

Testimony: Debra Shrader
Before the House Committee on Resources
April 25, 2006

Good morning, Congressman Pombo, members of the Resource Committee, and Congressman Frank. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the fishermen and their families here in the great port City of New Bedford, and we welcome you to our homeport.

As stated, my name is Deb Shrader. I am the wife of Captain Ronnie Shrader, and the Executive Director of Shore Support, Inc./Fishermen's Emergency Relief Fund; which is a nonprofit organization that has worked for the last ten years on behalf of fishermen and their families. I applaud you all for taking the time in your busy schedules to come to our home port and hear us out. All our men want to do is bring home the freshest, healthiest source of protein rich food for our citizens to enjoy. Hopefully, this bill will make it possible for us to continue to eat healthful, locally harvested seafood, and export it to others in our great nation that don't have the good fortune to live by the sea.

Part of Shore Support's mission statement is to create a voice for the rank and file fishermen with our regulators, so to be here, testifying before this esteemed committee is a bit daunting, but also very important to me.

After reading the "American Fisheries Management and Marine-Life Enhancement Act", I was relieved that much of the bill will be a measure that will balance many of the inequities in the prior Sustainable Fisheries Act, and previously the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Our organization fully supports many issues brought into the light with this bill; for example the 10 year rebuilding strategy being revamped with a great deal more flexibility. The greater flexibility would allow fishermen to pay attention to their safety and economic status. Nowhere in the National Standards does it state that one Standard has precedent over the others. Why then have socio-economic issues been ignored for so long? At every Council Mtg., when an overhead slide is displayed, you will always see "Socio-Economic Data Incomplete". I hope with the concentration on flexibility this bill brings to the table, those socio-economic issues will be brought out in the open. We also support the charitable donations of bycatch which would not just give us a truer picture of the amount of fish that are out there, but also allow us to feed healthful seafood to the poor, people who otherwise could not afford to make such a healthful dietary choice.

Shore Support has completed one socio-economic study of a comparison of income and working conditions prior to and since the implementation of the Days at Sea management plan. The work was done through a Saltonstall-Kennedy Grant to UMD/SMASST, with Professor Dan Georgianna as the Principal Investigator. We have been recently awarded another grant, to continue our work in coalition with UMD/SMASST through the Northeast Consortium. This most recent grant will take a look at the economic effects of Amendment 13 on our groundfish industry. In part, we will be comparing incomes and tracking how many men have left the fisheries, safety issues, etc. I feel that the benchmarks that were created in our previous study will give us a clearer understanding of the devastation that has beset an industry who has already had a 50% reduction in effort.

We did our interviews for our first study in the spring of 2003. Our interviewers met with 50% of the offshore boats in our harbor, both groundfish and scallopers. I can tell you that even then, the groundfishermen felt that they could take no more. The regulations are getting more and more complicated and more difficult for our men to work under. Many of our groundfishermen are Portuguese, from both the Mainland and like my Grandmother, the Azorean Islands. Many of these men prefer to speak Portuguese, and keep the customs of their homeland. The captains read the new regulations, and are not just hampered by the complexity of the regulations, but also the fact that nothing is translated into Portuguese for easier understanding.

One thing they can understand, is how precarious their futures are. Single boat owners, and many fishermen will not be around when the stocks finally rebound because most fishermen have had their right to harvest fish taken away, or diminished to a point where they either support their family, or listen to the calling in their hearts to continue to work at sea. Please try to picture the single boat owner/operator who has his boat mortgage rolled in with his house mortgage. I met with a man in that situation, and he had to suffer not just the economics of the situation, but the social pain of feeling like a failure to his family, knowing that his home would go with the boat and everything he had worked for would soon be gone. This man spoke to me with tears in his eyes, telling me that he felt he will soon lose everything, and he didn't know how he would face his children.

Part of my work is in the Fishermen's Emergency Relief Fund which we started after the sinking of the F/V Northern Edge. Originally developed to help the families suffering from the tragedy of losing their loved ones in the sinking, we then have tried to assist families who have been forced to leave the industry and are seeking retraining, or who have been injured in the performance of their duties. This is necessary due to the fact that there is no Workmen's Compensation for fishermen

when they are injured and families in transition often do not qualify for public assistance because of the ownership of a house or car. The demand for our services has already become more than we can handle, and our funds, donated by people from communities as far away as Wisconsin, are nearly gone. How will our government be able to help these families? The unemployment in the fleet is slated to increase markedly due to the lack of Days At Sea, and the consolidation of crews moving from boat to boat. I hope that there will be services and funding made available to help us to keep our families in their homes. Our retraining Center has been brought to a bare bones budget, at time when we never needed it more.

My last comment is regarding Individual Fishing Quotas. I realize that the decision of whether or not we will have IFQ's is subject to a referendum vote of 2/3 of the community in the fishing region. I would hope that, at the very least, federally documented Captains and First Mates would be added to the people eligible to vote. I would prefer to see all fishermen have a voice in this monumental decision, however, the Captains and Mates are documented with Identification Cards, making it easy for the government to validate that person's involvement in the fishery and therefore his/her right to participate in the vote.

In conversation with fishermen, I have asked them over and over why they continue to fish when things are so difficult. They will most often shrug, I get a little smile, and they tell me, "you know how it is, it's what I do, who I am". Please help us through this act of Congress to save our fishery dependent community, and the families who have been the cornerstone of the economic base of this Port City for hundreds of years.