Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 7, 2013

The Honorable Rebecca Blank
Acting Secretary of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Ms. Blank:

We write to request that you exercise all authority under the law to preserve New England's fishing industry and its groundfish populations for future generations. In particular, we urge the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to fully cover the costs of at-sea monitoring, as fishermen cannot bear this added cost coupled with dramatic cuts to catch limits. We also urge you to make a timely decision regarding carryover, as fishermen cannot make decisions about their businesses without knowing what to expect next year.

In December, the New England Fishery Management Council (the "Council") affirmed the findings of earlier stock assessments that found significantly reduced abundance of groundfish stocks, particularly Gulf of Maine cod. Last week, in response to these findings, the Council approved significant cuts in future groundfish quotas. Among these are a 77 percent cut to the catch limit for Gulf of Maine cod for the next three years and a 61 percent reduction in the catch for Georges Bank cod for the next year.

We are deeply concerned about the ability of the fishing industry to survive these considerable catch reductions, as well as the implications for the future sustainability of the resource. Scientific and anecdotal evidence suggests a serious resource problem that must be addressed through science-based management. More needs to be done to improve our data collection and analysis because sound management can only be built on a strong understanding of the resource.

We have consistently supported and will continue to support federal actions to improve fisheries science, invest in necessary infrastructure, and address the considerable economic burdens that fishing communities are facing. Now, in the face of an economic disaster declaration and looming cuts to catch limits, we urge you and the Administration to exercise all authorities available through NOAA, the Small Business Administration (SBA), the Economic Development Administration (EDA) and other agencies to ensure the future of this industry.

NOAA Fisheries must seriously consider the impact of further burdening our fishermen with at-sea monitoring costs and dedicate the resources necessary to continue to cover these costs. Even without the drastic reductions in catch limits, our fishermen cannot feasibly afford their expected share of at-sea monitors, and it is vital that NOAA provide full funding to cover these costs. NOAA Fisheries must also move to rapidly and effectively implement virtual monitoring and other measures to further reduce costs while ensuring adequate coverage.

Additionally, as you prepare your budget request for fiscal year 2014, we encourage you to prioritize long-term investments in New England fisheries that will continue to improve our understanding of this resource and help move the fishery towards a healthy, sustainable future. With incredible challenges ahead for fishermen and in rebuilding the resource, now is the time to prioritize federal programs that have the potential to improve fisheries science and management and support long-term sustainability of the resource and fishing communities.

Further, we urge you to invest in more frequent and improved stock assessments to help NOAA Fisheries and the Council work through the backlog of assessments for critical species and investigate the impacts

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of changing ocean temperatures, species interactions, and stock structure. This will help improve the timeliness and accuracy of data for the most critical target species and help facilitate better management decisions while creating more business certainty. We ask you to fully cover the cost of at-sea monitoring and to consider investing in electronic monitoring. It is critical to work with fishermen to ensure that the sharing of monitoring costs is equitable and sustainable in the long run. We also ask that you make timely decisions on issues like carryover so fishermen can make business decisions with the best information available. We urge that cooperative research efforts be broadened to ensure widespread participation, and we urge you to use the information collected to take meaningful action that will benefit fishermen and the resource. Finally, we ask that you work with the EDA and SBA to support working waterfronts and handling and processing infrastructure, which are vital to the future of fishing communities throughout New England.

In declaring New England's groundfish fishery a federal disaster, your agency has acknowledged that the current resource problem comes despite the fishing industry's adherence to rigorous management practices. Many fishermen in the region have been working to make their industry more sustainable and protect the resource. We encourage NOAA to work with fishermen to better understand the ecosystem as a whole, including issues such as warmer water temperatures, critical habitat, and predator/prey dynamics, as we work toward management efforts to rebuild and sustain healthy stocks.

We deeply appreciate NOAA's continuing efforts to work creatively with the Council to ensure a future for this critical and historic industry. We encourage you to fully engage fishermen and fishing communities as we work together to make targeted investments that will allow the industry to survive and become more sustainable in the years ahead. We are dedicated to working with our fishermen and with you to find ways to avert the collapse of this important fishery and secure a healthy and vibrant future for our coastal communities.

Sincerely,

SUSAN COLLINS
United States Senator

ANGUS KING
United States Senator

ELIZABETH WARREN
United States Senator

WILLIAM COWAN
United States Senator

MICHAEL MICHAUD
Member of Congress

CHELLIE PINGREE
Member of Congress

MICHAEL CAPUANO
Member of Congress

WILLIAM KEATING
Member of Congress

JOSEPH KENNEDY III
Member of Congress

STEPHEN LYNCH
Member of Congress

EDWARD MARKEY
Member of Congress

JOHN TIERNEY
Member of Congress

CAROL SHEA-PORTER
Member of Congress

cc:
Eric C. Schwaab, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
John K. Bullard, Northeast Regional Administrator