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Canadian/U.S.



LOBSTERMEN'S TOWN MEETING

April 7, 2006 – Portland, Maine, United States

Hosted by the Lobster Institute

SUMMARY REPORT

Prepared by the

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Moderator

Ted Hoskins, Minister to Coastal Communities & Fisheries - Maine Sea Coast Mission

Panelists

Penny Howell -- Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection
Jim Jamieson -- Department of Fisheries & Oceans – Dartmouth, Nova Scotia
Toni Kerns -- Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
Harry Mears -- National Marine Fisheries Service
John Tremblay -- Bedford Institute of Technology in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia
Carl Wilson -- Maine Department of Marine Resources.

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Planning Committee

Bonnie Spinazzola- Chair

Bill Adler – Massachusetts

Bill Anderson – Maine

Dr. Bob Bayer – Lobster Institute

Dana Rice – Maine

Mike Sirois -- Massachusetts

Klaus & Melanie Sonnenberg – Grand Manan

Background and Goals

The Board of Advisors of the Lobster Institute planned and hosted its third consecutive Canadian/U.S. Lobstermen's Town Meeting. This year's industry-wide gathering of lobstermen and others connected with the lobster industry brought people together to discuss lobster stock assessment reports and techniques. Of particular interest was the introduction of a new stock assessment model in the U.S. and possible correlations between U.S. assessments and Canadian assessments. The meeting took place in Portland, Maine, U.S. on April 7, 2006. Approximately 100 people attended the meeting, coming from as far south as Florida and as far north as Newfoundland.

Goals of the event:

- Provide fishermen with an opportunity to communicate what they are observing and what their concerns might be relative to current and future stock levels,
- Allow fishermen and fisheries management to get a more complete picture of stock assessment methods used in both Canada and the U.S., as well as new methods being proposed.
- Discuss ways lobstermen and scientists can provide/enhance the data available as inputs in modeling
- Fostering collaboration and communication between all geographic areas of the fishery, reinforcing the fact that all share and rely on a common resource that must be protected.
- Promote dialogue between lobstermen and fisheries management personnel.

Format

The daylong session began with a panel discussion featuring scientists and managers, from several geographic and management areas, who are closely involved in stock assessment. They provided a summary of stock assessment methods currently in practice in both countries and compared new models to traditional models.

The rest of the event took the form of a town meeting. Lobsterman and others in the industry were invited to draw from their experiences while fishing and share their thoughts, observations, concerns, theories and questions about lobster stock abundance and assessment. Principal participation in this component of the meeting was from industry people (fishermen, dealers, pound owners, processors, etc.). The town meeting was directed by an experienced moderator, Ted Hoskins, Minister to Coastal Communities & Fisheries - Maine Sea Coast Mission

The Town Meeting was audio taped and an unabridged transcription of these tapes is available from the Lobster Institute at 210 Rogers Hall, University of Maine, Orono, ME 04469 (207-581-1443).

Summary of Panel Discussion

(For a list of panelists see page 3)

U.S. Overview

An overview of the United States stock assessment techniques and findings was provided by Carl Wilson, Lead Lobster Biologist with the Maine Department of Marine Resources and a member ASMFC Lobster Technical Committee. He noted the U.S. had recently completed an assessment, which was peer reviewed on August 5, 2005 and published on March 6, 2006.

He indicated this assessment was a departure from previous assessments in that it moved away from terminology such as F10%, egg production, eggs per recruit. Rather, he defined it as a more common sense approach that used common sense indicators. They used a “stoplight” approach and looked at last 25 years and using abundance and mortality as reference points. There were different indicators for abundance and mortality employed. If an area was rated with a “green light” relative to the last 25 years it was considered in good shape. If an area fell below the last 25 years’ average it was considered in bad shape and given a “red light”.

Wilson reported in essence the assessment showed that the Gulf of Maine was given a favorable rating, with high abundance and low mortality. Southern New England was noted as a problem area, where mortality remains high and abundance is well below the 25-year average.

