

Statement of Congressman William R. Keating
HR 1013, the Strengthen New England Fishery Management Act of 2011
House Committee on Natural Resources
December 1, 2011

Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member Markey, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before your committee on an issue of great importance – not only to the residents of the Bay State, whom, as my colleagues from Massachusetts know all too well, rely on the fishing industry as a source of livelihood, but to all states with access to fishing stocks.

The issues currently plaguing the fishing industry are complex and divisive. Yet, here we sit this morning in full agreement that the common crisis facing fishermen from Massachusetts to North Carolina is the urgent need for increased research and hard, scientific data in order to implement fair and effective fisheries management policies.

I am not here to debate the effectiveness of these policies; on the contrary, I will speak on the first bill that I introduced as a Member of Congress: *the Strengthen Fisheries Management in New England Act of 2011.*

My bill, **HR 1013**, reroutes funds collected through penalties imposed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to the improvement of New England fisheries.

Current law requires that the fines collected from fishermen who have violated marine resource laws be invested in NOAA's Asset Forfeiture Fund. As we have already heard in previous testimony, NOAA and the Asset Forfeiture Fund have been the subjects of a wide range of accusations and investigations into the abuse and misuse of these funds.

Just last year the Department of Commerce's Inspector General found that these abuses included the use of monies from the Asset Forfeiture Fund to:

- buy cars for federal agents;
- to cover trip expenses to conferences in exotic and distant locations;
- and to even purchase a \$300,000 luxury vessel used by government employees

It was subsequently determined that NOAA did not regularly audit the use of those funds and could not disclose precisely how the AFF monies were spent.

I introduced the *Strengthen Fisheries Management in New England Act* in order to right these wrongs and restore trust in our government through proper oversight.

My bill directs the Secretary of Commerce to provide the New England Fishery Management Council with the funds collected by NOAA as fines and penalties from New England's fishermen to be used directly toward improving the research and management of our region's most valuable resource.

The New England Fishery Management Council is charged under the Magnuson-Stevens Act to manage fisheries in the federal waters of New England, and each year it identifies research and monitoring priorities, most of which lack adequate funding. In order to make sound management decisions, the Council must have the increased capacity to address these knowledge gaps.

The *Strengthen Fisheries Management in New England Act* will undoubtedly enable the Council to make better, more informed decisions that balance the continued protection of the marine ecosystem with the need for strong, profitable fishing businesses and coastal communities.

Perhaps most critical in today's political climate: this legislation does not increase federal spending. Rather, the bill re-directs existing funds. In this way, monies will support and protect the many fishing-related jobs crucial to the economic health of our region – all of which depend on sound resource management.

As I said before, there have been few measures this session of Congress that have received such broad bipartisan support as the need to increase scientific research of stock assessments. Here you have a panel of Members from both sides of the aisle who fully support this initiative.

In addition, I am proud to be a cosponsor of the bill, HR 2610, introduced by my colleague and dear friend from Massachusetts, Mr. Frank, which I believe will also go a far way in protecting our fishing industry from excessive fines.

The fishing industry is a central part of Massachusetts' and New England's history, and remains a vital economic lifeline of our local communities. In recent years, our fishermen's businesses have suffered due to inadequate data collection that dictates catch quantities. We can – and we must – implement fair and effective fisheries management policies while targeting government abuse and inefficient waste.

Chairman Hastings and Ranking Member Markey, I thank you for allowing me to testify before this committee and I hope to serve as a resource to you as Congress continues to work on this important matter.