

New Bedford Standard Times

Local delegation pleased with commerce chief's pledges to fishermen

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New Bedford's fishing industry was heavily represented at a meeting Monday on Beacon Hill with U.S. Commerce Secretary Gary Locke, who has become personally involved in ending the crisis of confidence in the region's fisheries law enforcement.

Eight fishing industry representatives who have had dealings with the federal fisheries prosecutors were on hand to tell their stories directly to Locke. Gloucester was similarly represented.

Backing them up were New Bedford Mayor Scott W. Lang and Gloucester Mayor Carolyn Kirk, along with state Rep. William Straus, D-Mattapoisett, and U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass.

Commerce General Counsel Cameron Kerry, brother of U.S. Sen. John F. Kerry, D-Mass., accompanied Locke.

The meeting was private, but the local delegation came away pleased with Locke's determination to not only reopen old cases already in the hands of the Inspector General, but other cases that have not yet been brought forward by people afraid of reprisals in the past.

Sen. Kerry hailed two announcements as evidence the fishermen are being heard.

- A new confidential e-hotline will be established for fishermen to report unfair enforcement actions or breaches of conduct by NOAA enforcement agents or attorneys. Users will be able to report by e-mail to EnforcementComplaintHotline@noaa.gov.
- Availability of \$3.35 million in cooperative research grants for the New England region that will support conservation engineering to prevent by-catch.

"We've sounded the alarm bells and Secretary Locke has responded," Sen. Kerry said in a statement.

Frank told The Standard-Times that he was pleased at the absence of Jane Lubchenco, the NOAA administrator who has come under intense criticism for her slow response to the law enforcement crisis and the severity of catch limits this year.

He said no mention was made of Lubchenco at the 90-minute meeting at the Suffolk Law School, and speculated that Lubchenco may have been assigned to some scientific work. "That's fine with me. She does not appear to me to be a major player," Frank said.

With Locke's involvement, which began in earnest last week at a meeting in Washington, D.C., the participants in Monday's meeting were pleased at the progress being made on law enforcement.

"We're almost home on law enforcement," Frank said. "We're about at the 50-yard-line for more fish."

The industry is pressing Locke for a review and emergency changes to catch allocations that are so low they are strangling the industry. As more and better science cause NOAA to review its decisions, the industry and lawmakers are pushing hard for an accelerated revision that would allow them to keep fishing rather than be forced to stop due to overly restrictive limits on certain "choke species."

There was no discussion of the lawsuit against Locke filed earlier this year by New Bedford and Gloucester challenging the fishing restrictions.

Richie Canastra, owner of the New Bedford Seafood Auction, along with Frank were pleased that Lang brought up the subject of cases that are not yet included in the review process. Frank followed up on the matter, and Locke agreed to consider widening the net of the inquiry.

"It was really nice to hear that the mayor ask about older cases, because a lot of fishermen didn't realize that the IG was doing this investigation," Canastra said.

Straus said he was impressed with Locke's knowledge of the fishing industry and command of its vocabulary. "Never once did I see him look to an assistant or aide for help," he said.

"The good fortune we have is that this guy was the governor of a state (Washington) with an active fishing industry only about a year ago," Straus said. "The terminology of the way the commercial fleet operates is very familiar to him. And as a former prosecutor he didn't hesitate from engaging."

"The most significant thing about the meeting is that we now have the secretary of commerce personally engaged," Straus said.