

New Bedford Standard Times

OUR VIEW: Protest on the Potomac

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New Bedford fishermen can't back down or they'll be backing themselves right out of business. The time has come for a history-making demonstration in Washington.

We urge fishermen in New Bedford, Gloucester and up and down the East Coast to do what farmers did with their tractors in the 1970s: Bring their protest to Washington.

The few boats that went to Martha's Vineyard in August during President Barack Obama's vacation weren't enough. Fishermen might finally get the attention they deserve by steaming up the Potomac River and gathering their vessels within sight of the National Mall to demand — peacefully — that their grievances be redressed.

They've tried going through the proper channels. Neither a letter from the governor nor the urging of members of Congress has made a difference. Since their needs have been largely ignored by the executive branch, they won't get the attention they deserve unless they demand it.

And what they deserve is a full investigation by Congress and the Commerce Department's inspector general. The disastrous decision to deny New England fishermen higher catch limits in spite of legitimate government science represents a serious threat not only to fishermen but to the entire New Bedford economy — starting with the legions of marinas, marine tradesmen, insurers and provisioners who serve a commercial fishing fleet that pulls down the highest gross income of any port in the nation.

Imminent disaster for the New Bedford fleet seems to be no problem for federal fishing regulators and their overseers at the U.S. Department of Commerce, who don't much care whether Northeastern fishermen survive or not. All they care about is making their own lives easier by passing the buck to the New England Fishery Management Council, a deeply dysfunctional mishmash of environmentalists, fishing interests and political appointees.

Gov. Deval Patrick, New Bedford Mayor Scott W. Lang and the congressional delegation have tried to make their case that the government's own scientific data support higher catch limits and that fishermen need economic aid to cope with the effect of overly restrictive limits. They've tried making a reasonable, science-based argument.

Yet all they got from Commerce Secretary Gary Locke on Friday was a procedural excuse. He couldn't possibly use the data to raise catch limits on an emergency basis, he

said, because the New England Fishery Management Council has already reviewed the data and rejected an interpretation that could have led to higher catch limits.

So to Locke, the important thing isn't the scientific value of the data and their ability to right real-world wrongs being perpetrated against fishermen but the possibility that his decision could be viewed as an overruling of the council. Locke acknowledged in October that the Magnuson-Stevens Act gives him the authority to issue emergency regulations to raise catch limits.

Likewise, Eric C. Schwaab, top fisheries administrator at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which answers to Commerce, has chosen not to take reasonable steps to help New England fishermen. He puts on a good show when he visits New Bedford, then behaves in an adversarial manner when he returns to Washington. Schwaab wrote a longer, more detailed letter accompanying the one Locke sent to Patrick, laying out the same points.

Forgive the fishermen if they have some doubts about NOAA. In July, the Commerce Department's inspector general found that NOAA law enforcement had misspent fines collected from fishermen, using the money for ridiculous luxury purchases, including a \$300,000 undercover boat, personal cars for employees in the law enforcement division regardless of need, and a trip for 15 to Norway for a conference.

It seems the inspector general's office is one of the few offices in the long chain of federal fishery enforcement with the backbone to do something difficult in the interest of justice.

Sooner or later, the woes of Northeastern fishermen will reach the consumer. It's time for this problem to penetrate the national consciousness.

It's time to protest on the Potomac.