



Feds to cover cost of fishery observers

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CHATHAM — Local fishermen received the good news this week that they won't have to pay for the federal fishery observers who occasionally accompany them on fishing trips to record what they catch and what they throw back.

Observers provide valuable fishery data to scientists and help ensure the accuracy of the landings that fishermen are required to report to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Observers can cost as much as \$600 a day, and sector management — the new fisheries system that governs the majority of the groundfish fleet — requires more observer coverage than the old system, according to the fisheries service.

The service funded the observers for the first year of sector management, through next April 30. Fishermen were supposed to assume the cost thereafter.

On Wednesday, U.S. Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., sent a letter to Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, asking that the fisheries service use \$7.5 million in an appropriations bill to pay for observer coverage for the next year. In a subsequent press release, Lubchenco said that an analysis of economic data from the first year shows "fishermen are not yet able to assume (that) cost."

Chatham fishermen who are members of the Georges Bank Fixed Gear Sector said the news that the fisheries service would continue payments through April 30, 2013, took a big expense off their back and could help make them profitable over the next year.

"It was pretty much an unfunded mandate," said fisherman Mike Russo, who also serves as the sector's president. Russo said he and several other fishermen met with Kerry last winter and told him they wouldn't be able to pay for observers.

Kerry also made observer coverage one of the main issues at an Oct. 3 Senate commerce committee field hearing in Boston that included Lubchenco.

Eric Brazer, manager of the Georges Bank sector, estimated it would have cost his group more than \$225,000 for observers for the next fishing year.

"They want the data, they should pay for it," Russo said. He does not want the industry to assume any new costs until the fisheries service helps fishermen catch a higher percentage of their quotas..

Since the new management system went into effect in May, New England groundfishermen have caught only 40 percent or so of the cod, haddock, flounder and other bottom-feeding species to which they are legally entitled. Fishermen would like the fisheries service to evaluate reopening large areas currently closed to fishing and allowing higher quotas of species such as skate and dogfish that interfere with cod fishing and are now considered plentiful.

Kerry expressed other concerns in his letter to Lubchenco that resonated with local fishermen, including improved funding of fisheries service science, measures to ensure more frequent fish population surveys, and a more streamlined approach to data that would give fishermen and scientists the most up-to-date scientific estimates.

"Sector management demands real-time data," Brazer said. "It's inappropriate to be making business decisions using data that is three years old."

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