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Contact

Nick Brancaleone

Tel: (978) 905-1118

Email: nsc.communications@gmail.com

**NORTHEAST SEAFOOD COALITION POLICY DIRECTOR TESTIFIES BEFORE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES**

September 11, 2013—Gloucester, Mass. Today, Gloucester fisherman and Policy Director of the Northeast Seafood Coalition Vito Giacalone testified before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources for the hearing on the “Reauthorization of Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act” (MSA). Giacalone testified about the critical need for a stable management regime that reflects the realities of the Northeast groundfish fishery.

Giacalone’s testimony came one year after the U.S. Department of Commerce declared the Northeast groundfish fishery a “commercial fishery failure.” In Fishing Year 2013, catch limits have been dramatically reduced for key groundfish stocks that are the core of the economic engine that runs the fishery and fishing communities in the Northeast. Today, as a result of dramatic instability within the fishery, many fishermen and groundfish-dependent businesses are not only facing the loss of their business and source of income, but they are also facing the loss of their homes that have been mortgaged to support their businesses.

For nearly a decade, fishermen have adhered to strict rebuilding timeframes and targets set forth in the law, while abiding by a progressive fisheries management style that includes hard Total Allowable Catches (TACs) and a catch share system. Yet, according to Giacalone, with many stock assessments, scientists report that their abundance estimates and fishing mortality rate predictions were incorrect—often substantially incorrect—and result in retrospective overfishing.

“The current statute does not work for NE groundfish,” Giacalone’s written testimony reads. “...The basic management strategy set forth in the statute places demands on science that far exceed its capacity... I believe this is due in part to the inherent and perhaps increasing instability in the physical and biological elements of the ecosystem in which our fishery operates.”

In his written testimony, Giacalone references the recently released National Research Council’s report “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Fish Stock Rebuilding Plans in the United States,” which reflects Giacalone’s testimony that there is often a mismatch between policy makers’ expectations for scientific precision and the inherent limits of science because of data limitations and complex ecosystem dynamics.

Giacalone said the instability in the Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank ecosystem is due in part to rapidly changing ecological conditions and factors. He pointed out dramatic environmental changes have been seen before and fish stocks follow cycles that have no correlation to fishing mortality. Rather, he noted biological parameters beyond the control of man—including recruitment, individual growth, and natural mortality rates—play a far greater role in determining future status of groundfish stocks than regulation of fishing mortality.

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4 PARKER STREET, STE. 202, GLOUCESTER, MA 01930
62 HASSEY STREET, NEW BEDFORD, MA 02740
TEL: 978.283.9992 | FAX: 978.283.9959
NORTHEASTSEAFOODCOALITION.ORG

With instability comes unpredictability, according to Giacalone's written testimony. "...The current statute is founded on predictability. It depends on the ability of science to predict future levels of recruitment, growth and natural mortality, and worse, to predict exactly when those levels will occur." These realities, Giacalone argues, were not contemplated in MSA or reflected in the National Marine Fisheries Service's interpretations and implementation.

The Northeast groundfish fishery needs flexibility that would allow regional Councils the ability to develop tools that tailor management strategies to reflect the realities of their region and fisheries. Such tools should enable management responses that account for known volatility from scientific stock assessments, and the severe social and economic costs of pretending to know the unknowable. Additionally, Giacalone testified on the need for Congress to provide authority for regional Councils to implement alternative rebuilding strategies to achieve fundamental goals to prevent overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks. He argued, statutory tools should be implemented that can enable managers to protect fish stocks while providing a more stable fishery.

"...Scientific unpredictability and dramatic swings in perceived stock abundance have completely confounded fishery management and every aspect of our fishing industry and community. We are perilously close to losing the oldest fishery in America, which was at the core of our colonial economy four centuries and is still at the core of our communities today," Giacalone's testimony reads.

Giacalone concluded his testimony by emphasizing the immediate reality of the Northeast groundfish fishery: we are in the midst of a crisis that needs immediate attention. Giacalone wrote, all the long term policy improvements in the world will not matter if there are no small fishing businesses left standing when they are implemented. This fishery critically needs disaster funding to survive, as has been relentlessly championed by Senators and Representatives representing the Northeast region. Giacalone plead with members of the Committee and the full House of Representatives to support measures such as those included in the Senate FY 2014 appropriations to provide fisheries disaster assistance funding.

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About the Northeast Seafood Coalition:

The Northeast Seafood Coalition is a non-profit organization representing over 361 commercial fishing entities, which hold over 500 limited access groundfish permits, in the northeast United States on political and policy issues affecting their interests as participants in the groundfish fishery and the Sector program in the Northeast multispecies groundfish fishery. NSC members are small, independent, entrepreneurial businesses that fish for—and support fishing for—cod, haddock, flounders, and other groundfish species along the northeast coast. NSC's fishing business members fish from small and large ports all along the northeast coast. They fish small, medium, and large vessels, and they employ all groundfish gear types.

NSC works for rules that embody real solutions to complex fishery problems.