

Deep Sea Fishermen's Union of the Pacific

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Established 1912
January 10, 2000

The Honorable John McCain: Arizona
United States Senate
508 Derkson Building
Washington, DC 21501

Re: U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
2000 Magnuson/Stevens Reauthorization Hearing
January 14, 2000 – Seattle, Washington

Senator McCain:

Individual Fishing Quota System 1995 – 2000; A Crewman's Perspective

Under the I.F.Q system, working conditions are much safer than during the frenzied “Derby Days” of the open access-fishing era. For example, when fishermen had to deal with extremely limited time constraints e.g., twenty four hour Halibut openings, in order to be competitive, they were compelled to go out on the ocean in any kind of weather with far too much gear aboard than the vessel was designed to safely handle, leading to vessel instability. Today I'm relieved to say that this situation no longer occurs. Coast Guard rescues have been significantly reduced as a result of I.F.Q. management. Under the previous open access system, the quality of the product often suffered due to huge delivery gluts that also created an adverse effect on prices paid to fishermen. Today under the new I.F.Q. system the product quality has improved due to better handling. Combined with a reasonably steady supply and a growing “fresh market” these changes have ultimately brought about better revenues to fishermen and have improved the quality of the product to the consumer.

From 1991 to 1994, incomes began to take a sharp decline in great part due to an increase in the number of boats participating in the open access fishery. The proverbial “slice of the pie” was getting smaller for everyone. Had this phenomenon continued, many crewmen feel they would have been forced to abandon the fishery in search of other employment or continue as part-time longliners and try to establish themselves in one of the other already overcrowded and depleted fisheries. For the crewmen who have survived this change, the I.F.Q. system has provided them a much more stable income.

The Halibut and Sablefish resource is becoming healthier as a result of I.F.Q. management. We're not experiencing the lost gear deadloss of the "derby days". Releasing sub-legal Halibut unharmed is much easier now because the fishermen are not forced to haul gear at unsafe breakneck speeds. Environmentally the program all but eliminated discards of bycatch, increased the focus on stock assessment and even allowed us the freedom to develop an in-season survey for bird-bycatch reduction. (An impossibility under an open access or license limitation scheme.)

From a labor standpoint, there are a few backlashes. Jobs have been cut but many believe it had to happen. Now we have a smaller more professional fleet instead of a hugely overcrowded part-time fleet.

The Deep Sea Fishermen's Union is a professional crewmen's union working under a contract with the Fishing Vessel Owner's Association since 1912. As far as I know, we are the only fishing crewmen's union in the U.S. During the open access years, our collective bargaining ability lay in our skills as highly efficient, productive and professional crewmen. This was essential to the fishing operation in order to compete for the resource. Under the privatized I.F.Q. system, a professional crewman is desirable but not necessarily essential. Thus our collective bargaining ability has been diminished greatly. Many crewmen believe that the acquisition of quota will become the future collective bargaining tool. The Federal I.F.Q. Loan Program, as mandated by the Magnuson Act, has been an excellent vehicle for crewmen and small vessel owners to acquire fishing quota. I personally am a recipient of the loan program. The role of crewmen is moving away from the "boots and oilskins" mentality into fully invested quota shareholders. Some of us have more invested in quota than the value of the vessels we work on. Unfortunately, the labor sector of the fishing industry still has no real voice in the decision making and implementation process. It is my hope that this hearing committee will consider this and mandate the labor sector a voting seat on the North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

Thank you for inviting my comments on this issue.

Respectfully,



Tim Henkel
President
Deep Sea Fishermen's Union of the Pacific