

SNOWE CASTS “NO” VOTE ON OMNIBUS FEDERAL SPENDING BILL

Senator Cites Authorization Language That Could Affect the Well-Being of Maine Fishing Industry

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Tuesday, January 20, 2004

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Citing provisions in the legislation that pose a critical threat to the Maine fishing industry, U.S. Senator Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine), Chair of the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Oceans, Fisheries and Coast Guard, today voted against the Omnibus federal spending package for Fiscal Year (FY) 2004 that was defeated in the Senate today. The Omnibus spending package was defeated in a cloture vote of 48 to 45. 60 votes are needed for cloture to be invoked.

Snowe specifically cited concerns with language in the bill authorizing Individual Processor Quotas (IPQs) for the Alaskan crab fishery.

“As Chair of the Subcommittee on Oceans, Fisheries and Coast Guard, I have worked hard to address fisheries policy in a consistent basis that is national in scope but flexible enough to allow for regional differences, which is the underlying tenet of the Magnuson-Stevens Act,” said Snowe. “When Maine fishermen are required to abide by the Magnuson-Stevens Act, I cannot support a bill that contains an end run around the authorization and fishery management process.”

“Voting against a bill that contains funding for Maine that I worked to secure is very difficult for me. However, these provisions have serious consequences for America's fishermen and the resources upon which they depend,” added Snowe.

Snowe has repeatedly expressed her opposition to the language authorizing Individual Processor Quotas (IPQs), which tie the hands of fishermen by dictating to whom they can sell their catch, and violate the foundation on which our fishery management system is based. IPQ provisions effectively remove competition from the dockside price-setting process, thereby putting fishermen at a significant economic disadvantage. IPQs are being sought in other fisheries and this would set a dangerous precedent for the rest of the nation, with the potential to remove anti-trust protections for fishermen.

“If we allow this provision to proceed, we will set a national precedent that has the potential to further undermine the regional fishery management system established under the Magnuson-Stevens Act. This provision will send us further down the road of having Congress directly managing fisheries - something Congress expressly decided not to do.”

“The authorization of IPQs is not supported by the vast majority of fishermen, the Department of Justice, the National Research Council, the General Accounting Office, or the National Marine Fisheries Service, which oversees the nation’s fisheries. Implementing these controversial provisions at this time, outside of the proper legislative authorization and review process, is an action that poses a threat to the well-being of fishermen in Maine and throughout the U.S.,” said Snowe.

Snowe is also concerned about a provision in the Omnibus would prohibit the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) from spending any funding to implement the Amendment 13 groundfish management plan, without removing the underlying statutory requirements to rebuild the fishery. NOAA faces a court order to begin implementing Amendment 13 in May 2004, and blocking the funding could return resolution of the issue to the courts, which could potentially result in a court-ordered shutdown of the entire fishery.

Senator Snowe continues to work on a number of levels to correct deficiencies in the Amendment 13 plan. Among her efforts, Snowe requested an independent socioeconomic analysis of the effect Amendment 13 would have on fishing communities, and urged the convening of a special meeting of the New England Fishery Management Council Groundfish Committee on January 14-15 to address inequities in the Council's Amendment 13 plan for Maine fishermen.

Snowe is particularly concerned over provisions that do not reactivate so-called "latent effort". Those provisions, in effect, penalize Maine fishermen who assisted the recovery of groundfish stocks in past years by harvesting other species, such as lobster and shrimp. Under the current proposal, these fishermen would permanently lose those groundfish days presently allocated to them but not used. The current proposal also fails to account for travel time, known as "steaming time", to and from the fishing grounds, in effect punishing fishermen, like those from Maine, who have farther to travel to prime fishing grounds. The Groundfish Committee is examining possible changes for presentation at the meeting of the full Council January 27th-29th.

"I have worked diligently to secure critical funding for a number of Maine interests in this spending package," said Snowe. "But I must represent what is in the best long-term interests of the state as a whole, and this Omnibus measure could cause significant harm to an industry that has defined Maine for centuries. I cannot in good conscience allow that to happen."

Snowe also criticized the sharp reduction in the amount of money appropriated to the Manufacturing Extension Partnership in the Omnibus. Although the Senate Appropriations Committee approved \$106.9 million for the MEP, the Omnibus Appropriations Conference Report cut funding to \$39.6 million. "At a time when we as a nation have lost 2.7 million manufacturing jobs in the past three years, we cannot shortchange a program that provides critical training and support to thousands of small- and medium-sized manufacturers," said Snowe.

In addition, Snowe objected to the removal of provisions that protected workers in Maine and across the nation from potentially-harmful changes in the overtime provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act. The Department of Labor is currently writing those provisions, which are estimated to block as many as 8 million workers from collecting overtime pay.

"While our economy as a whole has shown signs of growth, our workers have not yet seen the benefits. I have serious concerns about any step that would undermine the right to overtime pay, which provides economic security for so many families," said Snowe.

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