CITY OF NEW BEDFORD
JONATHAN F. MITCHELL, MAYOR

July 1, 2014

The Honorable Peter DeFazio,
Ranking Member
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
1329 Longworth H.O.B.
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Ranking Member DeFazio:

I am writing today in conjunction with your visit today to the City of Gloucester. I greatly appreciate your willingness to take time out during a personal visit to Massachusetts to learn more about the issues facing the commercial fishing industry in the Northeast.

As the Mayor of New Bedford, Massachusetts, the nation's highest dollar-value fishing port for the past thirteen years, I have closely followed the Committee on Natural Resources' work on the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA).

Fishing is an essential and vital part of New Bedford's port and regional economy, and the MSA dictates much of when, where, and how our fishermen can fish. That is why it is essential that the law be improved to provide the maximum benefit for our fishermen while still staying true to its conservation goals.

As an elected official whose constituents comprise a sizable segment of New England's fishing community, I would like to use this occasion to suggest ways to strengthen and improve the Act, and I hope you and your colleagues on the Committee will consider them.

When the Port of New Bedford recently examined the MSA as part of its comprehensive Port Revitalization Plan, we found several areas where the law could be improved to the benefit of our fishing community, without harm to our fishing resources:

(1) Flexible Management -- The most important way the MSA can be improved, and our number one request is to allow more flexibility in fishery management plans. Fisheries across the country are currently constrained by a strict, 10-year rebuilding schedule for overfished stocks, and the current draft of the MSA reauthorization only allows for alternative rebuilding plans if overfishing is ended immediately.

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The fundamental problem with this approach is that there is no real biological justification for such a timetable. The requirement places unrealistic mandates on fisheries managers, especially considering that many stocks do not have the quality and quantity of scientific data that would be necessary to make accurate 10-year estimates. Many species have their annual allocations set too conservatively as a result, with the effects felt throughout the region.

When quota is set too low on certain species, it prevents fishermen from catching the other, healthy species that intermingle with them. These "choke" species are the reason why fishermen can't catch their full quota of healthy and abundant species like haddock. This is not a biological problem, but a management one.

And in the case of New Bedford, the competitiveness and health of our port is put particularly at risk because current management practice undermines both fishing for groundfish and the harvesting of sea scallops. As you may know, the scallop fishery accounts for the overwhelming share of the value of New Bedford's landings. It is on a positive path biologically. And the fishery produces a world-renowned seafood product. Yet, because bycatch is an inevitability in scallop harvesting, often the same "choke" species that cause such dysfunction and harm in the groundfish industry, end up undermining the efforts of New Bedford fishermen to harvest scallops responsibly.

Regional fisheries managers should have the flexibility to set rebuilding timelines for stocks under their jurisdiction based on the unique biological and ecological factors that they face, as well as giving consideration to the economic wellbeing of the fishing communities that they serve. They should be able to manage stocks based on the available information, not an arbitrary set of rules only tangentially related to the situations they face.

(2) Collaborative Research and New Video-based Technologies -- The Act should also encourage cooperative research, especially between government and the industry, as well as create new scientific working groups to ensure that information used by NOAA and the management councils undergoes proper scientific review. In New England, some of our best scientific innovations have come from collaborations between the industry and independent scientists.

For example, in the 1990s, the scallop fleet donated resources and worked in cooperation with scientists from Massachusetts and Virginia to begin deploying video survey technology which produced alternative measurements of the scallop population. The survey was essential in producing revised, more accurate estimates of scallop abundance, than previous Federal-government surveys and is one of the primary reasons the scallop fleet today is one of the best-managed, most information-rich, and economically successful in the nation.

Scientists at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, who were integral to the development of the scallop video survey technology, are currently developing new methods to apply the same video survey techniques that proved so successful for the

scallop fishery to the region's groundfish stocks. Encouraging this kind of cooperative research in the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and funding it adequately during the appropriations process, would greatly improve the quality of the data available to fisheries managers, and make management more efficient and reliable overall.

(3) Accountability Measures -- The MSA should also be amended to improve accountability in fisheries management and increase cooperation in fisheries research. It should establish clearly defined accountability measures for fisheries management, such as establishing oversight committees, and well as clearly define NOAA's role in the management process.

US fisheries are already some of the best managed and most conservation-minded and sustainable fisheries in the world. But by making these critical revisions to the MSA, the Committee could ensure that our fisheries are economically sustainable as well, and that fishermen in ports like New Bedford can continue making vital economic contributions to their communities.

Thank you again for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jon Mitchell
Mayor