NFI-SMC research set-aside auction early this year

CAPE MAY, NJ - Fishermen interested in obtaining rights to harvest specific amounts of Mid-Atlantic species during the off-season and/or outside of regular trip-limit rules will have the opportunity to do so on Dec. 20.

That's when the National Fisheries Institute Scientific Monitoring Committee (NFI-SMC) will hold its fourth conference-call auction of research set-aside (RSA) quota.

This year, a total of 1.25 million pounds will be available for bid. The poundage is split among these five species as follows:
- Summer flounder - 352,762 pounds;
- Black sea bass - 111,500 pounds;
- Scup - 143,750 pounds;
- Loligo squid - 281,089 pounds; and
- Bluefish - 363,677 pounds.

The RSA amounts are allocated for the purpose of helping to fund cooperative research. The poundage is recommended during the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's annual quota specification process and finalized by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Previously, the RSA auction has been held in January, so this year's Dec. 20 date is earlier than in past years. So is the deadline for joining the association.

Dues deadline

This year's auction will be limited to NFI-SMC members who have paid their dues as of Dec. 8. Membership is open to anyone interested in joining.

NFI-SMC was formed in 1997 in response to a lack of congressional funding for Mid-Atlantic cooperative research.

Since then - through dues, donations, and auction proceeds - fishermen, docks, processors, and support companies have contributed more than $1 million to fund NFI-SMC cooperative research and scientific monitoring projects.

"These funds are used to help us make the 'best available science' better," said Dan Cohen, NFI-SMC chairman and president of Atlantic Capes Fisheries in Cape May.

"Those boats that contribute regularly keep the organization going and have funded several projects for which there was not set-aside quota available," he said.

The commitment to NFI-SMC has grown so strong that some individual captains have wound up contributing as much money to the organizations as major processors to support its work, Cohen added.

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—Dan Cohen

Research projects

To date, NFI-SMC has helped fund:
- Two side-by-side surveys by the fishing vessel Jason & Danielle with the NMFS research vessel Albatross IV;
- Two supplemental finfish surveys using the Jason & Danielle;
- One survey using the Luke & Sarah;
- A feasibility study of real-time management in the Illex fishery;
- A study on commercial discards reduction in the Mid-Atlantic otter trawl fishery; and
- Tests of new gear configurations to reduce bycatch in the Loligo fishery and the directed scup fishery.

Funds raised this year will go toward supporting two projects. The first is a continuation of the supplemental finfish survey. The second is a study of the recreational summer flounder survey developed by the Fisheries Conservation Trust.

NFI-SMC is actually auctioning RSA quota awarded to the trust to turn the quota into dollars to help pay for the project.

Eleanor Bochenek, a researcher at Rutgers University's Haskin Shellfish Lab who works closely with NFI-SMC, explained that the goal of the recreational project is to determine if changes in size and bag limits for the summer flounder fishery can reduce discard mortality and increase angler satisfaction while reaching management goals.

Those goals include meeting recreational harvest limits and sustaining a robust age/size structure.

More info

NFI-SMC membership dues are one-half of one percent of a boat's gross stock of Mid-Atlantic species up to $2,000 per year. Captains who contribute more than $1,000 to the NFI-SMC will be eligible to bid on the full lot of each species.

After all full lots are auctioned, a separate auction will follow for vessels that have contributed $500-$1,000 to NFI-SMC. Auction rules will be finalized just before the auction date.

Checks for dues payments should be made payable to NFI-SMC and mailed to: NFI-SMC, 1636 Delaware Ave., Cape May, NJ 08204, attention Greg DiDomenico.

For more information, call DiDomenico at (609) 898-1100. /efn/