He added that what caught some on the technical committee by surprise was how quickly the resource can change for unexplained reasons. There has been a huge fundamental shift to now say external factors, those other than actions of the fishing industry and out of the industries control, contribute to stock factors. This varies from the equilibrium approach that had been used. Wilson stressed the need to continue scientific research on those areas we don’t have a handle on, and that more data and expanded research was needed. He commented that scientists have been pushed by industry, which became a positive force for collaboration and improved assessment practices. He concluded that though still not precise, the most recent assessment is more understandable and approachable than past assessments and people can now more easily discuss and debate its findings.

Canadian Overview

John Tremblay from the Bedford Institute of Oceanography – Coastal Nova Scotia gave an overview of Canadian assessment. He noted that there are four regions within Atlantic Canada, and that his comments would focus on the Scotia-Fundy or Maritime Region, which includes the Gulf of Maine, with Yarmouth as a major port (LFAs 33 and 34). He explained he was the team leader for his scientist/biologist group in this area.

Tremblay summarized that each group of LFAs now has a group of research scientists/biologist that form a team, with one resource advisor for all of the region. Stock assessment reviews are staggered; not done in all areas at once. LFS 34 just completed its review, which involves a

working paper that is peer reviewed. The outcome is a summary report (made available online). This scientific assessment report provides an overview. Canada's current methods, like past U.S. methods, involve an egg per recruit model/life history model. While this method is still part of the backdrop of stocks, moves recently have been made to incorporate indicators. These can fall into such categories as: abundance, fishing effort (total effort as well as estimates of exploitation rate), production (pre-recruits/spawners), functions of the ecosystem (i.e. temperature, predators), etc. These indicators are more apparent to fishermen; they can see changes. This makes for easier agreement as to the state of stock. The most recent process included meetings with a core group of fishermen, scientist from the Atlantic Veterinary College, and others. This group met 5 time, then presented data and sought feedback. This made for a smoother assessment process.

Conclusions included:

- Abundance indicators for legal size lobsters were primarily positive – for example landing/catch rates were well above long-term needs.
- Fishing pressure showed either increased pressure or no change. He added that one of the factors they were not capturing well is an increase in the efficiency of lobstermen, in terms of bigger boats, catching and targeting lobsters better, etc.
- Pre-recruit abundance survey (conducted by fishermen with the Fishermen and Scientists Research Society – with fishermen recording data obtained using special traps) indicated a pre recruit abundance higher than it has been over the last 10 years, but starting to turn down. There are no signs indicating if this will continue or not.

Recommendations were made within the report for continued indicators and the data that is needed. The report emphasized a need to continue and indeed increase getting data from fishermen, and to also look to fishery independent surveys for data. Tremblay commented that such surveys were available in other fishery assessments but not in the lobster assessment. He added that he believed this was also recommended in U.S. assessment report.

Other Comments from Panelists

- All agreed that lack of essential data is the greatest challenge
- Need a collective vision of what we all want the lobster industry to be
- It was noted that the U.S. report recommended
 - That the stock assessment areas/stock units be changed. A map with these changes was distributed.
 - A mandatory data collection program should be explored to ensure accurate landings statistics
- Must now look at eco-system and biological triggers
- It is difficult to attach a nice percentage to indicators as managers are used to
- In U.S. now using a “dynamic surplus production model approach”. Fish stocks have surplus production that you can fish without depleting the stock – but this can be affected by changes in the environment
- Complexity of the resource is its most notable characteristic
- A unified, cross-border approach is needed

Town Meeting Summary of Topics Discussed

Major topic areas discussed are listed below in alphabetical order. Comments made and questions raised regarding that topic are summarized.

Note: Comments noted in this report do not necessarily reflect a consensus opinion of those who attended the Town Meeting, nor do they necessarily reflect the views of the Lobster Institute.

