

FISHERMEN'S NEWS

The Advocate for the Commercial Fisherman



Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen's Associations

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Making Our Fisheries Great Again

By Glen Spain, Tim Sloane for PCFFA

With a new federal Administration, the United States' political system is more deeply divided along partisan lines than we have seen in generations. This kind of political gridlock wastes precious time, and is a disservice to the American people. But there are many real environmental and management issues facing commercial fishing industry that require – that in fact demand – bipartisan and cooperative approaches.

People have voted for change. However, the people did not vote for more polluted or dried up rivers, disruptive climate change, or acidic oceans, all of which threaten our nation's fisheries.

The newly Republican-dominated federal government now has its chance to actually govern, and should be leading the charge toward cooperative solutions for our industry that avoid and mitigate all these looming problems, many of them environmental disasters we may still have some chance to avoid. But one fact is clear: those solutions – and the restoring of many of our nation's damaged fisheries – will still need strong environmental standards.

In reality, most of the major issues confronting America's fishing industry today – particularly onrushing coastal environmental and ocean acidification issues – are neither Republican nor Democratic in nature. Identifying any of these issues exclusively with any particular political party is foolishness of the highest sort, and jeopardizes the future of our nation's commercial fisheries and the tens of thousands of fishing-related jobs it supports.

A healthy and abundant food supply, clean and safe rivers, and unpolluted coastlines are not now, and never should have become, politically partisan issues. Nor in today's highly interconnected world are they even strictly national issues. These are instead issues that affect all of Humanity, including its future ocean food supply.

Urgent issues related to ocean acidification, climate change, clean water and both preventing and cleaning up past coastal pollution are real and physical issues, not political ones. In the politicized and highly subjective hall-of-mirrors Washington, DC world of "image," messaging and "branding" it is all too often forgotten that there is still such a thing as objective reality. It should therefore be data and statistics, and not politics, that leads our way toward objective solutions.

The annoying thing about objective reality is that it still exists, whether you believe in it or not. As Senator Patrick Moynihan once commented, "Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but not to their own facts." And facts can only be ignored at one's peril. And the simple fact is, our oceans are in trouble – and humans are the primary cause.

Protecting our own oceans' environmental health is also an economic imperative. It is all too often forgotten that our oceans' "natural capital" is also a major source of much of our nation's economic wealth, including large portions of its food supply.

In fact, the natural world as a whole is the ultimate source for all our food, drinking water, the very air we breathe, and all the raw materials going into everything we create for our own consumption. In short, all of our wealth ultimately comes from the Earth – but there is only one Earth, and no place else the get those resources. Yet what we are doing now is unsustainable, and one unforgiving rule of Nature is that unsustainable systems ultimately collapse. We need solutions to these problems, and soon.

And why shouldn't the Republican Party lead on creating these solutions? Remember it was Republican President Richard Nixon who helped create and signed the Clean Water Act in 1972, and shortly afterwards the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Air Act and the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), all pillars of modern environmental law.



President Nixon was following in a proud Republican Party tradition of championing sound environmental protections as an economic imperative dating all the way back to President Teddy Roosevelt, who created the National Park System to protect our natural treasures – and which today generates billions of dollars in economic benefits for local communities where these parks are located.

Commercial fisheries are a major case in point showing the close connection between healthy ecosystems and healthy economies. Worldwide, commercial fisheries are a trillion dollar industry – accounting for about 8 percent of the entire world's economy – supplying the primary source of protein to several billion people.

In the US alone, according to the most recent NOAA report, Fisheries of the United States (2015), our commercial fisheries provided that year 9.7 billion pounds of seafood valued at least at \$5.2 billion to our US economy, feeding tens of millions of our people some of the healthiest and most natural food available, and providing tens of thousands of jobs.

Yet today, America's fisheries provide only a fraction of the abundance they once did. This is because so much of our coastal fisheries habitat has been damaged or destroyed. Estimates of the potential increase in productivity that would result just from restored US fisheries habitat are enormous. Instead of our nation being so highly dependent (about 75%) on imported seafood, our nation's fisheries should be able to both feed and employ many more Americans.

Unfortunately, we have seen this pattern time and time again, through unsustainable, short-sighted and greed-guided land-use, nearshore and estuary development practices, through the misallocation, physical blocking and wholesale dewatering of rivers, and through pollution of estuaries and nearshore spawning and rearing grounds. Loss of habitat is actually a far bigger factor in the collapse of many commercial fisheries (particularly salmon) than is physical over-harvest, and is also much more difficult to correct.

But by seriously investing in restoring our damaged and degraded coastal fisheries habitat, we have the chance to make America's fisheries truly great once again.

