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Nov. 18, 2013

To John K Bullard, Thomas A Nies and members of the NEFMC,

My name is Mark S Phillips and I own the F/V Illusion, I fish on Georges Bank for groundfish and would like to voice my concerns about the small mesh fisheries allowed on Georges Bank. Georges Bank and the Gulf of Maine are large mesh areas yet these boats have been allowed to go unchecked with minimal observer coverage, I've had as much as 2 months straight with an observer aboard.

The groundfish boats are held to an extremely high standard when it comes to bycatch of regulated species, yet you allow these small mesh fisheries to do what they want. The only basic restraint is don't get caught catching too much groundfish. They have been given access to the closed areas which are really not closed areas at all but gear restricted areas, to the groundfish draggers and gillnetters, every other user group is allowed access.

This year I finally decided to start saying something about these boats because I got mad about catching there dead discards, you can drag an area a long time and not catch dead fish but when you do start catching them there has to be a reason and it happens when these small mesh fisheries are around.

I have watch year class after year class of haddock be destroyed because your science says there are plenty of them out there and there is; they just can't grow up big enough for the groundfish boats before they are caught by the small mesh fisheries. You gave access to closed area 1 and that huge body of haddock was wiped out (that body of fish was 15-20 miles wide), we could only work the edges yet you allowed these boats in there and the next year the haddock were gone, there is a huge year class of haddock that is just starting to become big enough but that is getting wiped out by these same boats and this year there is another huge class of 3-5 inch haddock and these boats will wipe them out too.

There should have been enough haddock to sustain the larger groundfish boats but instead it was more important that you protect these new entrants into the herring fishery then to protect the groundfish fleet. A dozen or so large herring boats were allowed access to a large mesh area with your blessing and the groundfish fleet good riddance. This is your making, you changed qualifying years to allow some of these boats in. You claimed the mackerel stock was bigger than it was encouraging these boats to rig up.

I don't know the right answer, but I do know that it is wrong for you to punish the groundfish boats while these boats have access to a large mesh area. The way it is now most of the groundfish boats would like these guys stopped.

In hind sight the boat size should have been capped at a lot smaller than 165 ft, qualifying years not changed, and maybe listened to the fishermen telling you the mackerel stock was not there as you claimed, Jim Ruhle started telling the Mid Atlantic Council the mackerel stock was not there in the 80s or early 90s but no one would listen.

Thank you,

Mark S Phillips

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*cc: Council, PMF (11/20)*