



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
The Secretary of Commerce
Washington, D.C. 20230

July 20, 2010

The Honorable Deval L. Patrick
Governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Boston, MA 02133

Dear Governor Patrick:

Thank you for your recent letters expressing concerns about the New England groundfish fishery. I understand the challenges that fishermen are facing and I am working diligently with my staff to both reduce the economic hardship to New England fishing communities and rebuild groundfish stocks that will sustain New England's fishing industry and heritage into the future. I would like to update you on the Department of Commerce's efforts to address the concerns you raised and express my continuing commitment to work with you on these important issues.

I know that the catch limits on several stocks that went into effect last May are of paramount concern to those who depend on this fishery for their livelihoods. I therefore directed Dr. Lubchenco to expedite new assessments of several stocks. The full scientific review shows that certain commercial catch limits can be raised while remaining consistent with the directive of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to end overfishing in 2010 and rebuild fish stocks. As I indicated in our meeting, I am prepared to respond quickly when new information on stock status is available. This is now the case for pollock.

On July 15, 2010, I transmitted an emergency rule to increase the pollock catch limits more than sixfold, from 6 to 36 million pounds. As a result of our commitment to ensuring that catch limits reflect the best science available, recent actions have also raised the spiny dogfish limit from 12 to 15 million pounds and the skate limit from 67.5 to 90.5 million pounds. Another pending action proposes to increase the red crab limit from 3.56 to 3.91 million pounds.

The primary reason for this substantial increase in the pollock catch limit is that the recently completed stock assessment incorporates a more comprehensive range of data, improved models, and longer survey times. The previous assessments relied on the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's fall vessel survey as the sole measure of stock abundance.

In light of this new scientific information now available, I am exercising my emergency authority under Section 305(c) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act to put the increase in catch limits

into effect right away. By acting immediately, we can provide the fishing industry continued access to pollock as well as to other stocks that could be restricted by the multispecies nature of the Northeast fishery, and so avoid economic loss.

I understand that even with the increased pollock catch limit, the 2010 catch limits required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act for some New England groundfish stocks will remain a challenge for some fishermen. I want to report, however, that early returns indicate that the expanded sector management program is alleviating some of the impacts of these lower catch limits by providing the industry with increased flexibility and efficiency as stocks rebuild.

Individual fishermen participating in sectors account for 98 percent of historic landings of New England groundfish. From May 1st (when the sector management program went into effect, along with new annual catch limits) to June 19, 2010 sector groundfish landings were down less than 1 percent (4.2 million metric tons compared to 4.3 million in 2009); however revenues from these landings were up from \$9 million to \$11.8 million—an increase of 31 percent.

I appreciate your support for a groundfish permit buyback plan, crew retraining program, and loan assistance program to help mitigate the economic hardships anticipated within the fishery. At its April 2010 meeting, the New England Fishery Management Council formally recognized the need for a permit buyback program in the Northeast groundfish fishery. NOAA has experience with buyback programs, and I am interested in exploring this with you.

Typically, buyback programs have been implemented under specific Congressional authorizing legislation and can be funded through specific appropriations; industry fee systems; and public, private, or nonprofit sources. Industry could request an industry-funded buyback program under existing regulations. NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is ready to assist in designing a buyback program to help address the economic impacts of ending overfishing in this fishery.

While we do not have any programs to support crew retraining or loan assistance for economic hardships, we would welcome the opportunity to work with you and impacted communities to explore options to provide assistance. I support developing programs to provide transitional assistance to fishing communities.

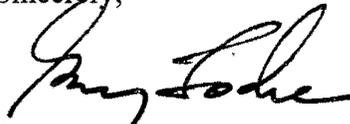
We also strongly support cooperative research into ways to build sustainable fisheries. NMFS will continue to invest in cooperative research with the Northeast fishing industry, which can lead to improved agency science, reduced bycatch, and minimized fishing impacts on habitat. NMFS recently awarded over \$2.5 million in contracts for projects involving nearly two dozen partners and a study fleet of about 25 vessels. In 2009 and 2010, over \$13 million was allocated to cooperative research in the Northeast, with a significant portion of that intended for Northeast groundfish projects.

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I share your goal of mitigating impacts on the industry through this difficult period. I remain committed to working closely with you and the fishing community to tackle challenges that arise, making sector management successful in the Northeast, and sustaining the fishing industry.

If you have any questions, please contact April Boyd, Assistant Secretary for Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, at (202) 482-3663.

Sincerely,



Gary Locke