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Secretary of Commerce declares disaster in Northeast Groundfish Fishery

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Acting U.S. Secretary of Commerce Rebecca Blank today declared a commercial fishery failure in the Northeast groundfish fishery for the 2013 fishing season. Despite fishermen's adherence to catch limits, several key fish stocks are not rebuilding, resulting in the expectation that further cuts to catch limits may be necessary in the 2013 fishing season, which begins May 1, 2013.

The disaster declaration makes it possible for Congress to appropriate money toward alleviating the financial hardship to fishermen caused by the fishery disaster. If money is appropriated, NOAA will work closely with Congress and the Governors representing the affected states to develop plans to assist coastal communities.

"Fishermen in the Northeast are facing financial hardships because of the unexpectedly slow rebuilding of fish stocks that have limited their ability to catch enough to make ends meet," said Acting Secretary Blank. "The Department of Commerce has determined that the diminished fish stocks have resulted despite fishermen's adherence to catch limits intended to rebuild the stocks, and I am making a fishery failure declaration so that Congress is able to appropriate funding that will mitigate some of the economic consequences of the reduced stocks and help build a sustainable fishery. The future challenges facing the men and women in this industry and the shore-based businesses that support them are daunting, and we want to do everything we can to help them through these difficult times."

Acting Secretary Blank is declaring the commercial fishery failure under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act and Section 308(b) of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act. The declaration was requested and supported by elected officials in the region. This announcement supersedes earlier requests for disaster declarations made by several northeast states.

For the past several months, NOAA and the New England Fishery Management Council have engaged the fishing industry and others in discussions to develop actions that can be taken given the anticipated low quotas for some key stocks in the groundfish fishery. However, it is unlikely that the economic impacts can be fully mitigated in the coming fishing year, which begins May 1. The work that NOAA has been doing with northeast states, including an in-depth look at impacts to specific industry segments provided by Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, will be useful in developing spending plans to assist coastal communities should Congress appropriate the funding that today's declaration authorizes.

"Fishing is the lifeblood of many coastal communities, providing jobs, a continuation of an historic tradition and culture, recreational opportunities for millions of anglers, and contributing to food security for the nation," said Dr. Jane Lubchenco, NOAA administrator. "Finding solutions will not be easy, but by continuing to work together, we can have healthy fish stocks, profitable fisheries, and vibrant fishing communities."

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