Industry, NMFS overcome research conflict

by Lorelei Stevens

WOODS HOLE, MA - Over the last few months, the National Fisheries Institute-Scientific Monitoring Committee (NFI-SMC) and the National Marine Fisheries Service Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) have moved beyond a serious difference of opinion back to working together to advance the cause of better data collection.

In the end, the conflict was a learning experience all around. It also demonstrated the truth in the warning that there are bound to be bumps in the road toward effective cooperative research, but they can be overcome.

In recent years, NFI-SMC has been working with scientists from the Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory at Rutgers University to coordinate cooperative research projects with the NEFSC.

The committee has also raised hundreds of thousands of dollars from fishermen and buyers to help pay for projects. Plus, it has organized volunteer vessels to participate in research and encouraged the state of New Jersey to create and fund the Fishing Industry Development Center, which has also committed funding for cooperative research.

One of the high-profile projects extensively supported by NFI-SMC involved working with NEFSC scientists on the 2001 spring and fall trawl surveys.

The effort included side-by-side tows between the commercial fishing vessel Jason and Danielle and the research vessel Albatross IV to compare the relative catchability by the two vessels and the gear they use.

During the two surveys, the Jason and Danielle, with NMFS and academic scientists on board, also conducted independent tows in areas requested by NMFS to supplement the number of stations sampled by the Albatross IV.

Basically, the idea was to begin to find ways to provide more and better-quality data for NMFS stock assessments — on which quotas for many commercially important species are based — and to help bolster fishermen's confidence in stock assessment reports.

Peer-reviewed studies of these two cooperative projects were generally positive and called for the continuation of the program to verify the results.

So it was perhaps understandable that some NFI-SMC industry people were shocked when, during a March 4 meeting, NEFSC Director Mike Sissenwine announced that the Albatross IV had already left the dock to begin the spring 2002 survey without them.

Different views

Industry responded by widely distributing a biting written account of the meeting, including quoted exchanges between Sissenwine and Jason and Danielle owner Bill Grimm regarding differences in the catches between the commercial vessel and the Albatross IV.

From the perspective of the industry account, Sissenwine had discontinued the commercial vessel sampling program just as the results had begun to indicate that there might be room for improvement in how the NMFS surveys — used by the agency for decades to identify abundance trends — are conducted.

"It's not that we want to denigrate the science, but we want the best possible science rather than the best available science," said Sima Freierman of Montauk Inlet Seafood, referencing federal law requiring that fisheries management decisions be based on the best available science. Freierman also a member of NFI-SMC.

A number of NFI-SMC members apparently believed that continuing the survey work was a given.
sissenwine, on the other hand, had a
different take on the situation.

like the previous two surveys, no
specific research proposal had been made
to NMFS for the spring 2002 survey.

In a response to the industry account,
sissenwine said, “no one should have
been surprised that the meeting on
March 4 was too late for planning a
cooperative survey to match up with the
NEFSC’s spring survey on Albatross IV.

The starting date of the NEFSC spring
survey had been scheduled for more than
a year, at about the same time as it has
occurred for more than 30 years.”

In a follow-up interview, sissenwine
explained that it wasn’t that he had made
a choice to not go forward, but that “we
ran out of time.”

He described the first year of
cooperation on the surveys as “a learning
year” to figure out protocols.

“I felt the need to step back and
re-evaluate goals,” sissenwine said.
“Scientific planning does take time and it
can be bureaucratic and that can be
frustrating.”

Moving on

Disagreements between industry and
NMFS are nothing
new. But what was
extraordinary about
this one was the
speed with which
just about everyone
put the experience
behind them and
started talking again.
“Things that were
negative in March
are pretty positive
now,” said haskin
Shellfish Lab
Director Eric Powell
in mid-May.

“Maybe there wasn’t
to thorough
communication, but
it seemed that
everybody wanted to
get things
straightened out.”

While NFI-SMC
members and Powell
regret the lapse in
the comparative
time line that will result
from industry not
participating in the
spring survey, they,
sissenwine, and
other NEFSC
scientists have had
several productive
sessions since the
tension-filled March 4 meeting.

The result was NFI-SMC’s submission
of several projects to the Mid-Atlantic
Fishery Management Council’s 2003
research set-aside program. The program
will make 0%-3% of total allowable catch
levels of many species available to be
harvested so that sale proceeds can be
used to fund scientific projects.

