

"It's not a response to Carlos, but it may help us identify areas related to his activities that we can address," Nies said Wednesday.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's own catch share policy actually mandate that the councils periodically produce "a formal and detailed review ... no less frequently than once every seven years" on catch share programs.

"This is the first review, really, since catch shares originally were implemented in 2004, and more importantly, expanded in 2010," Nies said. "It's been on our radar for a couple of years. The next step is to assemble a staff and get the report written."

The review comes at a critical time for the fishery.

In Gloucester and elsewhere, groundfishermen continue to struggle against declining quotas on key species, shrinking fishing areas and additional management regulations to not only protect vulnerable groundfish stocks, but other marine creatures such as right whales.

In New Bedford, the groundfish industry remains idle at dock because of Rafael's malfeasance and the inability of the port's groundfish sectors to properly manage their sector members. It will not fish again until 2019 at the earliest.

Those are just some of the reasons the report's evaluation period — stretching from May 1, 2010 through April 30, 2016 — has the potential to provide an intriguing glimpse of the sea changes that have rocked the fishery and the commercial groundfishing industry since the changeover to catch shares.

Nies said the council will hire an independent contractor to work with council staff and assorted working groups to conduct the review. The council has posted the position and expects the successful candidate to begin work some time in December.

Nies said the council hopes to complete the report in 2019.

"We're really not sure at this point how long it's going to take," Nies said. "It's not something you can do overnight. It's quite comprehensive."

Nies said the council has not determined whether the catch share review will include specific public hearings or periods of public comment for stakeholders.

But, he said, the review is enough of a priority that he expects it to be a frequent topic at the council's regular meetings and those of its groundfish committee and other council working groups as the drafts of the formal review are compiled.