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**Fed lawmakers must put legislative clamps on runaway NOAA push**

The Obama administration consistently says it is focused on job creation. But there are more signs than ever that just doesn't apply to the fishing industry.

There are just weeks to go before the start of a new regulatory regime, imposed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, that could put as many as half of the region's current commercial fishermen out of business.

On May 1, the start of the new fishing year, the regulatory system known as catch shares, designed to have fishermen work in cooperatives known as "sectors," will go into effect along with some ultra-conservative total allowable catch limits imposed by NOAA and its National Marine Fisheries Service.

The net effect is expected to reduce the revenue from the groundfishery by 32 percent, according to the government's own numbers.

Estimates of business failures in the industry, largely based in New Bedford and Gloucester, are 50 percent or higher.

This impending disaster has prompted U.S. Sen. John Kerry and five congressmen, including John Tierney, D-Salem, to petition the U.S. Secretary of Commerce for an emergency executive action to bring economic relief, at least through 2014, when stocks are expected to be rebuilt and the industry rebounds. The letter also has the outspoken support of Massachusetts' new Republican U.S. senator, Scott Brown.

Otherwise, this interference by government in the market is expected to wipe out small commercial operations, which will then have to sell their permits and equipment at pennies on the dollar — likely to investors with enough economic strength to ride out the next few years, then reap windfall profits down the line.

This, from an administration that dares talk about job creation?

The worst thing about all of this is that it does not have to be this way. If there was solid evidence that the resource would collapse without eliminating half of the fishing fleet, perhaps it could be justified.

But there isn't. In fact, the evidence points to commercial species populations rebounding.

One of the most absurd ironies about the current situation is that the spiny dogfish, a voracious, small shark that preys on much more valuable food fish like cod, haddock and pollock, is still under protected catch limits.

Most fishermen, quite sensibly, see the protections of dogfish as preposterous — and they are. But it is bureaucrats, with little apparent interest in maintaining not only a way of life but an economic engine for a region, who are making the decisions.

The letter from the lawmakers, drafted by Congressman William Delahunt, who represents Cape Cod, points to the limits on dogfish catches, but also argues that the limits on skates, pollock and yellowtail flounder are also too low, because they are based on outdated statistics.

The catch limit on pollock alone is about a third of what it was in 2008. But fishermen and the congressmen say that a new catch assessment due at the end of June could show that those limits could be relaxed without endangering the recovery. And that makes perfect sense.

Remember, however, that, under director Jane Lubchenco, NOAA is not an agency built on perfect sense, or logic, or fairness, or caring about any local communities. It is built only on agenda — Lubchenco's agenda, drawn from her times as a former board vice president with the Environmental Defense Fund and as a Pew fellow.

The good thing about all of this is that our federal lawmakers clearly now see that as well. Perhaps that's one reason why this letter is addressed over Lubchenco's head to U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke.

But David Goethel, a long-time New Hampshire commercial fisherman who is also a member of the New England Fishery Management Council, put it in blunt terms. "I fought my entire life for the survival of the community-based fishing industry, and this (new system) destroys it."

That system is being championed by our own federal government, and by a wing of an administration committed to "jobs."

Our lawmakers must bring a legislative halt to this nonsense before Lubchenco and her supposedly "green" allies achieve their apparent goal of sending the family fishing boat the way of the family farm.