

SNOWE CALLS FOR INVESTIGATION OF NORTHEAST FISHERIES SCIENCE CENTER TO VERIFY NMFC FISH STOCK DATA ACCURACY

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Washington, D.C. -

In response to recent complaints by local fishermen questioning the veracity of the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's (NFSC) stock assessment data, Ranking Member of the Senate Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmospheres, Fisheries, and Coast Guard U.S. Senator Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine) sent a letter today, cosigned by Senator Collins, Senator Kerry, and Senator Kennedy, to U.S. Department of Commerce Inspector General Todd J. Zinser requesting an independent investigation to evaluate the Center's scientific process as it relates to groundfish and to all of the fish stocks it analyzes.

As part of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the NFSC conducts stock assessments and develops biomass targets for fish stocks in order to inform the New England Fishery Management Council of allowable mortality rates and develop accurate regulations for New England fisheries. Fishery stakeholder groups have raised concerns about the quality of this scientific information, claiming that the biomass targets have been set unrealistically high and that other biological data has been erroneously analyzed. Inaccurate stock assessment data can lead to incorrect and ineffective management measures that could have severe economic and ecological impacts on the fishing industry.

"If these allegations are true, the implications of inaccurate stock assessment data and ineffective management regulations on New England's fishing industry would be monumentally grave and costly," Senator Snowe said. "For an industry that reeled in more than \$4.1 billion to our region over the past five years, we must ensure that the decisions NFSC and the New England Fishery Management Council are making—most immediately in regard to the groundfish industry—are based on sound, credible science. By performing an independent investigation of the NFSC to examine the credibility of the claims, the Department of Commerce can possibly save our valuable and cherished fishing industry from an economic and ecological disaster."

An investigation is particularly timely in light of the approaching new groundfish stock assessment by NMFS that will inform revised management measures NMFS plans to enact before the next fishing year. This measure, known as Amendment 16, requires fishing harvest adjustments for 2009 (at the mid-point of that 10-year management plan), and it also requires that the 2009 new harvest levels be calculated based on the results of a 2008 stock assessment review.

"When Congress last reauthorized the Magnuson-Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), we included a mandate to set catch limits based on scientific assessments," said Senator Snowe. "If there are flaws in the scientific process, this investigation will uncover them and if not, our managers and fishermen will be able to move ahead in developing management measures with confidence that the underlying data form a sound scientific basis for effective management measures."