West Coast Groundfish Sablefish Permit Stacking Program

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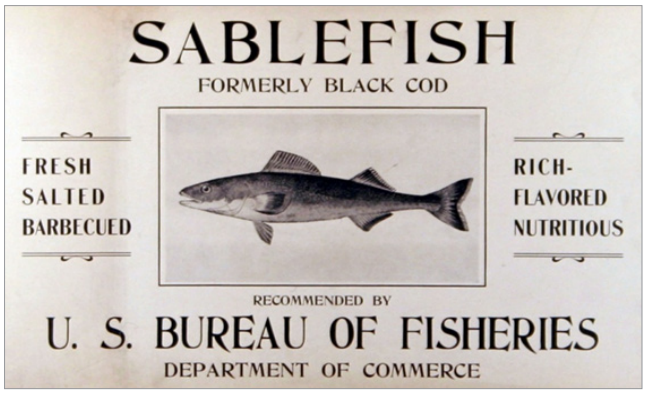
The West Coast Groundfish Sablefish Permit Stacking Program is a type of individual fishing quota (IFQ) where up to three limited entry permits, each with an associated amount of sablefish for harvest, may be registered to a single vessel. The program was implemented in stages by the Pacific Fishery Management Council (Pacific Council) and NMFS to address overcapacity and short fishing seasons.



U.S. Government published poster, circa 1917.

In 1997, NMFS implemented the Pacific Council's first step—a sablefish endorsement program for limited entry permit owners. This was intended to reduce overcapacity by restricting participation to those permit owners with historical participation in and dependence upon the sablefish fishery. Today, 164 limited entry permits have sablefish endorsements. In 1998, NMFS implemented the Pacific Council's next step—to manage the season with a three-tiered cumulative limit regime. NMFS assigned a tier designation of one, two, or three to each sablefish-endorsed permit based on historical landings associated with a specific limited entry permit. During the primary season, a participant could land an amount of sablefish up to the cumulative limit associated with their permit's tier. The three-tier system slowed the rate of capitalization in the fishery. Vessel owners no longer had an incentive to increase their fishing speed because they were limited in how much sablefish they could catch by their permit's tier.

In 2001, the program was implemented and allowed a vessel owner to register up to three sablefish-endorsed permits for use with their vessel and to harvest the cumulative limits associated with each of those permits (i.e., stacking permits). A sablefish-endorsed permit is transferable but the endorsement and tier are permanently affixed to the permit. The program also extended the season length from about ten days to seven months to allow participants flexibility in fishing their tier amounts. Finally, the program implemented several additional provisions, some of which were intended to limit control of the resource and to maintain the small, owner-operator character of the fleet.

The program has been operating for over a decade and has met the goals and objectives set for the program. The sablefish season is longer. There have been few permit transfers in recent years, indicating fleet stability. There has been a reduction in the number of vessels harvesting sablefish (i.e., there are 59 fewer vessels fishing sablefish). Finally, the program has provided more flexibility and has maintained the small, owner-operator character of the fleet.