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Commercial Fishermen, Scientists Collaborate to Learn More about Monkfish

NOAA scientists and fishermen are working together aboard commercial fishing vessels to gain information about the monkfish population in Northeast U.S. waters, part of an ongoing collaboration between the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) of NOAA's Fisheries Service and the monkfish industry under the center's Cooperative Research Program.

John Hoey, who directs the program, and NEFSC colleagues Rob Johnston and Anne Richards, have worked with the monkfish industry for the past several years to develop the 2009 survey, which is funded with approximately \$1 million from NOAA. Cooperative monkfish surveys were also done in 2001 and 2004, both involving the fishing vessel *Mary K*. The *F/V Drake* from Portland, Maine also participated in 2001.

"The monkfish industry wanted to do another cooperative survey as part of ongoing efforts to improve stock assessments, and to compare results from these industry-based surveys with those from the new NEFSC survey vessel *Henry B. Bigelow*," Hoey said. "We have worked closely with the fishermen from the beginning, and mid-way through the 2009 sampling cruises things are going very well."

The 2009 surveys began in February and will be completed by the end of April, weather permitting. The sampling efforts will provide information about the size, age and sex composition of monkfish, officially known as goosefish (*Lophius americanus*), as well as their geographic distribution.

Two fishing vessels, the 100-foot *Mary K* and the 119-foot *Endurance*, both based in New Bedford, Mass., are sampling at more than 200 locations in U.S. waters, from Cape Hatteras to the Gulf of Maine. Five fisheries scientists are aboard each vessel working with the vessel's crew. *Endurance* is working in the Gulf of Maine and the northern Georges Bank region, and the *Mary K* is working in southern Georges Bank, southern New England and the Mid-Atlantic region as far south as Cape Hatteras, N.C.

Scientists are tagging fish for recapture studies, and will conduct studies of monkfish reproductive biology, genetics, diet and their distribution with respect to

water temperature. Estimates of monkfish population size will be made from data collected in the diverse geographic areas sampled in U.S. waters ranging in depths from 15 to 250 fathoms (90 to 1,500 feet).

Johnston, chief survey scientist in Cooperative Research, says the scientists and fishermen are also conducting experimental work to estimate the efficiency of each net used in the survey, and compare the catch rates in commercial monkfish nets with those used in NEFSC standardized bottom trawls, which collect samples of many species for stock assessments required under federal fishery management laws.

“This survey allows us not only to develop another estimate of the total weight of the monkfish population, but will improve our estimates of vital characteristics such as age, growth and maturity,” said Richards, the primary assessment scientist for monkfish.

Hoey says that despite the tough winter weather, the *Mary K* and *Endurance* have been operating on schedule and according to plan, but with some unexpected events the past few weeks (See *All in a Day's Work... Times Two* under Related Links).

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Related web links:

Cooperative Monkfish Research Program:

<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/read/popdy/monkfish/>

Status of the Stock: <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/sos/spsyn/og/goose/>

Frequently Asked Questions About Monkfish:

http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/read/popdy/monkfish/Survey2004/frequent_questions.html