

Recreational Fishing Alliance Says Environmental Defense is on the Offensive

The Recreational Fishing Alliance has issued the following release:

February 16, 2011 - This week, Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) activists are visiting the offices of federal legislators claiming erroneously to represent the interests of U.S. fishing communities while selling their plan to privatize our nation's public resources in the name of conservation. According its sources, the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) said EDF campaigners have been arriving in DC by plane the last few days to promote their 'Catch Share' manifesto with Members of Congress in an effort to limit overall public access to coastal fisheries.

"On February 24, 2010, a national coalition of mainstream, grassroots fishing organizations helped unite the fishing industry in a call for fisheries reform, rallying on Capitol Hill and pleading with legislators to just say 'no' to Catch Shares," said RFA Executive Director Jim Donofrio. "We had 5,000 fishermen waving flags and carrying signs at an open public protest last winter, and here it is almost a year to the day and EDF is still responding by slinking around in the shadows in Washington, pretending to represent fishermen," he said.

RFA has already been in contact with members of the House and Senate regarding the renewed lobbying efforts by EDF, which Donofrio calls "preservationist, anti-industry rhetoric" designed solely to limit public access to coastal resources. "Our legislators are going to hear buzzwords like 'overfishing' and 'imperiled' when these activists plead for support of their Catch Share program, but this unnecessary and restrictive policy is the anti-fishing community's answer to a perceived problem in fisheries management. Their lobbying position does not represent the views and opinions of our U.S. fishing communities."

"The public does not want catch shares, recreational charter boats do not want catch shares, the majority of commercial fishermen do not want catch shares and yet Environmental Defense along with their former Vice Chairman Dr. Lubchenco continue to push their agenda even though they have very little support," said Capt. Bob Zales, II of the National Association of Charterboat Operators. In a letter to Members of Congress, Zales urged legislators to "insist this management travesty stop immediately and help us solve this national fishery crisis that has been caused by overzealous environmentalists who do not understand the complexity of fishery management and protecting heritages and jobs from total destruction."

Earlier this week, President Obama unveiled his FY2012 budget request proposing a new National Catch Share Program calling for approximately \$17.4 million in catch share funding to be moved out of Fisheries Research and Management Programs and Cooperative Research. The President's budget defines Catch Share as "a general term for several fishery

management strategies that allocate a specific portion of the total allowable fishery catch to individuals, cooperatives, communities, or other entities." Those entitled to receive Catch Shares are accountable to cease fishing when specific quota is reached, and the President's budget also cites other programs like limited access privilege (LAP), individual fishing quota (IFQ) programs, and exclusive allocative measures such as Territorial Use Rights Fisheries (TURFs) that grant an exclusive privilege to fish in a geographically designated fishing ground.

"Our fishermen call it the privatization of a public resource, though I believe 'social engineering' is a perfectly good definition," Donofrio said. "Catch Shares by design will cap fishing participation and trade ownership of our fish stocks amongst the privileged few, and we cannot support any type of management program which would put an end to open access fisheries in America." RFA points to a particularly troubling two-year national trend where monies previously designated for science and research have been offloaded towards this program which Donofrio refers to as little more than coastal sharecropping.

"Showroom environmentalists have been working to secure buy-in from a handful of fishermen willing to sell out their friends to corner the market, but this Catch Share scheme that EDF is pushing will ultimately destroy our nation's fishing industry, it will put tens of thousands of fishermen out of work and forcibly deny public access to millions of American fishermen." RFA said that some fishing groups have publicly stated that Catch Shares won't work in 'recreational only' fisheries, a point of view which has actually been supported even by some of the groups openly supporting Catch Shares.

"The problem with that position is that tarpon, bonefish, permit, and a couple of other pure gamefish like largemouth bass are the sole recreational only fisheries in the United States today," Donofrio said. "Red snapper, grouper, summer flounder, black sea bass, striped bass and even Pacific blue marlin are shared commercial and recreational fisheries, so failing to take a more unified and comprehensive stance against Catch Shares amongst both our sectors leaves all fishermen vulnerable to significant loss of access."

The EDF push for Catch Shares has been fueled by the statutory definition of "overfishing" written into the Magnuson Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act which is now being used as a marketing tool to influence federal legislators. "Overfishing is a legislative term which EDF uses interchangeably with the biological term when pressing their agenda with legislators. What they won't be telling our elected politicians this week is that 80% of our nation's fisheries are no longer classified as experiencing overfishing, neither in biological nor statutory terms," Donofrio said. "It's pure preservationist propaganda."

For the past four years, RFA has maintained that the real problem with coastal fisheries management stems from a poorly worded federal fisheries law which includes artful definitions, arbitrary deadlines, antiquated assessment models and inflexible requirements which have led to increased closures of vitally important coastal fisheries. Coupled with "fatally flawed" harvest data and lost research funding through both the FY2011 and FY2012 federal budget, RFA says the concept of Catch Shares has become an easier sell

for the environmental business community.

"Catch Shares will only cost more American jobs and lead to the outsourcing of our seafood industry to those foreign nations with no concern for quotas or conservation principles as held by American fishermen," Donofrio said. "This privatization scheme is being sold as a method to end overfishing when all it really does is end open access fishing by placing our nation's marine fisheries into the hands of a select and privileged few."

On April 22, 2010, Donofrio testified before Congress on behalf of the recreational fishing community in vehement opposition to the Catch Share doctrine now being driven by EDF and its allies, openly criticizing fishing organizations which have allowed their leadership to compromise 'open access' through willingness to embrace and accept the privatization concept. "Some groups have suggested limiting the number of recreational anglers to those individuals with the financial resources to pay for access, thereby creating free markets for catch shares," Donofrio said in testimony before a Congressional Subcommittee on Catch Shares. "RFA hopes members of the Committee share our disgust with this notion of selecting recreational participation based on the criteria of money."

NOAA Fisheries Service responded in November with a new National Catch Share Policy which summarily dismissed all angler opposition to the notion of Catch Shares. "We've fought too hard and for too long to keep this catch share policy out of our sector, we cannot let NOAA continue to ramrod this policy through Councils in direct contradiction to the wishes of our fishing community," Donofrio said in November. "Clearly our federal bureaucracy is not listening to the will of the people."