Protecting Ocean Ecosystems

Our nation's estuaries, and the fishing industry they support, are intimately tied to the health of our nation's rivers. Estuaries are among the most biologically productive places on Earth, and most commercially fished species depend for at least parts of their lifecycles on salt-water nearshore estuaries to lay their eggs and rear their young.

Polluted rivers empty that pollution into the oceans at their estuaries. Those pollutants (including massive amounts of plastic, as well as mercury from burning coal) then build up in the oceans. Many pollutants become bio-accumulative when they get into the ocean food chain through ingestion or absorption, and concentrate in the bodies of the oceans' higher order predators. This includes us, as this is an important part of the human food chain.

Phenomenon like the massive "dead zones" that destroy all life in the ocean near the mouth of the Mississippi, and growing dead zones off the US West Coast and in Washington's Puget Sound are all preventable. Polluting companies cannot be allowed to just ship their pollution downstream. Ultimately these "externalized" pollution costs do not disappear – they are simply transferred to the backs of the public and its taxpayers, appearing in the form of toxic waters, more cancer deaths, fisheries closures and poisoned food sources. What protects society from these nasty negative impacts are the nation's environmental laws.

Other major sources of nearshore ocean pollution include offshore oil development, which can never be made completely safe and which has in the past lead to numerous oil spill disasters, such as the Exxon Valdez spill and the more recent Deepwater Horizon oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. The fishing industry will and should oppose opening up its major fisheries areas to more oil pollution and more likelihood of major oil spills.

The fact is, the United States does not really have an ocean ecosystem protection program. Past Administrations have made some headway in developing a National Oceans Strategy, and in working through planning issues to reduce ocean user conflicts through "ocean zoning." Those efforts – small steps through they are – should not be dismantled by the incoming Republican Administration. They should be built upon and improved in order to protect commercial fishing industry opportunities and harvests, and to prevent increasingly difficult conflicts among ocean resource users. Reinvesting and upgrading our nation's crumbling coastal fishing port infrastructure should also be one of our national priorities.

Reversing Ocean Acidification and Climate Change

One of the most difficult problems the commercial fishing industry is facing is the problem of increasing ocean acidification, often referred to as the "evil twin" of the world-wide problem of fossil fuel-driven climate change. This is one area this Congress could be very helpful in addressing – but not if the official policy of the Trump Administration is denial that man-made climate change even exists!

Here especially, reality should prevail over ideology. There is plenty of room for reasoned debate on how to address these problems, but there is no longer any serious rationale for denying the very existence of man-made climate change. Man-made climate change is no longer an esoteric duel among conflicting models, it is increasingly seen in the physical data. To say that one "does not believe in man-made climate change" is, in essence, saying that one does not believe in thermometers!

Ten of the last twelve years have each been physically measured as each being the most recent "hottest year on record" to that date, and the impacts of climate change are clearly measurable, accelerating and particularly hitting coastal communities. The physics behind climate change



is not even complicated – the “greenhouse effect” can be demonstrated in a high school science classroom.

There is growing concern that the recent “Blob” of heated seawater that hovered offshore the US West Coast in the last two years led directly to the massive toxic algae blooms and persistent domoic acid contamination that closed most of the West Coast Dungeness crab fishery in 2015 to mid-2016.

What will this Administration do about it?

Science-Driven Policies and Fisheries Management

And finally, this new Congress will be considering an update and reauthorization of the Magnuson Sustainable Fisheries Act (MSA). We have written several times with recommendations on how to improve the MSA, but all boil down to the fact that these fragile biological stocks need to be managed based on biological science, not politics.

We have seen in the past what happens when political pressures over-ride fisheries science. It was just this sort of politically-biased decision making that led to the collapse of the New England fisheries, and later the west coast groundfish fisheries.

And fishery management is also about money. Science-based fisheries management is not optional, it is mandatory – but costs money. It is time for the new Congress to revive and approve a source of perpetual funding for the Fisheries Management Trust Account that already exists in the MSA, but has never been funded.

And many ocean fisheries issues are international in scope. Better multi-country and international fisheries management must be built on good international relationships as well as a

continued U.S. commitment to its existing international ocean management agreements. Country-of-origin seafood labeling laws and international controls over illegal and unlicensed fishing piracy cry out for international solutions.

In Summary

We are ready to work with the new Congress and President on crafting realistic solutions to all these real-world problems. However, this discussion should be shaped and guided by hard data and statistics, not by politics.

The Trump Administration should address our industry’s real needs, but none of the solutions involve dismantling the environmental laws that protect our own and most other industries and the public from environmental disasters.

There are no “Republican” or “Democrat” fisheries – there are only the nation’s fisheries, which belong to the people as a whole and help feed us all. By paying proper attention to the problems of our fisheries, and by investing in reversing the damage past poor planning and neglect has done to so much of the nation’s economically valuable fisheries habitat and port infrastructure, America’s fisheries can become great once again. **FN**

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