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## **FISHERIES: Outdated catch reporting system wreaks havoc in South Atlantic (Friday, October 19, 2012)**

**Laura Petersen, E&E reporter**

Imagine trying to check your checking account balance only to find the bank hasn't updated it for two weeks. And then you write checks based on your best guess of how much money remains -- only to have checks come bouncing back.

That's how it's going right now for the commercial fisheries in the South Atlantic. Dealers, who buy seafood from fishermen, submit landings data to fisheries managers every two weeks. The percentage of allowable catch that has been landed or "spent" is then updated online, leaving fishermen in the meantime unsure how much more they can catch.

"It makes us look silly at best," said Gregg Waugh, the deputy director of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

The delay has very real consequences for fishermen. The three fisheries that have been closed this year are well over their quotas -- by 17 percent, 43 percent and 91 percent. Two were just over or under the target. For some species, overages have to come out of next year's total, which means less income for fishermen.

"We still don't have a system that works down here, and we are still blowing all our quotas," Waugh said.

Successfully implementing hard caps on how much fish can be caught -- annual catch limits - - relies on good data received in a timely fashion.

The South Atlantic region, which runs from North Carolina to east Florida, is striving to improve its quota monitoring system, by moving to electronic, weekly reporting. But the system continues to experience hiccups and be a point of contention between the National Marine Fisheries Service scientists who collect and analyze fisheries data, and the fishery management council, which sets the quotas.

Over the past year, the NMFS Southeast Fisheries Science Center has moved from a paper to an electronic reporting system for dealers. It has been a vast improvement, said Bonnie Ponwith, the center's director.

"Our reporting system for commercial landings has never been as limber as it is right now," Ponwith said.

However, they are still working out the kinks. Last month, for example, the regional office announced the yellowtail snapper fishery was about to hit its catch limit and would close.

That caused outrage among fishermen, who had never before experienced a yellowtail snapper closure and argued there were tons of fish left. Indeed, before the closure went into effect, the projection was revised and the closure was averted. The council is now preparing to increase the quota based on an updated stock assessment.

The problem in that case was that dealers are identified by different numbers by state and federal agencies, and some dealers were likely double counted initially. The science center has developed a program to reconcile those codes to catch any potential errors. After running the program, it revised its yellowtail snapper projection.

While the science center sees that as an improvement, Waugh remains frustrated and concerned about the center's ability to deliver a system that works.

"At this stage of the game, we can't even resolve our dealers in one county in one state," he said.

Rather than "reinvent the wheel," Waugh has been pushing for the region to adopt a data management system that has been widely implemented in the North Atlantic since 2004.

The Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP) has developed a data collection system used by 23 agencies to monitor quotas. Dealers upload their landings data into the database, either through standard Web-based forms or by exporting their data from their accounting programs. Once the numbers are there, they are accessible to all the regulators who need them.

"That is one of the greatest things about ACCSP: It's a consolidated database that everyone can access," said Greg Power, a fishery information specialist at the Northeast Science Center, which co-manages the database.

Before that system, called the Standard Atlantic Fisheries Information System (SAFIS), agencies received data on triplicate paper and then keyed it into their computers. "That was painful," Power said.

It also made it tricky to share data across agencies, said Mike Cahall, the ACCSP director. Before, different agencies had different codes for the same fish species. Now, everyone is working with the same standardized reporting method and managers can get a much more complete picture of the Atlantic fisheries quickly.

Dealers were once apprehensive about the electronic system -- some didn't have computers or Internet access, Cahall said. But now many embrace it. For example, Phil Conklin, who owns Seven Seas Seafood in South Carolina, said he would much rather have one system where he can file all his paperwork at once rather than multiple forms.

There is still some concern that moving to electronic reporting will hurt small dealers who haven't digitized their bookkeeping.

But with hard catch limits to track, "we can no longer tolerate inefficiencies in the system due to small operators," Waugh said.

## **Weekly reporting**

That also means speeding up the pace of reporting.

The South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico regions recently approved a plan to move to weekly reporting, which they anticipate will take effect sometime next year, after it is approved by the Commerce secretary.

Ponwith, the science center director, said it will be a "giant leap forward" to go from bimonthly to weekly reporting.

"That takes a lot of uncertainty out the process" of projecting how much of the catch has been hauled in and when the limit will be hit, Ponwith said. Much like hurricane forecasters predict when a storm will make landfall, fisheries scientists have a suite of models to project the fishery closure date. When dealers are late or miss a report, it means the scientists have to turn to other information, like last year's numbers, to estimate total landings.

The councils considered daily reporting but agreed to start out with weekly reporting and focus on enforcement.

To encourage more on-time reporting, the new rule will require dealers to file their weekly reports before buying more fish. If they haven't, they will be violating their permit, which is a much more serious offense than simply being late on paperwork.

"You can't have a system that depends on data and nobody gets it to them," said Conklin, the dealer who supports electronic reporting.

The next step will be to move to electronic reporting for fishermen, which is still on paper in the South Atlantic for federally managed species. Fishermen logbook reports provide a way to double-check some numbers also submitted by dealers, while providing additional information like where and when the fish were caught.

The transition may not be easy for some who don't even have bank accounts. But Conklin said a few months out of work because blown catch limits shut down the fisheries should provide an ample prod to report on time.

"When these fishermen get a real vacation and start really struggling, it's going to change," Conklin said. "You can't be fishing six months of the year if you are a commercial fishermen. You got to be fishing year round."

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