

New Bedford Standard Times

Editorial

OUR VIEW: Raise the catch

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Five weeks after Gov. Deval Patrick asked Commerce Secretary Gary Locke for emergency increases in groundfish catch limits, the man who stands between northeastern fishing families and economic survival remains silent.

Unless he acts without delay, more fishermen will lose their livelihoods. Scientific data support a higher catch; it is possible and necessary, without endangering fish stocks.

We call on Locke to respond to Patrick's plea, and the request of the congressional delegation, and issue emergency regulations immediately that will raise the limits on "choke" stocks, species whose ultra-low catch limits prevent fishermen from returning to sea.

Since the new catch-share system went into effect May 1, it has nearly bankrupted many fishermen, especially the small owner-operators. If they can't go fishing, they can't feed their families or bring fish to the retail market — all because of regulations setting the catch at the lowest end of a range of acceptable numbers supported by scientific research.

Two-thirds of New Bedford's fishing boats are tied up at the dock, according to data Mayor Scott W. Lang plans to release today. About 35 boats have caught and been allocated 80 percent of the catch, Lang said, while some 140 boats share the rest. That means they're fishing very little or staying home.

Moreover, with so many vessels staying in port, shore-side businesses that offer fuel, equipment, repairs and other services are hurting. If they close their doors, the infrastructure a commercial fishing fleet needs will be gone. The industry will be at even greater risk of collapse.

Back in October, Locke acknowledged that the Magnuson-Stevens Act gives him the authority to issue emergency regulations to raise catch limits, but so far, he has not chosen to use that authority.

When Patrick made his case to Locke last month, he included a report, "Economic and Scientific Conditions in the Massachusetts Multispecies Groundfishery," overseen by scientists at the Massachusetts Department of

Marine Fisheries and the School for Marine Science and Technology at UMass Dartmouth. The report argues for raising catch limits by 30 percent for most groundfish species, more for others.

Then, Senators John Kerry and Scott Brown, along with Congressmen Barney Frank, Bill Delahunt and John Tierney, wrote to Locke, calling the situation an "economic emergency" and endorsing Patrick's argument that regulators could raise catch limits "to higher levels that remains consistent with conservation requirements."

The science supports it.

Fishermen and their communities need it.

We urge Locke to raise catch limits on choke species immediately.