Fishermen find their voice
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Wednesday, February 24, 2010 was the day that US fishermen* found their collective voice, and that voice was a roar. And that roar echoed in the halls of Congress. It was the day that two dozen US legislators heard that roar loudly and clearly, and responded unequivocally that they were committed to the cause that brought us all to Washington - to Fix Magnuson Now.

The day was a complete success from the fishermen's perspective, and I can't imagine it turning out any better than it did. Upwards of 5,000 fishermen were there, on the very steps of the Capitol, to express their dissatisfaction with the anti-fishing weapon that federal fisheries management has been turned into; a weapon based on the Big Lie that fishermen shouldn't be involved in managing their own fisheries. Some fishermen expressed it with religious fervor and some expressed it with humor, but they all expressed it with passion, with pride, with integrity and with conviction. Anyone who was there and was listening couldn't have missed that.

But there was a downside

One of the major themes was the chasm that has developed separating fishermen from the federal fisheries managers and the federal fisheries management system. This was echoed by speaker after speaker. The NOAA/NMFS presence at and reaction to the rally provided compelling evidence that this chasm is getting wider and deeper, and that the people in charge at NOAA/NMFS aren't at all interested in bridging it.

Two days before the rally Jim Donofrio, Executive Director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance and one of the rally's chief architects, was contacted by NOAA/NMFS with a request to have Eric Schwaab, newly appointed NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, added to the agenda. When Jim found that Mr. Schwaab wasn't interested in supporting our cause, legislation to bring much needed flexibility back to the Magnuson Act, he graciously declined and he did so with the unanimous support of all of us who were involved in putting the rally together.

On the day of the rally Mr. Schwaab issued a press release, which he passed out to the media reps in attendance, stating that he was there "to listen to those who have come to rally Congress." But, as Tony Bogan, another rally organizer and president of the party/charter boat association United Boatmen, said, "his press release stated that he was 'there to listen' to fishermen, but he spent the majority of his time talking to reporters instead of listening to any of the thousands of us that were available." And from what I've read subsequently, and based on his press release, his talking had everything to do with convincing those reporters that neither the rally nor the changes to the Magnuson Act that it was in support of were necessary.

In other words, according to Mr. Schwaab and NOAA/NMFS, all of those fishermen had wasted their time, their money and their energy and had wasted the time and energy of all of those legislators as well, because we didn't need what we were asking for.

I'm not going to speculate here on how appropriate it was for the person in charge of the Obama administration's fisheries agency to be actively campaigning against legislation introduced by high ranking Democrats and sponsored by more than thirty legislators from both parties at a rally of people who are supposed to be his constituents during his second week on the job. Nor on exactly whose interests he was representing while he was doing it. But for the sake of all of our fishermen, there are some serious questions about this that demand to be answered.

What of the rest of his press release?

I'll start off with his plea for patience on the part of fishermen, predicated on his agency's success in rebuilding four fisheries.

I'm familiar with two and know that the "success" in their management only started when cooperative research pro-jects inarguably demonstrated that there were far more monkfish and sea scallops available than the NOAA/NMFS vessels, crews and scientists had been able to find on their own. While perhaps Mr. Schwaab hadn't yet been briefed on these fisheries (the sea scallop fishery is the most valuable in the country and the monkfish fishery is the most valuable federally managed finfish fishery on the East Coast), his claim that their management success was due to "rebuilding" was slightly less than accurate. They were both cases of fishermen working cooperatively with NMFS scientists and showing them how to find the monkfish or scallops that were there all along. (Unfortunately, such positive outcomes are unlikely in the future because NOAA/NMFS plans to transfer $6 million from the cooperative research budget to a campaign to force catch shares on fishermen who might not want them.)

As far as the third of the four species he mentioned, for as long as people have been fishing on the East Coast, the bluefish population, regardless of fishing pressure, has cycled from high abundance to low. In fact, a page on Mr. Schwaab's agency's own website states "cycles of low and high abundance of bluefish follow a pattern…. Several recent studies have examined potential causes of this pattern and have found no biological explanations." This cycling happens with or without management, and bluefish are at a high level

of abundance now. His scientists don't know why but Mr. Schwaab wants us to believe that his agency and its management program are what did it.

I don't know anything about the king mackerel fishery, the fourth that he claimed as a "we rebuilt it" success. Perhaps he got that one right.

But most troubling to me was his ongoing advice to just sit back and let the management measures work because the sacrifices that fishermen are making now "have the potential to result in significant long-term economic benefits to fishing communities." In his release Mr. Schwaab asserted "I am familiar with fishing communities, their proud traditions, and the challenges we face in keeping them vibrant for future generations." I don't know how much time Mr. Schwaab has actually spent on the ground in those fishing communities, but I'll bet he's never seen a fishing business or a fishing-dependent business closed down because of management cutbacks required by unnecessarily restrictive rebuilding requirements that was eventually replaced by another fishing business. Tee shirt shops, condominiums, convenience stores and fast food places definitely, but never another fishing business.

And what are the displaced business owners and employees in these fishing communities going to do while they're waiting for these arbitrary rebuilding targets to be reached? Become investment bankers and finally get something from the federal government other than pain and suffering? That might keep them vibrant, but it sure won't keep them as fishing communities.

Mr. Schwaab's press release ended "I am interested in hearing the concerns of everyone involved, and I look forward to a cooperative and productive relationship," but it seemed as if he wasn't really interested enough to listen to the biggest gathering of involved and committed fishermen than I've ever seen.

On Wednesday I heard 5,000 fishermen saying that they were tired of, threatened by and paying grievously for a fed-eral management system that was being run from the board rooms of billion dollar foundations by people who are about as far removed from the docks, beaches or marinas that any of us frequent as it's possible to be. Those founda-tions have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on legislation that makes the fish more important than the fishermen and has taken all of the human judgment out of a system that was originally designed to rely on that judgment.

Congressman Pallone's and Senator Schumer's legislation is the first step, now that we have the knowledge, the safeguards and the will to avoid another plunge into overfishing, in getting us back to the level of sustainable management where the fishermen matter as much as the fish. It's too bad that the new head of the National Marine Fisheries Service had decided by his eighth day on the job that we don't need anything like that, that what we really need is more of the kind of "fish first" management that brought us all to Washington.

I'd respectfully suggest that Mr. Schwaab find a somewhat more accurate definition of "cooperative" than the one he's presently using.

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*When I write "fishermen," that's my personal shorthand for men who fish, women who fish, kids who fish, and all of the people whose livelihoods depend in all or in part on those fishermen keeping on fishing.

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In what is an unfortunate postscript, on February 26 Mr. Schwaab sent out an invitation to "participate in an in-formal stakeholder call to introduce and familiarize myself with the interests and view points of you and your community," scheduled for the afternoon of Monday, March 15. While it's a sure thing that a host of foundation subsidized fishermen and so-called marine conservationists will participate, that is the first day of the Boston Seafood Show, the most important annual event for the seafood industry in the U.S. That's about the best way I could imagine to guarantee that an awful lot of commercial fishing industry leaders would not be available. Let's assume that it was just an oversight. Considering that one or two phone calls or about a half a minute's worth of web surfing would have revealed this conflict, Mr. Schwaab seems even more out of touch with the real fishing industry than his press release would indicate.