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Commerce chief vows to help fishermen

By Bob Salsberg, Associated Press | September 28, 2010

US Department of Commerce Secretary Gary Locke told New England fishing representatives yesterday that he was committed to ending overzealous or abusive enforcement of fishing rules and to helping the industry find ways to become more efficient and profitable.

While stopping short of offering fishermen an apology for questionable penalties identified in a recent federal report as having been assessed by investigators of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Locke said fair and effective enforcement was critical to the management of the nation's fisheries.

"The problems identified by the inspector general are simply unacceptable, and they were allowed to persist for too long," said Locke, whose Cabinet department oversees NOAA. "Some of those complaints actually dated back to 2001."

He vowed: "Those problems will end on my watch."

Locke, who was appointed by President Obama and was sworn into office in March 2009, spoke after a closed-door meeting in Boston with Massachusetts fishermen, also attended by Governor Deval Patrick and US Representative Barney Frank, both Democrats. The secretary also met yesterday with local officials and fishing industry representatives in Portland, Maine.

Richard Canastra, co-owner of New Bedford-based Whaling City Seafood Display Auction, called the meeting with Locke "refreshing" after he said the industry's earlier attempts to communicate its concerns to NOAA fell on "deaf ears."

"We're not looking for an apology, we're just looking for action," Canastra said.

The meeting came several days after Locke appointed a special master to examine 19 questionable penalties against fishermen in the Northeast that were identified by his office's inspector general, Todd Zinser. Retired judge Charles B. Swartwood III also was asked to look into more than 100 complaints that didn't appear in Zinser's report.

Zinser detailed a strategy by enforcers to impose excessive fines as a tool to prod

fishermen into settling their cases rather than going before a judge. The penalties were imposed for regulations governing such things as where fishermen could fish and how much they could catch.

Frank, whose district includes New Bedford, expressed support for fishermen.

“These are not our enemies,” Frank said. Fishermen “are the hardest-working people in America doing something very important, and an occasional error should not be treated as a serious felony.”

Locke announced yesterday that an online hot line was being created to field complaints from the industry about unfair or overzealous law enforcement. He said those complaints could be lodged anonymously and without fear of reprisal.

The secretary also said that \$3 million in federal grants was being made available in Massachusetts to help fishermen develop new equipment, allowing them to be more efficient and profitable, *and that the industry would be given more input into the scientific research that determines catch limits aimed at preserving fish stocks.* Fishermen have frequently complained the guidelines are arbitrary and have forced many to quit fishing because they can no longer make a living.

Patrick called for striking a balance between the interests of conservationists and fishermen.

“We need action on the catch limits, and we need it now,” he said.

Canastra said fishermen are hoping the commerce secretary will reevaluate some of the fishing stocks. He said easing catch limits could improve profits by as much as 15 to 20 percent.

Maine fishermen have not reported the level of problems reported in Massachusetts, but the enforcement issues are still of concern, said US Representative Chellie Pingree, a Democrat who attended the Portland meeting.

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