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Feeling neglected, fishing industry vents

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NEW BEDFORD — At a crowded and highly charged meeting on the city's waterfront Thursday, commercial fishermen, boat owners and representatives from shoreside businesses slammed the federal government's seeming indifference to the growing crisis in the Massachusetts fishing industry.

Since Nov. 5, when Gov. Deval Patrick wrote to U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gary F. Locke asking him to "move expeditiously to protect the economic viability of our fishing ports," fishermen have anxiously awaited some response from Washington.

But five weeks later, there has been only silence.

Industry members gathered to express concern, anger and frustration with a government policy that Mayor Scott W. Lang says appears to have been designed to put most of them out of business.

"People who haven't thought about the consequences are trying to implement a management system that they have no idea how it will affect the fish but it will collapse the people in the industry. This is a human crisis and it gets bigger with every day that goes by," Lang told a crowd of more than 100 gathered at the Waterfront Grille.

According to statistics from the mayor's office, 253 boats from a fleet of 500 are no longer fishing at all, leading to severe industry consolidation. With 55 boats now realizing 61 percent of the revenue, the remaining 192 vessels account for only 39 percent of total revenue.

"Every day I look at my boat rusting away," said Tony Pereira, who has been fishing on his vessel, Blue Seas 2, for the past 25 years. His dragger is now tied up.

"I laid off my three crew members," Pereira said. "One of them has made two trips since April, another only six. I sold my quota to my friend Manuel from the Sea Siren, but it's sad that a man now has to pay to go to work in the United States."

Boat owners are now passing along the expense of acquiring more quota to their crew, according to crewman Antonio Moco.

"I'm working. I'm lucky. But when we buy fish (quota), the crew has to pay 50 percent and the owners pocket the money," he said.

With a majority of boats tied up because they have not been allocated enough quota to make fishing profitable, New Bedford and other Massachusetts ports are losing out, according to Brian Rothschild of UMass Dartmouth's School of Marine Science and Technology.

"We're 60 percent into the fishing year and we've only caught 18 percent of the total allowable catch," he said. "That's a shortfall of 130 million pounds of fish or about \$200 million, which can be multiplied by four by the time it gets out in the economy. We're leaving all that in the water."

But the toll the crisis is taking cannot be measured solely in economic terms, as a number of fishermen testified.

"You go home every day and your kids say 'Dad, why are you so miserable?' What do you say to kids 8 and 10 years old: 'The government is screwing me'?" said Plymouth fishermen Jim Keding, who received only 15,000 pounds of fish for his annual quota and has fished three times since May.

"I'm going down and I'm going down fast and the U.S. government is putting me out of business," he said.

Kevin Scola, a Marshfield fishermen summed up the industry's frustration by complaining that the National Marine Fisheries Service is not held accountable for its actions.

"But we are held accountable for their actions," he said. "My best friend dropped dead on October 28th. He died too young, of a heart attack. But he was squeezed, he was pushed, he lost his allocation and they took his days.

"He went to another fishery that was less productive. He didn't like it but we're fishermen. It's what we do. It's all we know. I don't want to do anything else."

In summing up, a heated Lang addressed his remarks directly to the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration.

"You have put the entire industry at risk," he said. "Try this headline: 'NOAA sends \$1 billion industry overseas.' A bureaucratic agenda has decided to collapse the fleet. It's wrong and it's immoral, quite frankly."

The mayor is now seeking an investigation of the regulatory process by the office of the inspector general, which recently uncovered systemic abuse by members of NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement.