

Study: Illegal fishing harming present and future New England groundfish fisheries

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Weak enforcement combined with fishermen facing serious economic hardships are leading to widespread violations of fisheries regulations along the Northeastern United States coast. This pattern of noncompliance threatens the success of new fisheries management measures put in place to protect and restore fish stocks, according to a new study published online this week in the journal *Marine Policy*.

Among their findings, environmental economists Dr. Dennis King of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science and Dr. Jon Sutinen of the University of Rhode Island detail nearly a doubling of the percent of total harvest taken illegally over the last two decades in the Northeast multispecies groundfish fishery (NEGF). The study estimates the annual illegal harvest to be 12 to 24 percent, significantly higher than estimates of 6 to 14 percent in the 1980s.

The study, supported by the Lenfest Ocean Program, is based on the results of an extensive 2007 survey of fishermen, managers, scientists and enforcement officials involved in the Northeast multispecies groundfish fishery, and analysis of enforcement data from the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement and NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service.

"The one-two punch of weak enforcement and deteriorating economic conditions combined with declining faith in the competency and legitimacy of fisheries management is encouraging more and more fisherman to press their luck and fish illegally," said Dr. King. "To many

fishermen, the current situation has reached an economic and moral tipping point where the potential economic gains from illegal fishing far outweigh the expected cost of getting caught."

In the article, the authors outline how the existing enforcement system in the NEGF fishery does not significantly deter illegal fishing because economic gains from violating fishing regulations are nearly five times the economic value of expected penalties. The study finds that only one-third of violators are caught, and only one-third of those are actually prosecuted.

"Normative factors, such as moral obligation and peer and community pressure, usually induce fishermen to be law-abiding despite potential illegal gains," said Dr. King. "However, normative factors favoring compliance in the NEGF fishery are weak because many fishermen believe recent fishery management decisions were not justified and that planned stock rebuilding targets and schedules are arbitrary and unfair. Until this situation changes, more enforcement and more certain and meaningful penalties for fishermen who intentionally don't comply with regulations are needed."

"It's unfortunate that biological and economic conditions in the fishery were allowed to reach a point where so many fishermen are facing serious economic hardships," added Dr. King. "Better enforcement policies are needed to create more economic opportunities for all fishermen."

To combat the problem, the authors recommend that a "smart compliance policy" be implemented in the NEGF fishery. The policy should employ different types of enforcement strategies and penalties for frequent, occasional and possibly accidental violators. Specific recommendations include aggressive targeting of frequent violators and criminal penalties and the forfeiture of all fishing privileges for certain

types of violations. Additionally, funds should be redirected toward incentive programs to support collaborations between other fishermen and enforcement staff to increase the number of violations that are detected, reported and successfully prosecuted.

The NEGF includes 24 species, including cod, haddock, flounder and other important commercial stocks, and is targeted by a fishing fleet of nearly 3,400 vessels ranging from small hook-and-line vessels, operating in near-coast waters; to large offshore trawlers.

More information: The article, "Rational noncompliance and the liquidation of Northeast groundfish resources," appears in the online edition of the journal *Marine Policy* and will be published in the print version later this year.

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