Few in the fishing industry have been as critical of the federal government as PCFFA. Republican Administration, Democrat Administration, it doesn’t matter. We’ve got little use for the incompetence, dithering, disingenuousness and sometimes downright malevolence found all too often in many federal bureaucrats and agencies.

Our criticism hasn’t just been coffee shop or barroom grumbling, press releases and testimony either. We’ve sued the government any number of times – mostly successfully. Our unhappiness with government operations has taken us to court, sometimes on our own, but mostly in the company of others also aggrieved.

We’ve litigated over operations of the Columbia River dams, diversion of salmon water from the Bay-Delta estuary, logging roads in Oregon, pesticide spraying near salmon streams, selenium discharges into the San Joaquin River, Corps of Engineers dumping of dredge spoils in fishing grounds, bungled PFMC fishery management plans and allocations (and we’ve defended ones they occasionally got right), mining operations, water contracts that cause the dewatering of in-stream habitat, discharge of untreated ballast water into coastal waters, and the list goes on. Next up, we expect to be filing against the Food & Drug Administration (FDA) if they give the green light to genetically-engineered salmon (“Frankenfish”).

We’ve gone after Cabinet Secretaries, whether it be Commerce, Interior or Agriculture, as well as the whole alphabet soup of agencies from NMFS and NOAA, ACORE, USBR, BPA, USFS, EPA, and soon, unfortunately, the FDA. We’re no pushovers.

When we haven’t been in court we’ve been in Congress making known our displeasure with everything from past versions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act to its implementation in the present. Our criticisms have ranged from the mismanagement of our nation’s fisheries to keeping after a blundering National Marine Fisheries Service which after 40 years still can’t remember its name (it’s not “NOAA Fisheries”). And we’ve gone after its meddlesome and glory-hungry big sister in Commerce, the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), as well.

Given the amount and intensity of our criticism of the federal government, you’d think we would have been leading the applause for the government shutdown in October 2013, and champing at the bit for another in January 2014. Wrong.

We are critics of government because we seek to make government work better to serve the people (including us).

After all, government is organized in a democratic society to provide for our common defense, protection and welfare. Like them or not, these are mostly our institutions, employing our civil servants.

We say “mostly,” because we are not naïve. Our government is a mixed one, and no we’re not talking about the mix of a free market and social welfare economy, but an unhappy combination of Democracy with Plutocracy.

Thus we are wrestling at times with a government that is large simply because of the demands and complexities of 21st century society. At other times our problem with the government stems from its plutocratic bent, when it places the welfare of the very top rung of society, along with those other “persons” – the big corporations – over that of the general public. Worse still, we have to contend with those who would use government institutions to impose their own narrow ideologies on all the rest of us.

That said, shutting down the federal government is not the answer – as we saw, and hopefully learned, in October.

It wasn’t just that PCFFA, the Institute for Fisheries Resources and the Golden Gate Salmon Association – which

Reprinted with permission from Fishermen’s News • December 2013
Consumers of fish and shellfish were affected. The shutdown meant reduced FDA food inspections. While that may not be a big deal for much of the fish we produce locally, it is a big deal in the total US marketplace where nearly 90 percent of seafood is imported. A listeria, salmonella or PSP outbreak originating from any of those imports could have spread a food safety scare throughout all our seafood markets, potentially devastating the sales of our locally-caught fish. If the public loses faith in the safety of seafood it will affect us all.

And for anyone who thinks this fear is overblown, remember that there actually was a serious salmonella outbreak in the poultry industry during that same time – but the national Center for Disease Control (CDC), whose staff were furloughed in the shutdown, did not have the capacity to track it to its source, resulting in many unnecessary exposures.

We lost access to daily seafood market reporting services. The close down of commodities market reports additionally hit the nation’s farmers, jolting a lot of them out of support for such a shutdown. Without current market information both farmers and fishermen are at a distinct disadvantage in profitably getting their products to their customers.

The Government Accounting Office (GAO) estimates that the October 16-day shutdown cost the US economy some $24 billion, and that’s probably conservative.

The answer to a shutdown, some have proposed, is to make fishery regulations some kind of essential service, like law enforcement and the Coast Guard, exempt from a government closure. Get in line. Nearly every member of the US House of Representatives (and a few Senators) are proposing the same thing – they all want a special exemption for the National Park in their district which brings in revenues to their local businesses, or for government contractors at their local military base whose paychecks bolster that district’s economy. They want everyone else to feel the pain of a shutdown, until they get their way – just not themselves. Sorry, that’s just not going to fly.

There is a lot we can do to improve our fisheries and we have suggested a number of such improvements in past Fishermen’s News columns, ideas from getting NMFS out from under NOAA and making it a stand-alone agency within Commerce to the development of a National Fishery Trust Fund to ensure there is an adequate and reliable funding source for research and other fishery needs.

Shutting down the federal government again, however, will do nothing whatsoever to improve our fishing industry or our fisheries – it can only hurt us.

Although the October shutdown is now over, that lesson must not be forgotten, since Congress will be returning in January when the federal government funding and debt limit issues will be up for debate again.

Indeed, it could be even worse this time since the next round of “sequestration” cuts will also be in the mix. If nothing was learned from the October shut down, come January we’re likely to see a repeat of October – with a small but determined Congressional minority threatening to defund the government until they get whatever it is that they demand the next time, which could be cuts to our Social Security and Medicare, or gutting the Clean Water and Endangered Species Acts.

That’s not the way to run a country – except into the ground. And every day’s closure costs our economy well over $1 billion. If you think the costs of having an effective government are high, try living without a government at all. That particular brand of chaos is far most costly. Just check out Somalia as an example.

There is a lot we need to be doing to improve America’s oldest industry, but we can’t do it through shutdowns or the threat of federal government shutdowns, no matter how critical we may be of various agencies and bureaucrats. And, in fairness we have to say there are a fair number of competent, diligent and hard-working folks in the federal government as well; they’re not all slackers.
By January, the fishing industry has to get across to Members of Congress that their shenanigans do real harm to real people with livelihoods and small businesses that can be seriously disrupted, and sometimes damaged beyond repair.

Finally, maybe Captain Coburn of “The Deadliest Catch” can put the word out to that reality program’s fans for them to tell the “knuckleheads” they sent to Congress to straighten up – or they will vote them out of office next November.

Zeke Grader is the Executive Director of the Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations (PCFFA), and Dave Bitts is current PCFFA President. Both can be reached at the PCFFA main office at PO Box 29370, San Francisco, CA 94129-0370, (415) 561-5080, Email: zgrader@ifrfish.org. Glen Spain is PCFFA’s Northwest Regional Director, and can be reached at PCFFA’s Northwest Regional Office, PO Box 11170, Eugene, OR 97440-3370, (541) 689-2000, Email: fish1ifr@aol.com.