

JONES TESTIFIES ON NOAA FISH SCIENCE

Jones calls for a new definition of best available science, a prohibition on diverting science money to catch shares and a federal investigation of NOAA's use of Saltonstall-Kennedy funds

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Today U.S. Congressman Walter B. Jones (NC-3) testified at the House Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs Subcommittee hearing on whether federal fishery science is costing fishermen their jobs. Jones documented how the outdated science used in the recently enacted Amendment 17B has impacted North Carolina fisherman. Jones also called for a new definition of "best available science"; a prohibition on this Administration diverting science money to catch shares; and a federal investigation of the National Marine Fisheries Service's use of Saltonstall-Kennedy funds on operations expenses instead of fisheries research.

Congressman Jones' testimony can be viewed below:

"Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important topic. On behalf of Eastern North Carolina fishermen, I can confirm that the Magnuson Act's definition of "best available" science and the lack of science on fish stocks are causing significant job loss in North Carolina.

A great example of this can be seen in NOAA's December 2010 approval of Amendment 17B to the South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Management Plan. That amendment closed federal waters from 240 feet to 200 miles offshore from Florida through North Carolina to protect two fish species – speckled hind and warsaw grouper – for which there are no valid stock assessments. In fact, the last stock assessment on speckled hind was completed 11 years ago. The last stock assessment on warsaw grouper was completed over 20 years ago! Imposing such a massive closure based on such outdated science is terrible policy. It's also costing my constituents their jobs, as boats are literally tied to the dock because of this. The annual economic loss to fishermen in my district from Amendment 17B is well over \$1 million dollars. I am pleased that NOAA is helping to get some of these fishermen back to work, but serious damage has been done.

This unnecessary situation is largely the result of the Magnuson Act's requirements to set annual catch limits on species determined to be undergoing "overfishing" based on "best available science". NOAA has interpreted the Magnuson Act definition of "best available" science to mean "any available" science, regardless of how old it is, or how sound it is. So in the case of Amendment 17B, despite the fact that the only available science was well over 10 years old, it was used to produce a determination that the stock is currently undergoing overfishing. This finding triggered the Magnuson Act's requirement for imposition of an annual catch limit, which the agency found should be set at zero.

Unfortunately, this situation is not an isolated incident. Fishing communities around the country are suffering under similar circumstances. The fishermen I talk to unanimously agree that at least two changes are necessary to fix this problem.

First, Congress must pass legislation to improve the Magnuson Act's definition of "best available" science. If the latest available stock assessment is more than five years old, it should not be considered "best available" or used as the basis for management decisions.

Second, we need more money for fisheries science. That is why it is extremely troubling that this Administration continues to rob money from the NOAA science budget in order to ram their job-destroying catch shares agenda down the throats of fishermen across the country. For Fiscal Year 2012, NOAA proposed to redirect \$17.4 million from science to catch shares. That is simply unacceptable.

It is also troubling to see NOAA annually take tens of millions of dollars in Saltonstall-Kennedy funds – which are required by law to be spent on fisheries research – and instead redirect them to fund NOAA operations. In Fiscal Year 2009, NOAA used over two-thirds of its \$108 million in Saltonstall-Kennedy revenue on operating expenses, leaving less than one-third for fisheries research grants. At the very least, this practice appears improper. It may also be illegal. In the interest of transparency and accountability, I believe the Inspector General of the Commerce Department or the Government Accountability Office (GAO) should open an investigation of NOAA's administration of Saltonstall-Kennedy funds.

Mr. Chairman, I'd like to thank you again for holding this hearing. This is an important issue, and I appreciate the opportunity to testify."