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New Trawl Gear Reduces Bycatch and Improves Haddock Landings *Approved for Use off the Northeastern U.S.*

NOAA's Fisheries Service has approved the use of new trawl gear that is expected to reduce the catch of nontarget fish species in the Northeastern groundfish fishery by more than 50 percent.

The use of the "haddock rope trawl," commonly known as the eliminator trawl by the Northeast commercial groundfish fishing industry, should help conserve and restore depleted groundfish resources, such as cod and flounders, while allowing vessels to target haddock and other healthier stocks that live in the same area.

Groundfish species often live together near the sea bottom, and are caught by trawl gear. However, some stocks are overfished. Most are under rebuilding plans, but some fishing is allowed on all of them.

The haddock rope trawl was developed by the University of Rhode Island Sea Grant College Program in conjunction with commercial fishermen in a project funded by the NOAA's Fisheries Service Northeast Cooperative Research Partners Program. The project was intended to develop a gear that would capture fish from stocks that are not overfished, while avoiding or releasing others.

"This was a truly collaborative effort among industry, University of Rhode Island, and NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center," said John Hoey, cooperative research program director. "We are looking forward to working with industry to increase experimentation and adoption of this gear as well as other more selective trawls."

Researchers conducted nearly two years of gear testing, deploying it from commercial fishing vessels. Experiments comparing traditional and new trawl gear showed the new gear reduced bycatch of groundfish stocks of cod and flounders, while simultaneously retaining the catch of healthier stocks, primarily haddock. Large 8-foot mesh in the forward end of the new trawl net allows cod and other fish to escape, because of their body shapes and unique behavior around the netting.

The gear may now be used when fishing in the Eastern U.S./Canada Special Access Program, an area of Georges Bank managed under rules intended to ensure similar fishing effort and rebuilding of groundfish stocks shared with Canada. It may also be used in a fishing program for vessels that are targeting groundfish stocks that are not overfished. NOAA's Fisheries Service approved use of the gear as requested by the New England Fishery Management Council.

In 2007, the haddock rope trawl won an international "smart gear" competition sponsored by the World Wildlife Fund. The NOAA Northeast Cooperative Research Partners Program has since provided additional funds for testing of smaller haddock rope trawls suitable for lower horsepower nearshore vessels.

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