

Among the topics of most interest to Maine fishermen are setting Atlantic herring catch limits for 2020 and 2021.

Final numbers won't be available until they are discussed Tuesday, but Janice M. Plante, public affairs officer for NEFMC, said, "The catch limits at best will be about the same as this year or a little bit lower."

The 2020 numbers will be set, but 2021 numbers may be updated following a stock assessment update, she said.

The council will also discuss a potential amendment to the federal fishery management plan for groundfish that would change how officials monitor the number of fish caught.

Currently, an independent monitor is present on a certain percentage of trips — 15 percent of the trips last year and about 32 percent of the trips this year — to collect information on the number of fish caught and any fish discarded, according to Ben Martens of the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association.

But a number of obstacles, including high turnover of observers, low pay and difficult work schedules, led to a lax monitoring program last year, Martens said.

In addition, various studies have shown that "trips observed don't look like the rest of the trips," Martens said. "A number of different analyses have shown different decisions are made by fishermen when observers are on and off the boat."

Martens was quick to point out that the discrepancies don't necessarily mean any illegal activity is taking place, but could just mean the fisherman "doesn't want a random person on their boat during bad weather."

"It's hard on small boats adding extra people," he said.

Jamie Cournane, fishery analyst for groundfish at the NEFMC, said three alternatives stand out among many to be discussed next week at the council meeting. She said all are in draft form, and the council will only determine next week which alternatives to continue to study.

One would have a boat's catch monitored dockside.

Two others include verifying the catch on a percentage of trips; or using human or electronic monitoring on a fixed percentage for all at-sea trips — anywhere from 25 percent to 100 percent.

Martens said Maine Coast Fishermen's Association has worked on a test project with The Nature Conservancy and Gulf of Maine Research Institute to study using cameras to monitor

the catch. Last year, cameras were on two or three boats in Maine, and this year they are on boats out of Cape Cod, Rhode Island, Gloucester, Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Some fishermen have objected to the cameras, he said, arguing that the science is “bad,” and asking, “How can you hold me to a high level of accountability if it’s bad science?”

“It’s cheaper, safer and has a much better data stream,” Martens said. “This could radically transform how our fisheries are managed.”

Eventually, the council will present a final proposal to the National Marine Fisheries Service, which will make the decision.

“The questions are: What does this mean for the fish, what does this mean for the fishermen, and what does this mean for the habitat?” Cournane said.

The council will also look at management issues in the northern Gulf of Maine, as well as a number of issues related to possession limits and begin discussion of catch limits for 2020. They will also discuss the research set-aside program and suggest a list of recommendations for research priorities.

According to Martens, the management issues in the northern Gulf of Maine include what some call a “loophole” and others call “overlapping regulations” regarding scallop quotas.

After years without any scallop fishery in Maine, an area named Stellwagen Bank saw “an explosion of scallops” several years ago that prompted offshore fishing boats — many from New Bedford, Massachusetts — to catch as many as 100,000 pounds of scallops, Martens said.

While smaller boats were limited to 200 pounds per trip, larger boats could bring in as many as 5,000 pounds a day until the smaller boats hit their 70,000 to 80,000-pound limit.

In the end, Martens said, 1 million pounds of scallops came out of the area.

“We worked very hard to get protections in place” last year, Martens said. Now the NEFMC committee must determine how best to manage the area.

“We have a chance to protect a very fragile resource in the Gulf of Maine, or we could roll back protections,” he said. Possibilities include trip limits and limiting the number of permits.

Again, a final decision is at least a year out, he said.

The NEFMC will meet June 11 to 13 at the DoubleTree by Hilton on Maine Mall Road in South Portland.

Decisions by the New England Fishery Management Council are sent to the Department of Commerce for review and implementation.