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# New England fishermen tell lawmakers, don't scrap fishing system

## Say new system is better than none

By Jay Lindsay | ASSOCIATED PRESS NOVEMBER 17, 2011

More than a hundred New England fishermen in ports from Maine to Rhode Island are asking lawmakers to back off efforts to kill a new management system.

The letter, dated Monday, is not a love letter to the new system, which has been in place since last year and which some fishermen vocally despise. But it says local fishermen are making it work, and scrapping it would only damage the industry lawmakers are trying to save.

The letter asks lawmakers to instead focus on various ways to improve what already exists.

“A few voices calling for the overturn of the entire . . . system have been amplified in the media,” the letter reads. “Unfortunately, this has led to a series of increasingly dangerous proposals that truly put the future of our businesses and fisheries at risk.”

The letter comes about a month after US Senators Scott Brown of Massachusetts and Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire introduced a bill that could wipe out the new system, if more than 15 percent of participating fishermen lost their jobs in the first year. But fisheries advocates say the letter was about more than Brown's bill.

A spokesman for Brown said he is frustrated regulators at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration won't acknowledge the new system isn't working, as fishermen continue to lose jobs. He said his bill is “one possible way of moving

forward.”

“The legislation also serves as a clear message that NOAA must recognize the damage catch shares has caused, and is causing, to fishermen and fishing communities in Massachusetts,” Brown spokesman John Donnelly said.

In May 2010, New England fishermen switched from a “days at sea” system, which tried to stop overfishing largely by limiting how many days fishermen could fish and how much of each species they could catch. By the time it ended, some fishermen had less than three weeks of fishing a year, as the industry was being forced to throw away tons of fish caught over the daily limits.

The new “catch share” system sees most fishermen allotted a certain share of the catch of each species, which they can lease or sell. They pool and manage their shares in groups called sectors, and can't exceed their limits without shutting down the fishery. Some fishermen say the catch allotments were unfairly distributed and the system favors wealthy interests that can afford to accrue the catch shares.

Early numbers indicate troubling trends of job loss, decreased catch, and industry consolidation are continuing under the new system. But there was also an increase in revenues.

Chatham fisherman Jan Margeson said a lot of fishermen are doing better under the new system and believe it will improve in time, but politicians are not hearing from them.

“Most of us are not involved in the media,” he said. “Most of us spend our lives on the ocean.”

Gloucester fisherman Russell Sherman said the new system is deeply flawed and biased toward larger fishing interests, and he would not want other regions to adopt it. But he signed the letter because he said ending what exists now would leave many fishermen with nothing.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he said. “It’s the specter of having them just stop the sector system. Well, what the hell are they going to replace it with? There’s no way this system is going out of place, except with something worse.”

The letter to lawmakers in New England’s coastal states was signed by 109 fishermen

from varied backgrounds, including some with big operations and multiple boats and others that own one vessel.

The letter says facts are being ignored in the debate, including that painful cuts to the catch are coming, no matter what.

It said “rather than rhetoric,” fishermen need lawmakers to focus on ways to stabilize the industry and increase ways for it to become more profitable.

The letter listed several priorities, including keeping the current system in place “rather than the return of the chaos of the failed days-at-sea program”; more chances to catch the healthy stocks, such as haddock; more funding to reduce costs of the new system; and frequent assessments of the health of each stock.

“Our jobs and businesses depend on your response,” the letter said.

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