Data/Reporting

- Many expressed an agreement with scientists that more data is needed to improve accuracy of assessments
- It would be beneficial if data collection could be refined, with collection areas more specifically defined (i.e. statistical areas – or 10-minute squares as is used in Nova Scotia).
- When Nova Scotia went to 10-minute square logbooks it was a “great leap forward” in locating fishing effort. – yet there is still a need to incorporate data on movement patterns, larval dispersal, etc.
- Opinion was divided on whether mandatory reporting should be in place in all areas
- Most areas other than Maine have some form of mandatory reporting
- If not for 20 years of logbook data in Long Island Sound, scientists would not have been able to show that fishermen were not to blame for the die-off in 1999.
- Many in Maine fear mandatory reporting, and are especially concerned that it will lead to an implementation of quotas.
- Some expressed more willingness to report if they did not have to attach their names to the data.
- Others said if you do not attach your name to the data, and a quota system is put in place – you will have no historical information to help establish a reasonable quota.
- If logbooks are put in place where not currently in use, it would be better to have the fishermen supplying the data than leaving it to dealer/buyers.
- Fishermen need to report and help collect data in order to know what is going on so problems can be identified and fixed.
- Industry independent surveys are needed.
- Fishermen want to provide data to the scientists, but not to the managers.
- Fishermen find it difficult to put much value on the assessment report and recommendations when the amount of quality work is so minimal due to a lack of funding.

Economics/Socio-Economics

- Economic impacts must be calculated when making management decisions based on stock assessments
- Management decisions affect the livelihood of fisherman and that needs to be considered.

External Factors

- A great deal of discussion centered on external factors, and all agreed it is essential to find a way to incorporate data on external factors into the assessment (i.e. predator populations, water quality, temperatures, environmental phenomena, etc.)
- Scientists from Canada and the U.S. stated there is no consensus on how to integrate these external factors into the assessment models.
- Some work is being done to analyze external factors:
 - The ASMFC is looking at predator/prey interactions
 - Yong Chen at University of Maine working to incorporate these variables into current U.S. model
 - Canada is already including temperature variables and researching ways to include data on more variables.
- It is the factors and not the fishermen that must be regulated.
- There is a need to integrate the variety of data that has been collected through various water quality projects and incorporate it into a long-term trend analysis.
- Natural mortality must be separated from fishing mortality.
- It was noted that even discussing incorporating external factors into stock assessments would not have been viewed well in the past – but scientists, managers, and legislators are at least listening now, which is a step in the right direction.

Ground Fish

- Many of the fishermen stated that the once depleted ground fish stocks are returning (striped bass, dogfish, cod, etc.) and as predators of lobsters they must be figured into the assessment.
- Now that ground fish stocks are on the rise, fishermen feel these fisheries should be re-opened.
- Diversity is needed to balance fishing effort in general.
- Scientists noted the U.S. Technical Committee could not come to a consensus on the impact of predators – because they could not identify a cause/effect relationship through the research available to-date.

Funding for Research

- All agreed that funding for research is the key to improving stock assessments.
- Fishermen find it difficult to put much value on the assessment reports and recommendations when the amount of quality scientific work is so minimal due to the lack of funding.
- All fishermen and industry personnel should be willing to pay an additional fee upon license renewal that is earmarked for research.
- Research is only funded when something is in trouble. It should be proactive rather than reactive.

Miscellaneous

- Several expressed the feeling that once a right/privilege is taken away it will never be reinstated (i.e. revoking ground fish licenses)
- There is a need for more flexibility in management decisions, particularly for the ability to more easily retract a management decision if it proves to be ineffective.
- Several expressed the feeling that there should be a lag time between when management decisions are put in place and when the next changes come along. Earlier decisions must be given time to prove they are effective or not effective. We should not be reactionary – basing decisions on day-to-day data.
- Politics should be removed from management decisions.
- Most agreed the industry has been looking at the same issue as in the past, and likely will be looking at these same issues ten years from now

Organizing Lobstermen

- Fishermen should join with other groups (i.e. conservationists) that have political clout and find commonality. This would make it easier to change the systems in place.
- Very few young people are coming into the fishery outside of Maine. It is the same lobstermen that you see at every meeting and seminar – more need to be involved.
- Several stated that lobstermen should consider forming a lobbying group, though they were not sure how to proceed with that.
- A more powerful voice is needed not only locally but nationally as well.
- Fishermen need to organize and lobby for research money.
- Fishermen have an unwarranted reputation as rapists and pillagers of the ocean, when they are in fact stewards of the ocean. This can be made known by banding together in a non-self serving way.
- Lobstermen should develop a collective vision of where they want the lobster fishery to be in the future.

Predators

- The impact of major predators on lobster stocks, particularly larval populations, should be figured into the assessment.
- Ground fish are once again becoming major predators.
- Seals remain a major predator.

