should continue to be protected. The current closure reduces historic tows in the area by 50% compared to fishing effort that occurred before the closure was put in place.

With the continued shift in fishing effort from groundfishing to lobstering since 2004 when Jeffrey's Bank habitat area was established, I strongly recommend that NMFS collect data on the density of lobster traps in current and any new habitat management areas to be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of the closures. Though the lobster fishery is outside of the prevue of NEFMC, the gear type does have interactions with bottom habitat and alters essential fish habitat, and these interactions should be considered when evaluating the groundfish fishery.

In conclusion, to narrow the focus of these comments to the currently proposed alternatives for the eastern Gulf of Maine region, the first alternative of no action, of maintaining the current Jeffrey's Bank closure is most preferable to protect several types of bottom habitat, while preventing the expansion of lobster traps into the areas to the east and west of the current closure. The proposed new Eastern Maine closure is acceptable both in the large and small options and may benefit new spawning groundfish stocks, but it should be considered with the option of maintaining the current Jeffrey's Bank area – without a new area over Toothaker Ridge. Eliminating mobile gear access to Toothaker ridge in combination with modifying Jeffrey's Bank will ensure the end of groundfishing boats fishing from midcoast Maine.

Changes to the current Jeffrey's Bank habitat area will have severe consequences on the few remaining groundfish fishermen fishing from Port Clyde. Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the current alternatives in the Omnibus Habitat Amendment.

Sincerely,

Randy Cushman
F/V Ella Christine