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Editorial: Fishermen need work, not bogus buyout plan

They're calling it a financial rescue package for fishermen.

But how can using \$100 million in federal money to help — even encourage — fishermen to go out of business be viewed as a rescue from anything but the ability to make a living?

Perhaps the initiative by seven New England senators — including John Kerry of Massachusetts — for \$150 million in federal money, \$100 million of which would be used for a buyout plan to reduce the size of the New England fishing fleet, is well-intentioned. Perhaps the idea of a federal handout of tens of thousands of dollars will be seductive to some fishermen who have been worn down by federal regulations and a corrupt system of law federal fisheries enforcement.

But this proposal is wrong on many counts — not the last of which is that Kerry is a member of the party in power — the Democrats — who keep insisting that they are all about "jobs, jobs, jobs."

The fact is, a fishermen's buyout is about eliminating jobs. And the fishermen themselves know that the other \$50 million, aimed at job training and low-interest loans for helping them to start new careers, amounts to little more than feel-good window dressing. Job training doesn't mean getting a job, as millions of well-trained, unemployed people struggling in today's economy know.

That is not the only thing wrong with this proposal.

The fact is, any buyout plan and funding for it at this point amounts to throwing money at a problem to make complaints about it go away, instead of confronting the problem and making that go away.

Fishermen in Gloucester, around New England and around the nation don't need a boat buyout plan. They need true reforms within the

Magnuson-Stevens Act that will give them the rightful allocations and reasonable regulatory tools so they can continue to fish — so they can continue to earn a living without a government buyout or bailout.

The buyout plan, whose net result would be a loss of independent fishing boats and diminished fleet, seems aimed at providing further protections for rebuilding fish stocks. But all of the lawmakers within New England's congressional delegation surely knows well by now that the problem is no longer overfishing. A majority of the fish stocks are rebounding, as the latest credible trawl data shows.

The real problem, of course, rests first with limits on fishing that are unnecessarily extreme, and second with a regulatory agency that has been both vindictive and unfair in its enforcement of regulations.

As head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Jane Lubchenco has acknowledged that those problems are real and claimed that she both "owned" them and would fix them.

Instead, she has ignored them. Now, with some misguided backing from Capitol Hill, she seems to think she can just pay off the fishermen and buy her way out of this fishery management quagmire.

There is a context to setting aside some money as emergency aid for fishermen who have been denied the allocations they deserve through NOAA Fisheries' flawed landings data. And NOAA must, in the name of justice, set aside its law enforcement Asset Forfeiture Fund built with excessive fines paid by fishermen to pay back those who have been so horribly wronged by this rogue wing of their own government.

But merely giving fishermen a pile of cash to make them walk away from the industry is no "fix" to the issues confronting the fisheries of New England and elsewhere. By trimming the fleet, it will have a negative effect on the general economy of fishing communities like Gloucester.

If Kerry and other congressional leaders want to truly continue to fight for the fishermen, this is not the way to do it.

They need jobs, not handouts.

Don't buy them out or pay them off. Let them fish — for their families, for their communities, and for the American economy.