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Editorial: Catch share push hits new depths on dishonesty

The absolutely co-opted — if not truly corrupted — nature of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's fisheries policy under Jane Lubchenco has never been more evident than now, as various environmental groups push hard for the catch share management system that is driving independent fishermen out of business and rightly drawing questions in Congress.

Indeed, some of the enviros and their subsidized fishing "partners" have reached new depths of dishonesty in recent weeks in their fight against the so-called Jones Amendment. That's the measure that, filed by North Carolina Congressman Walter Jones to cut off NOAA's funding for any new catch share programs, emphatically passed the U.S. House as part of the compromise budget proposal.

How far off the rails have these groups gone?

Well, the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholder's Alliance — a group partially underwritten by the Environmental Defense Fund — has gone so far as to refer to the Jones Amendment the "Anti-Fishermen's Act" — a blatant lie.

And the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation last week announced grants totalling \$2.25 million to 18 recipients on three coasts to advance Lubchenco's catch share fishery policy, which essentially manages fish allocations as in a commodities market, and is already steering more control to bigger corporations while driving smaller, independent, family fishing boats into economic oblivion.

None of that should be surprising. EDF and other nonprofit giants, fueled by major corporate donations, were jumping on catch shares as an investment bonanza even before President Obama eased Lubchenco from her seat on the EDF board of directors into the top NOAA leadership post.

But here's the real catch, so to speak.

The Fish and Wildlife Foundation — not to be confused with the bigger and better-known World Wildlife Fund — has "partners" that not only include corporate-based foundations, private corporations, and global commodities conglomerates, but NOAA itself.

In fact, this agency, which draws donations from Big Oil donors and many more, is the same one that made Times headlines in May 2009, when Lubchenco announced NOAA was accepting millions from the foundation — not the usual other way around — to help fund the transition of the New England groundfishery to a catch share market. And — Eureka! — the New England Fishery Management Council approved the conversion a month later.

Today, the foundation that is NOAA's "partner" has made one of its New England grants to the Cape Cod Hook Fishermen's Association, extending \$185,000 to help launch a fishermen's loan fund.

The Hook Fishermen, you'll remember, are the group that got a favored allocation from the council when catch share management began a break that's a target of a lawsuit filed by the cities of Gloucester and New Bedford and a variety of fishing interests.

They're also the group whose CEO, John Pappalardo, serves as — wink, wink — the New England fishery council's chairman. And now all of this, through the foundation "partnership," is tied directly to NOAA and Lubchenco themselves.

Look, this underhanded byplay has, sadly, become a seemingly accepted way of life within this seedy system of federal fishery management — where fishermen are still being denied the chance to make an honest living based on corrupted and outdated scientific stock assessments.

Consider, for example, the actions of U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., who — during a committee meeting headed by U.S. Sen. John Kerry, turned into a downright shill, holding up a sign proclaiming "catch shares work" — **but without explaining the sign was an ad, bought and paid for by the Gulf Reef alliance.**

But the idea of an entire, supposedly impartial and regulatory government agency to "partner" in a policy push against the economic survival of private, independent small business takes NOAA's credibility to a new low.

We only hope our federal lawmakers recognize that, and **install the independent prosecutor this tangled mess surely needs.**