

Making Fisheries Management Work for You A Fact Sheet for Connecticut Fishermen

Fisheries Co-management

In Maine, legislation approved in 1995 shifts some decision-making authority for conservation and management of the lobster fishery from state officials to area lobstermen who know and depend upon the fishery. Lobster management policy councils, comprised of locally-elected lobstermen, now decide the appropriate conservation measures for their region within constraints set by the legislature: trap limits, fishing hours and days, and number of traps per string. The Maine lobster industry is an example of power-sharing between government and fishermen, or “co-management”; an alternative approach to fisheries management.

Co-management

The failure of many fisheries has led to a reassessment of how fisheries are managed. An alternative approach to fisheries management is one in which there is greater local stewardship; greater responsibility, authority and participation of fishermen in decision-making; and recognition of not just fish but the ecosystems in which they live. It is becoming increasingly recognized that fisheries can be better managed when fishermen are more involved in management of the fisheries. A new management philosophy is warranted, one in which the fishermen can become active members of the fisheries management team, balancing rights and responsibilities, and working cooperatively, rather than antagonistically, with government fisheries managers. Such “co-management” recognizes the need for management decisions to be made in collaboration with fishermen who use and depend upon the resource.

Co-management can be formally defined as a partnership arrangement in which the fishermen and government share the responsibility and authority for the management of the fishery (Figure X). Through consultations and negotiations, the partners develop a formal agreement on their respective roles, responsibilities and rights in management. Fishermen are usually represented through various organizations or associations. The partners may also include other industry members such as boat owners, fish traders, and fish processors; environmental groups; academic and research institutions; and other representatives of civil society.

Co-management does not mean total control for management being given to fishermen. It is generally acknowledged that not all responsibility and authority for management should be given to fishermen. The amount of responsibility and/or authority that the government and fishermen have will differ, and depend upon location-specific conditions. For example, where a species stays in one area most of its life cycle, such as shellfish, a large amount of the responsibility of management may be vested to fishermen. Determining what kind and how much

responsibility and/or authority to allocate to the fishermen is ultimately a political decision. The government will always hold the balance of power in co-management.

Co-management is a Process

Given the different ecological, technological, economic and social conditions and needs within the fisheries sector, there is no simple management solution appropriate for every fishery. Co-management should be viewed not as a single strategy to solve all problems of fisheries management, but rather as a process of resource management that will adjust over time in response to changes in trust, credibility, legitimacy, and success of the partners and the co-management arrangements. There is no blueprint for co-management but rather a variety of arrangements from which to choose to suit a specific context and scale.

Co-management attempts to overcome the distrust, fragmentation, and inefficiency of many existing fisheries management arrangements by providing a forum for action by the partners on regulation, negotiation, conflict management, sharing of information, and dialogue and communication. Co-management is adaptive; that is, through a learning process, information is shared among partners, leading to continuous modifications and improvements in management. Through co-management, the partners actively contribute and work together on fisheries management and share the costs and benefits and the successes and failures. Co-management is not a regulatory technique, although regulations are used in co-management.

What Can Co-management Mean for Connecticut Fishermen?

- A more transparent, accountable and autonomous management process;
- More economical by requiring less to be spent on administration and enforcement, in the long run;
- Localized solutions to local problems through management strategies and regulatory measures that are more appropriate to local conditions and ecological scale;
- Use of fishermen's indigenous knowledge and expertise to provide information on the resource base and to complement scientific information for management;
- Improved stewardship of marine resources;
- A greater sense of ownership over the resource which can provide a powerful incentive to view the resource as a long-term asset rather than to overfish;
- Involvement in the formulation and implementation of management and regulatory measures resulting in a higher degree of acceptability and compliance;
- Increased communication and understanding among the partners which can minimize conflict.

However,

- Fishermen must be willing to take on the responsibility of co-management;
- In the short-run, there will be high initial investment in time, financial resources and human resources to establish co-management;
- For some fishermen, the costs of participating in co-management (time, money) may outweigh the expected benefits;
- There must be sufficient political will to support co-management;
- The need to develop a consensus from a wide range of interests may lengthen the decision-making process and result in weaker, compromised measures;
- Co-management may not be suitable for every fishery, for example, it is more appropriate where species stay in one area most of its life cycle.

A Way Forward for Connecticut Fisheries?

Co-management can be considered as an alternative fisheries management strategy. It is a timely alternative for Connecticut fisheries which are currently facing difficult times. However, it is a new alternative and will require some restructuring in the way fisheries are managed. Co-management can provide an opportunity to improve communication between government and fishermen, improve stewardship, and improve management decision-making.