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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1903

December 6, 2011

Mr. Eric Schwaab
Assistant Administrator, NOAA Fisheries
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Mr. Schwaab:

Under the first year of sectors, commercial fishermen stayed well within the Annual Catch Limits, and in previous years under the Days-at-Sea system were also well within the annual Total Allowable Catch. For this reason, the results of the recent Gulf of Maine cod stock assessment, which have resulted in unexpectedly low biomass estimates, have been especially difficult to understand and reconcile. I am deeply concerned that these results, which may result in exceptionally stringent management measures and very low catch limits, would prove too much for New England's groundfish industry to bear.

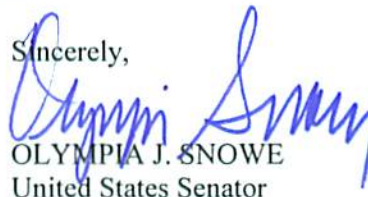
The groundfish industry has been living within its means according to the best available science until, through no fault of its own, the best available science changed. The mandates of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) Section 304 ensure that overfished stocks will be rebuilt within a ten year timeline with limited exceptions. As you know, Congressman Barney Frank and I have initiated a National Research Council study to provide a scientific analysis of the appropriateness of these timelines, which is currently underway. Unfortunately, we are now seeing the economic consequences of this standard unfolding before our very eyes.

I urge you to explore all possible options to find latitude in the existing law and allow an extension of this rebuilding period. Enabling the development of prudent catch levels that will provide for the continued existence of our historic and diverse fleet is not contrary to the underlying purpose of these rebuilding timelines, and I hope that there will be broad support for such an extension.

I also encourage you to communicate broadly and clearly the assessment results and reasons for this dramatic and unexpected change to the stakeholders of the groundfish community as well as to Members of Congress. It is of the utmost important that we all share a common understanding of basic fisheries science, its limitations in providing clear answers, and the importance of continuing to prioritize improved data and research.

Finally, I greatly appreciate your efforts, and those of your staff to expand the Gulf of Maine cod working group and engage a diverse group of stakeholders in the development of a viable solution that will allow the long-term viability of both groundfish stocks and groundfishermen. I look forward to continuing to work with you to achieve this critical goal.

Sincerely,



OLYMPIA J. SNOWE
United States Senator

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