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## Fisheries meeting catches criticism

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BOSTON — Both the people who were there and the people who were not there were unhappy with yesterday's unusual closed-door meeting with national fisheries officials, fishing industry representatives and members of the state's congressional delegation, including both senators.

Although Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, promised flexibility and accountability, officials left the session, arranged by U.S. Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., concerned that the agency was staying the course to impose extremely limited catch shares along with a cooperative system called sector management.

The fear in the industry is that the changes will cause a wave of job losses and idle boats by midyear because the allocations are too small for small boats to make enough money.

"If we proceed along the lines contemplated, we will lose 50 percent of our fleet," New Bedford Mayor Scott Lang wrote in a letter fired off to Lubchenco after the meeting.

Bridgid O'Rourke, spokesman for Kerry, D-Mass, portrayed yesterday's meeting, to which the press was excluded, as "a private stakeholders' meeting" put together at the request of Massachusetts fishing industry representatives.

But Peter Shelley, vice president of the Conservation Law Foundation, described the session, which included no representatives from the environmental community, another way.

"This (was) an industry-driven lobbying event," he said.

"I don't see any balance at all."

Over the past three months, environmental organizations like CLF, Pew and the Marine Fish Conservation Network have been uncharacteristically silent in the face of a concerted effort by some groups of fishermen and some Massachusetts members of Congress to roll back key provisions of current fishery management.

At rallies in Gloucester this fall and in Washington, D.C., last month, thousands of fishermen heard politicians speak ill of fisheries science like the stock assessments conducted by the Northeast Fisheries Science Center in Woods Hole. In a letter to Lubchenco in December, U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass, and Sen. Olympia Snowe, D-Maine, described the 10-year time limit required to rebuild fish stocks as "an arbitrary timeline" not based in science.

Environmentalists are concerned they are seeing a tried-and-true formula in the New England fishery experience, where disaffected fishermen engage the support of politicians who then question the science that is the basis of restrictive management measures.

Some fishermen have also been critical of the environmentalists for their support of the catch shares form of fisheries management, which divides the total annual quota of fish between individuals according to how much they caught in prior years.

This method will be implemented in New England May 1.

Peter Baker, the manager of the Pew Trust New England Fisheries Campaign, said the industry opposition is better organized and more political than before.

"This is some big political muscle being flexed by the industry. I've been impressed by it. It's the most organized I've seen," he said.

"Environmentalists in New England are a little intimidated," said Ken Stump, policy director for the Washington-based Marine Fish Conservation Network. "(There are) some very powerful, liberal Democrats leading the attack."

Stump said yesterday's event was a perfect example of how environmentalists are being shut out of the process.

"We have been silent about this, and it's not right," he said.

Stump compared the political backlash to the tea party movement in health care reform. He said Democrats

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who have top conservation ratings on other environmental issues suddenly are talking like conservatives when it comes to fish.

But Tom Dempsey, fisheries policy coordinator for the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, pointed out that there was a middle ground, small changes that could alleviate the short-term concerns of fishermen and take some of the heat off NOAA. Dempsey, who went to the meeting even though he was not invited to speak, said it wasn't as one-sided as the agenda seemed to be.

"I thought the dialogue was constructive," Dempsey said after the meeting. Although the hook association "wouldn't welcome any effort to gut conservation measures," he thought some of the industry requests were reasonable and that NOAA chief Lubchenco had the right answers.

Lubchenco told participants that a review by the National Academy of Science of the science behind the 10-year rebuilding timelines, requested by Frank and Snowe, was moving forward. She also indicated that her agency was working on getting better information on pollock and skate that may allow fishermen to catch more.

Fishermen dispute NMFS estimates showing that these species are in trouble because they believe the data is incomplete.

Along with dogfish, these species are known as "choke" species because they swim with the fish that New England fishermen catch like cod, haddock and flounders. Once the catch quota on pollock is reached, for instance, fishermen must also stop fishing on all the other species. That could keep them from catching the total allowable quota of much more plentiful species like haddock.

New Bedford Standard-Times reporter Steve Urbon contributed to this story.

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