

# **2007 SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS**

“Oregon’s Ocean: Resources and Opportunities ”

**Master of Ceremonies: Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Distinguished Professor of Zoology, Oregon State University**

**Panel I: “The Future of Groundfish Trawlers ”**

**Brad Pettinger, Director, Oregon Trawl Commission**  
**Dr. Mark Hixon, Professor of Zoology, Oregon State University**

As a long-time fisherman, boat owner, and major player in establishing Oregon's ocean policy, Pettinger represented a knowledgeable voice for the fishing industry. He described Oregon's trawl fleet as mostly multi-fishery vessels-shrimp/drag/crab, shrimp/drag, and drag/tuna outfitted. They are 40 - 100+ feet in length, consisting of a skipper and two-man crew. Traditional bottom trawl trips last one to four days, although whiting trips are usually one day.

The Pacific Fisheries Management Council manages the trawl industry by setting quotas on species, arranging observer coverage, and conducting vessel monitoring systems.

Steady decline in the last decade of groundfish trawl vessels along the West Coast, from almost 700 vessels in 1990 to about 200 today. Similarly, the catch has declined from close to 200 million pounds to 50 million during the same period.

In 2003, PFMC voted to move toward IFQs with final action in 2008 which will result in:

- Dramatic reduction in discards
- 100% observer coverage (person or camera)
- Eliminating early closures, and market interruption
- Allowing fishermen and processors to plans long-term
- Placing caps on vessel and individual ownerships
- And providing more specialization.

Hixon gave a natural science view of groundfish trawling. Bottom-trawling, in which heavy nets are dragged along the sea floor by vessels, is a major fishery off the coast of Oregon. The future of this fishery is best examined in the context of the past in terms of effects of groundfish trawling on target species (intended catch), bycatch species (unintended catch), and sea floor habitats (both living and nonliving).

Regarding target species, the West Coast ground-fishery was declared an official disaster by the Secretary of Commerce in 2000 due to 9 species crossing the "overfished" status threshold (two of these species have subsequently recovered due to unusually strong 1999 year classes). Since that time, rebuilding plans for overfished species have been in place, some of which are projected not to be completed until late this century. Trawler fleet size has been reduced by a federal vessel buy-back program, and temporary, variable closed areas are in place to avoid catch of overfished species.

Only time will tell, Hixon said, whether ground-fishery management will shift from such reactive emergency responses focusing on single species to a more proactive, holistic, and sustainable approach involving ecosystem-based tools.

Regarding bycatch species, Hixon stated that in the past bycatch and at-sea discards of seafloor life and non-targeted fish species was immense. There is now a federal observer program to monitor bycatch, and some attempts to modify trawl gear to minimize bycatch. Time will tell whether bycatch and discards remain substantial.

Regarding seafloor habitats, Hixon said that in well-documented, peer-reviewed scientific literature (including a nation-wide study by the National Research Council and a book by the American Fisheries Society) that groundfish trawling has major effects on both rock and mud seafloors, especially the living habitat provided by seafloor invertebrates (such as sponges and corals). Recent trawl gear modifications and Essential Fish Habitat designations have resulted in most trawling off Oregon now being over mud seafloors, yet there has thus far been no effort to conserve some portion of this habitat and the ecosystem it supports.