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I recently had the opportunity to speak with a number of charter boat captains who also operate in the striped bass commercial hook and line fishery. In the course of these discussions, and discussions with other commercial industry members, I am aware that some members of the charter boat industry are pressuring the Department of Natural Resources about current fishery laws and regulations, specifically the number of crew members on a commercial hook and line vessel and the commercial minimum size of 18 inches for striped bass.

I would like to recap how the current laws and regulations were established. The commercial striped bass fishery, for both gill net and hook and line, operated under a derby style fishery until 2014. Because a derby style fishery means each fisherman can work until the State's quota is caught, and the fishery is subsequently closed, it was imperative that each fisherman, or vessel, have equal opportunity to catch a portion of the State-wide quota. To do so, it was established that no more than three fisherman could be on a commercial hook and line boat, unless there were two license holders on board in which case there could be a total of four fisherman on a vessel. This was fair and reasonable while the State operated under the derby style fishery.

In 2014 under the direction of the Department of Natural Resources, the commercial fishery transitioned to the Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) system. We, in the commercial fishery, were assured that with greater accountability would come greater flexibility.

Because fisherman were assigned a specific number of pounds they could catch in the ITQ fishery, the need to restrict the number of commercial fisherman on a vessel became obsolete; there is no longer a need to sacrifice efficiency for equal opportunity. The decision to remove commercial hook and line crew limits, in the ITQ fishery only, was first brought to the Tidal Fisheries Commission meeting in 2013 and taken to the Striped Bass Work Group later that year. The striped bass workgroup, elected by their peers, supported the removal of the crew limits.

Late this year, it was brought to the attention of the Striped Bass Work Group that charter boat captains, who also operate as commercial hook and line fisherman, may be operating illegally by carrying paying passengers when commercial fishing. The concerned individuals believe the decision to eliminate crew limits in the ITQ fishery made this possible. As a result, these individuals are pushing to reinstate crew limits for the ITQ fishery. However, a current law prohibits charter boat captains from having paying passengers onboard while commercially fishing. This is an enforcement issue within the charter industry that would not be resolved by reinstating crew limits on commercial fishermen.

The decision to remove the ITQ commercial hook and line crew limits is advantageous to commercial fisherman for various reasons. For individuals who were assigned small quotas, pooling resources such as bait, crew, fuel, and gear reduces costs and serves to help them operate with greater proficiency. Greater proficiency means less time on the water and less chances that they will interact with charter and recreational fisherman. For those who support themselves through commercial hook and lining, a larger crew means more efficient business operations.

It is important to note that commercial hook and line fisherman are currently permitted to fish only four days a week. Day restrictions are yet another reason a larger crew is essential to the efficiency of business operations. Hook and line fishermen are currently vetting the possibility of allowing hook and line fishing on Fridays.