

Bangor Daily News - Print this Article

Last updated: Saturday, July 19, 2003

Surveying the Oceans

While New England fishery managers met this week at a Portland hotel to consider four options for reducing overfishing, Buoy C bobbed in Casco Bay, collecting information that could be valuable in determining how bad off fish stocks really are. The New England Fisheries Management Council is considering options to limit catches and restrict fishing areas while admitting it doesn't really know how many fish remain in the ocean and if their numbers are increasing or declining.

A couple months ago, the journal Nature reported that fish stocks had reached dire levels and were slow to recover. The same week, the National Marine Fisheries Service reported how well the nation's fish stocks were doing.

That's where Buoy C, and its nine cousins spread from Cape Cod to the head of the Bay of Fundy, come in. They constitute the Gulf of Maine Ocean Observing System (GoMOOS),

a system deployed in 2001 by the University of Maine and others to learn more about New England's most productive fishing grounds. The buoys report daily on wind speed, water temperature, current patterns, even phytoplankton growth. All of this information, collected with the help of satellites operated by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA, is placed on-line and available to fishermen, and the public at www.gomoos.org.

The information gathered by GoMOOS can be used by fishermen to determine, based on phytoplankton blooms, where the fish are most likely to be. Penobscot River pilots use it to time their trips up and down the river and into the bay. It can be used to warn fish farmers of dangerously low water temperatures like those that killed thousands of salmon last winter. The buoys could also be rigged to monitor the movement of right whales and ships to avoid collisions. And it can help identify sensitive fish-breeding areas that may be put off-limits to trawling and other activities. Finally, and the most promising in terms of winning more federal financing, GoMOOS could be used to monitor ship traffic off the U.S. coast to thwart terrorist attacks from the sea.

With all of this in mind, Sen. Olympia Snowe has proposed expanding the successful Gulf of Maine project into a national ocean monitoring system. The new system, which was unanimously endorsed by the Senate Commerce

Committee Thursday, would cost up to \$200 million a year to operate. But, it

is expected to save up to 10 times that amount by allowing better preparation for natural disasters, improving search and rescue and Navy operations, streamlining oceanic shipping and providing critical knowledge about ocean habitat and fish stocks.

If it also helps fishery managers make good decisions about rules

that preserve the fish, while not

putting fishermen out of business,
it could be priceless.