Stock Assessment vs. Management Areas

- Concern was expressed that new U.S. assessment areas did not take into account the uniqueness of the stock in various fishing locations (i.e. Long Island Sound). Fishermen in individual areas are being asked to come up with their own plans – yet these cannot be consistent with the management areas because of this uniqueness in the stock.

- The Southern New England area is considered a transition area and may see affects of external indicators before the Gulf of Maine. It is like the canary in the coal mine.
- The resource is too diverse to manage all areas in the same way.
- Contrasts in fishing and assessment areas make it hard to evaluate management effectiveness.
- If management areas are lost, then fishermen in those areas lose their voice in the decision making process.

Universal Assessment

- Several stated the lobster resource should be viewed as one stock and there should be universal assessment techniques.
- Cross-border assessment is needed.
- It was suggested a good start to a unified assessment process would be a published document describing the relationship between the Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank stocks – between the U.S. and Canadian stocks.

Water Quality

- Concern was raised about toxins and pollutants being discharged into waterways and being piped out into the ocean (i.e. a proposed sewerage pipeline in New Hampshire).
- Pollution is changing the chemical structure of the ocean by adding viruses, antibiotics, pesticides, solvents, pharmaceuticals (i.e. estrogen – which is similar to the compound that triggers the molting process), etc.
- Scientists stated that if mortality affects can be identified and quantified then they can start to deal with them – they need good, sound studies to move forward one step at a time.
- Fishermen stated that studying affects after the fact is too late to protect/save the lobster stock.
- Water quality is not a stock assessment issue, rather a management issue – many expressed the opinion that water quality managers and legislators need to be brought into the discussions with fisheries managers.
- Relative to the U.S., Canada does not have fisheries in heavily industrialized areas.

Potential Action Points

As a follow-up to the 2006 Canadian/U.S. Lobstermen's Town Meeting, the Lobster Institute's Board of Advisors met to discuss action points that might be taken as a result of the day's discussions. The Board may consider pursuing one or more of these independently or as collaborative projects with others, or it may choose to encourage another organization to pursue one or more of these action points.

These potential actions, in alphabetical order not necessarily in priority order, are:

Data Collection

Discussion at the Town Meeting included comments by some that can be paraphrased by saying "we don't know what we know". There is a great deal of scientific data that has been compiled as a result of many different research projects concerning stock assessment and some of the possible external variables affecting stocks (i.e. water quality). However, there is no easily accessible "library" that contains a complete collection of this data.

Related to this is the need to unify existing data and if needed obtain additional data that can be used to devise a baseline reflecting stock and habitat conditions that can be a reference point as research and assessment moves forward.

Environmental Awareness Network

The point was raised at the Town Meeting that fishermen have long been environmentalists and conservationists. Further, that fishermen may have allies in areas that they might not normally tend to look. Therefore, it could be beneficial to bring fishing groups together with non-government environmental/conservation groups to find common ground in each others philosophies and goals for protecting the habitat and the fish stocks – while also putting a human face on the need to balance these philosophies and goals with the goal of maintain a vital fishing industry.

Joint Canadian/U.S. Stock Assessment Initiative

The need for a joint Canadian/U.S. lobster stock assessment was expressed many times during the Town Meeting. The Institute might foster discussions of ways to bring about a joint assessment. A possible first step could be to develop a document that brings together assessment work done to-date in both countries. A next step might be to convene a group of appropriate representatives to take a serious look at what it would take to put together a cross-border assessment initiative.

Management Summit

A frequent area of discussion at this and previous Town Meeting has been the need for an ecosystem management approach and the need to look beyond just fisheries management when trying to find ways to ensure a vital lobster stock. A plan to address this might be to assemble officials and scientists involved with the numerous management agencies whose policies and decisions may affect the habitat and lobster resource. The purpose would be to raise the awareness of how inter-related each is; and how the policies and decisions of each agency could impact the efforts of other agencies to meet their goals. For example, take a close look at the external variables that may impact the lobster stock above and beyond how fishing impacts the resource – such as pesticide control or waste management.

Youth Leadership Initiative

Develop programs that encourage younger lobstermen to become more actively involved as industry leaders and advocates – and to learn more about lobster management plans and systems. Example: Pay them to attend a leadership seminar/training session.