

Editorial: Landmark fishermen's rally doesn't need phony NOAA intrusion

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By all counts, today should be a landmark day for the fishing industry of Gloucester, all of New England and across the nation.

It's the day that fishermen and their industry allies from here to the Gulf and West coasts are converging on the U.S. Capitol in Washington.

There, they will raise their voices and call for congressional help in an overdue push to reform the Magnuson-Stevens Act and make it flexible and workable for the good of fishermen and fish stocks alike. And they will have support from a growing bipartisan chorus of lawmakers from Massachusetts Democrats such as Congressmen Barney Frank and John Tierney, to Congressmen Walter Jones, R-N.C., and Tim Bishop, R-N.Y., along with U.S. Sens. Charles E. Schumer and Kristin Gillibrand, both New York Democrats.

Yet, the most conspicuous voice raised so far this week is one that will thankfully not have a platform today. Monday, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration tried to have Eric Schwaab, chief of its National Marine Fisheries Service, added to the speaking program — and mercifully, rally organizers said, "no thanks."

Above all, the fact NOAA would even try to horn in on the fishermen's demonstration shows federal fishing officials just don't get it. Oh, NOAA officials might have seen Schwaab's potential speaking role as one that could help "build bridges" with the fishermen, to talk of "working together," perhaps sing a verse or two of "Kumbaya," and show that NOAA and NMFS are really just friendly agencies that want fishermen's input while pursuing common goals.

Yeah, right.

The truth is, NOAA chief administrator Jane Lubchenco, for all her talk, has shown the industry far too many times that neither she nor NOAA give a damn what the industry says or thinks. And she delivered that message louder and clearer than ever two weeks ago with her appointment of Schwaab — a career Maryland fish and game bureaucrat — to the top NMFS post.

So it was encouraging to hear "United We Fish" rally organizer Jim Donofrio of the New Jersey-headquartered Recreational Fishing Alliance tell NOAA communications official Monica Allen that NOAA and Schwaab could take their presentations someplace else.

Today is not a day to talk once again of "conciliation," as Allen put it, which any address by Schwaab would no doubt pursue. Simply put, it's too late for that.

Today is a day for America's fishermen — and the lawmakers who have already staked out positions alongside them — to push for real action, the kind of decisive action Lubchenco has shown she is either unable or steadfastly unwilling to take.

Despite a damning Inspector General's report on NOAA enforcement, she has shamefully not taken any action to suspend or fire enforcement agency leaders such as national chief Dale Jones and Gloucester regional chief Andy Cohen, whose henchmen have treated fishermen as criminals for years and socked those in the Northeast with bankrupting violation penalties 250 percent higher than those doled out in other parts of the country.

And in tapping Schwaab for the NMFS post, Lubchenco cast aside the more qualified candidate, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth marine biologist Brian Rothschild — who could have bridged some of the trust and credibility gaps between fishermen and federal regulators, having built respect from both sides.

Simply put, Lubchenco does not have — and does not deserve — the confidence of the fishing industry. Donofrio was right on the money when he noted that "no one from NOAA can help us" to give the Magnuson-Stevens Act the flexibility that fishermen and their communities need.

Schwaab apparently will at least take in the rally today, perhaps with an ear toward hearing what fishermen such as Rockport's Bill Lee — driven out of the industry by heavy-handed NOAA enforcement tactics late last year — have to say. He should also hear and heed the words of community leaders such as Gloucester Mayor Carolyn Kirk, who can tell him the economic havoc his and Lubchenco's agency is heaping on fishing communities with a policy intent on killing more jobs amid a continuing economic slump.

But no one needs to hear him tell fishermen that his agency has any interest in working toward common ground. They've heard that all too many times before — and they know it's a bunch of baloney.

Today's not a day for baloney. It's a day for fishermen and fishing communities to tell Congress and the federal government that, indeed, "United We Fish" — and all of us need their help to keep it that way.

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