Next year

Among the project proposals coming
out of the talks between NFI-SMC and the
center is one for industry participation in
the spring and fall 2003 surveys.

Sissenwine said the plan this time
around is to “start off with workshops like
we did with the scallop industry, to roll up
our sleeves and find agreement as to what
is practical.”

Another proposal is for the illex real-
time data collection program that has been
in the pilot stage for the last few years.

According to NFI-SMC Chairman Dan
Cohen of Atlantic Capes Seafood in Cape
May, NJ, about 10 boats are lined up to
report their catches electronically to the
NEFSC while fishing this summer.

The hope is to replace log books with
real-time, accurate catch reporting. This
is important because, since illex is a
short-lived species, many doubt that
setting a precise quota a year ahead of
time is the best way to manage the
resource.

In 1998, for example, the fishery was
shut down once the quota was filled even
though there was wide acknowledgment
that the squid were still abundant.

“This project has been going on
without funding from anyone but the
Northeast Fisheries Science Center and
volunteer boats,” Cohen said. “There is
real value to this. We hope to expand it to
the fall to 20-30 boats in the scup and
Loligo fisheries.”

Migration timing

Other NFI-SMC proposals for 2003
involve studies to get a better handle on
how
water temperature
and other
environmental
factors may
influence the fish’s
availability to the
survey.

Powell explained
that many important
commercial and
recreational species
migrate offshore in
the winter and
congregate just about
the time NMFS
conducts its surveys.

The timing is probably different
from year to year
because the
migration is believed
to be influenced by
water temperature.
This, many believe,
may be responsible
for the “patchiness”
in the catch that
survey scientists find
troublesome.

“We’re in agreement that the
timing of the
seasonal migrations
could result in a
match or mismatch
of timing for the survey,” said Sissenwine. “This variability is very interesting to scientists and for tuning this assessment. We’ve been interested in more intense industry activity on this.”

The NFI-SMC is also proposing a multi-year fluke fecundity study, including documenting the presence and location of egg masses that, Cohen explained, “will tell us where we are in our rebuilding schedules.”

Another project would be an extension of the ongoing gear modification work conducted by industry people and Chris Glass of the Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences to reduce scup discards in the Loligo squid fishery.

Set-aside auction
While all of these projects have been submitted for consideration under next year’s research set-aside program, NMFS has awarded NFI-SMC some quota for the current 2002 fishing year and the industry group recently settled on a way to determine which boats will catch it.

NFI-SMC and the Haskin Shellfish Research Lab applied for and, early in June, received an exempted fishing permit (EFP) good through Dec. 31.

The EFP allows 18 fishing vessels to participate in a project to test the effectiveness of a 5-1/2” square mesh extension escapement panel for reducing the bycatch of scup and the retention of Loligo in the Mid-Atlantic gear restricted areas (GRA) in the offshore Loligo fishery this fall.

Also in the EFP, NMFS authorized NFI-SMC to take up to 25,550 pounds of black sea bass, 80,775 pounds of scup, and 187,000 pounds of Loligo squid.

NFI-SMC intends to take the quota set-aside award independent of the fall research project, Cohen explained.

Early in June, the group conducted an auction among interested vessels for the Loligo set-aside. Three vessels — the Huntress I, the Margaret Holley, and the Perception — submitted winning bids for the available set-aside quota in exchange for a specified per-pound contribution to NFI-SMC, which will be used to fund this fall’s research.

While fishing for the Loligo set-aside, the vessels must comply with all fishing regulations and are only exempt from the current 2,500-pound Loligo trip limit up to the cumulative amount of the set aside.

A similar auction was scheduled to take place on June 14 to distribute the black sea bass and scup set-aside quota awarded to NFI-SMC.

New members welcome
Cohen stressed that while NFI-SMC is limiting participation in the auctions to vessels that have supported the committee’s work, anyone is welcome to join the group.

NFI-SMC was founded in 1997 and has raised more than $250,000 since then from member vessels and buyers to fund research on Mid-Atlantic trawl species including squid, scup, fluke, and black sea bass.

All funds, which are administered by the National Fisheries Institute, go to research.

“There are no administrative costs,” Cohen said.

NFI-SMC member vessels pay either $2,000 per year or one-half of 1% of their annual gross.

Anyone interested in more information can call Cohen at (609) 425-1044 or e-mail him at <Acfish@aol.com>.

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—Mike Sissenwine, NEFSC Director