



GULF OF MAINE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A participant measures gillnet mesh for Gearnet, a fishermen-driven research project to increase gear efficiency.

Coordinated by the non-profit Gulf of Maine Research Institute in Portland, Maine, Gearnet teams New England groundfish fishermen with scientists and manufacturers to develop gear improvements that increase selectivity and energy efficiency while reducing environmental impacts.

Gearnet, which held its first meetings last fall and began at-sea testing this spring, comes largely as a response to the region's sector management system. Low catch allocations, combined with the requirement to land all legal-sized regulated species, highlight the necessity to fish selectively to maximize profits.

In one instance, members of the New Hampshire-based Sector XI began experimenting this fall with gillnets set two, four and six feet off the bottom. The goal is to reduce cod landings while targeting pollock, which generally swim higher in the water column.

"People don't often think of cod as a choke species, but as our quota fills up into the fall, they can become the biggest choke species of all," says Capt. Randy Gauron, Sector XI member and owner/operator of the 32-foot Capt Al, ported in Hampton Beach, N.H.

At its core, Gearnet is about fishermen-driven research. Members of Gauron's sector first raised the concept at a meeting in the fall of 2010, and later collaborated with scientists to refine the experimental net designs.

"This project really addresses our needs as fishermen; we identify problems that need to be solved, and scientists help us try to find solutions," Gauron says.

— Willy Goldsmith