

Gloucester Daily Times

January 9, 2011

Editorial: Commerce chief's stand a betrayal of his office

We wanted to believe Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke last October when he said he'd consider raising catch limits in the New England groundfishery if the case could be made that government regulations and policies had created an economic emergency.

And our own government leaders, right up to Gov. Deval Patrick, clearly took Locke at his word as well.

Now, we know. Secretary Locke's promise of "consideration" was nothing more than a sham, and a downright slap in the face to everyone from the governor right down to the Gloucester piers.

There is simply no other way to view Locke's insulting, indefensible denial of any "emergency" boost in groundfish limits, and his lack of recognition of the dire effect the current limits, coupled with NOAA chief Jane Lubchenco's "catch share" system, is having in Gloucester, around New England and far beyond.

Locke essentially claims that a study commissioned by Gov. Patrick and carried out by scientists at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth didn't show the economic need or make the case from a scientific standpoint.

Yet, on the economic side, the state has shown that, under the Amendment 16 framework that includes the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's catch share system, just 10 percent of the boats landed 64 percent of the total revenue from May through September — a grim statistic for small, independent fishing businesses. Over the first six months of the fishing year, New England's groundfishermen brought in just 13 percent of the allowable catch in cod, a largely rebuilt stock. And, in an increasingly restored fishery, landings were down up to 11 percent through August through September.

Locke said in his Friday announcement that he sees no "new science" that would lead him to raise the catch limits. Well, Mr. Secretary, that wasn't part of the deal in October — when mid-term elections headed down the home stretch, and perhaps you worried about some justifiably irate fishermen throwing a few inconvenient truths into various debates.

Locke's position didn't call for "new" science; his consideration was to be "based on the best scientific evidence available that indicates (raising the limits) will not undermine the conservation mandates of (Magnuson-Stevens)."

In that case, Locke needed no more evidence there than what he'd already seen — NOAA's initial assessments for setting the pollock catch were so out of whack he had to sign off on raising that limit by 600 percent. That's not 6 percent, not even 60, but 600. Let's face it: NOAA's agenda-driven science — especially under Lubchenco, the faux-scientist who, lest we forget, signed off on a now laughable study that found the oceans would be virtually devoid of all but jellyfish by 2048 — has taken inaccuracy and incompetence to some entirely new depths.

The truth is, Locke has plenty of data to make the limit changes that clearly need to be made. Instead, he seems bent on keeping in Locke-step, if you will, with NOAA's Jellyfish Jane, who's now claiming the plight of endangered sea turtles in the Gulf of Mexico is due not to the epic 2010 BP oil spill, but to hazards posed by fishermen.

We've come to expect embarrassing statements like that from a NOAA chief whose only real goal is to carry water for the Environmental Defense Fund, the lobbying giant where Lubchenco had served as board vice-chair, and the folks who have brought both catch shares and the cap-and-trade system to our American economy.

But it's far more frightening to have an entire industry of working families, small businesses and the communities that economically rely upon them sold down the river by our federal Secretary of Commerce.

That's right. At its core, Locke's decision means that America's Secretary of Commerce — working directly under a president who forever spouts rhetoric promising "job, jobs, jobs," — is willing to allow federal regulations and policy to kill thousands of jobs along our waterfronts, wipe out countless small, independent coastal businesses, and add to an already \$280 billion trade deficit by limiting U.S. businesses in a competitive field where, despite plentiful resources, 80 percent of our seafood is imported.

That, like Lubchenco's sellouts and other actions, is a downright betrayal of the Commerce secretary's office.

And that warrants immediate action on the part of our congressional lawmakers — as in, right now.