

“Fishing” isn’t a four letter word

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Please excuse this intrusion on a national holiday. However, considering that Labor Day was designed to recognize the contributions and achievements of American workers, that fishermen are and since colonial times have been among the hardest working of those workers, and that the Congress and the current Administration are about to embark on an prohibitively expensive and totally unnecessary program to put many of those fishermen – fishermen in our most historic fishery - out of work without giving any consideration to alternatives that could keep them fishing, this seems a particularly appropriate time for it.

Two weeks ago I referred to the situation in the New England groundfish fishery as a debacle. I should have ended with “*but you ain’t seen nothing yet.*” According to Richard Gaines in the Gloucester Daily Times, a proposal is circulating in New England’s Congressional delegation that would make available several hundreds of millions of federal dollars which would do little more than reduce the size – and the political and economic clout - of the New England commercial fishery yet again (*Fishing aid plan: \$100M in buyouts, 08/30/2012, <http://www.gloucestertimes.com/topstories/x493933932/Fishing-aid-plan-100M-in-buyouts>*). With a combination of vessel/permit buyouts, retraining programs and increased subsidies for groundfish sectors, this federal funding will exacerbate all of the problems that have been visited on the fishery by a federal administration that professes to value fishermen and fishing communities. It all boils down to fewer fishing jobs, fishing boats, fishing support jobs on shore and fishing generated dollars for New England along, of course, with even more imports of *tilapia*, *pangasius* and *swai*.

Is there an alternative? In *The groundfish debacle* I wrote about the well over a billion pounds (557 thousand metric tons) of spiny dogfish swimming around off our coast in the Northeast (<http://www.fishnet-usa.com/Debacle.pdf>). A large portion of these fish are – or would be – catchable and salable with the right kind of government support (in fact, the Northeastern spiny dogfish fishery was just certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council – see <http://www.savingseafood.org/conservation-environment/atlantic-dogfish-fishery-certified-as-sustainable-by-marine-stewardship-c-3.html>).

But the uncaught fish available to New England fishermen don’t end with spiny dogfish. In 2010 it was estimated that the spawning stock of haddock on Georges Bank was 167 thousand metric tons (<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/publications/crd/crd1206/gomhaddock.pdf>) and that Acadian redfish biomass was over 300 thousand metric tons (<http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/publications/crd/crd1206/Acadian.pdf>).

In 2010 the coastwide domestic landings of spiny dogfish, Acadian redfish and haddock was 12 thousand metric tons.

Haddock have a ready market in the U.S., and the Acadian redfish fishery was one of the mainstays of the New England groundfish fleet starting in the 1930s.

All together that's just over a million metric tons – or two and a quarter billion pounds – of fish, with not a penny of the so-called bailout money going towards helping fishermen to catch them, processors to process them or dealers to sell them.

If only 20% of that biomass, 200 thousand metric tons, was harvested by our fishermen every year and those harvested fish returned twenty cents per pound to the fishermen, they would be worth \$90 million. By the time they were processed and sold they could easily contribute a half a billion dollars to the coastal economy. To put this into perspective, in 2010 the total weight of finfish landed in New England was approximately 200 thousand metric tons. This could be doubled, and any reduction in the biomass of spiny dogfish is going to result in an increase in the other, higher-demand species. *(Note that some of this biomass might have to be shared with the Canadians.)*

It's easy to understand why the people at NOAA/NMFS wouldn't be interested in anything that would have anything to do with forcing fewer fishermen out of fishing. Their boss, NOAA head Jane Lubchenco, has been on the record since she took over at that agency that, in spite of the professed priority on job creation by the Obama administration, her goal is fewer fishermen, fewer boats and less fishing. Considering her background in and continuing close ties with the anti-fishing ENGOs and the foundations that support them, what else could anyone expect? But has the New England Congressional delegation been convinced that that's the way to go as well? It surely seems so.

The National Marine Fisheries Service used to know how to do fisheries development. Several decades ago the agency had a "let's utilize underutilized species" program that was a screaming success with some species (in fact, with some of those species it was arguably too successful). From a U.S. Seafood pavilion at international food shows to Saltonstall-Kennedy grants to develop catching/handling/processing technologies, a large part of the agency was devoted to developing and supplying markets for domestically produced seafood. Back then catching fish, and profiting from doing it, wasn't considered one of the cardinal sins.

Because the New England groundfish fishermen and the people and the communities that they support are approaching the bitter end of the dead end street that the federal fisheries managers and the ENGOs that are so obviously in charge have forced them down, they can't be faulted for grasping at whatever straws Congress throws their way. Nor can the Members of the New England delegation, who are trying to help their constituents. But is yet another reduction in the groundfish fleet size, in total landings and in income generated the only option? Over two billion pounds of dogfish, redfish and haddock and a potential market of over seven billion consumers argue obviously not, but before any of the other options are seriously considered, the people on Capitol Hill and in the White House are going to have to decide that the fishing industry shouldn't be kicked under the bureaucratic rug to hide years of grossly inadequate management (or to advance mega-foundation agendas).