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Lawmakers seek bigger role for science in fisheries regulation

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BOSTON — The fate of the Northeast groundfishing fleet and its treatment by the government were the subject of a Statehouse public hearing today by the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

The two-hour meeting in a packed Beacon Hill hearing room lacked the acrimony of some previous meetings and instead had an air of inevitability about catch shares and sector management. Much of the time was spent swapping strong suggestions about improving NOAA's fisheries science, management and public relations.

NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco, however, took heat from U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., who had become frustrated by her seeming inability to supply concise answers to questions from the panel, which was chaired by Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass.

At one point when Lubchenco handed a question off to Eric Schwaab, head of the National Marine Fisheries Service, Frank snapped, “Just give a straight answer. It could be yes, it could be no. You don't have to hire someone to take the SAT for you.”

The panel also included U.S. Sen. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, who proposed a closed meeting with Congress, fishing representatives, and NOAA officials to discuss sensitive matters such as the failure of NOAA to fire its law enforcement chief after he was found to have shredded up to 80 percent of his files while his agency was under investigation.

Sen. Scott Brown, R-Mass., who sat alongside Kerry, repeated his frustrations at having his requests – demands, in fact — for NOAA documents ignored and rebuffed.

The meeting ended with a consensus that:

- **NOAA's calcified bureaucracy needs to be examined by an ad hoc committee,**
- **NOAA fisheries science needs to be redirected to be of better use,**
- **a move of fisheries management to the Interior or Agriculture Department needs to be examined,**
- **and NOAA's relationship with the fishing industry needs to be less adversarial and more transparent to rebuild after a total loss of trust.**

No date was set for the closed session.