

Statement by Senator Gordon H. Smith
Newport, OR Field Hearing on West Coast Groundfish
Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation
January 16, 2001

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding today's field hearing on the status of one of Oregon's most important fisheries, West Coast groundfish. Like you, I am deeply concerned about the economic impacts on Oregon's fishing-dependent towns caused by recent harvest restrictions. As a newly appointed member of the Commerce Committee, I hope to continue working closely with you to secure needed federal assistance and to restore stability to Oregon's commercial fishing industry.

Today we are here to learn more about the causes and effects of the precipitous decline of the West Coast groundfish fishery. Experts in the field can point to many factors that have lead to an apparent decline of certain species in the groundfish complex -- from oceanic temperature changes to overfishing in certain instances. While natural and human activities have likely both played a part, it is the federal government alone that must bear primary responsibility for the current disaster. Since the Americanization years of the 1970s, the management of our nation's fisheries has been entrusted to federal agencies. Regrettably, in too many cases, past administrations and congresses have left fishery managers under the Department of Commerce without the necessary resources to gather accurate data on the fish populations and life cycles. It is unfortunate that it takes a catastrophe, like the one we now have in the groundfish fishery, to bring needed federal attention to the situation.

In my estimation, a long-term solution to the problem will require an increased federal commitment to groundfish stock assessments. NOAA Fisheries' models would be much more credible if they were backed up by annual, rather than triennial, groundfish surveys. Sound management decisions cannot be made in a vacuum of accurate data. The Department of Commerce should budget -- and the Congress should appropriate -- substantial increases for data collection so that management decisions are based on credible science. Whenever possible, NOAA should work cooperatively with industry to gather information by chartering industry vessels. A carefully implemented federal observer program should add much to our knowledge as well.

In the intermediate term, we clearly need to reduce overcapacity in the groundfish fleet. While securing federal funds for vessel and permit buyback problems is an uphill battle in the Congress, it is not an insurmountable challenge -- provided there is broad agreement in the industry over how to implement a buyback program. I hope that the fishing industry will be able to overcome differences in gear type and vessel size to reach a consensus buyback plan that would result in the orderly exit of excess capacity out of the fleet.

In the immediate term, we must continue to address the community assistance needs that have developed as result of the loss of revenue from the groundfish resource. While I was pleased that we were able to secure \$5 million in emergency funds last year to help meet the urgent socioeconomic needs of fishing-dependent towns, I know it was just a beginning. In the new Congress, we must renew our coalition of West Coast Senators to secure another installment of community assistance funding. I look forward to working with state agencies and the OSU extension service to continue their vital assistance services to coastal communities.

Finally, there are important policy areas, such as tax reform and IFQ programs, I believe should be carefully considered by the new Congress as well.

Clearly, this is not a problem that developed overnight -- nor is it one that can be remedied overnight. There is much work to be done on the part of all us -- the Congress, NOAA, industry representatives, environmentalists, and other stakeholders, to respond to this crisis before it is too late. Not only is it our challenge to enhance and protect the groundfish resource for future generations, we must also ensure that a viable fishing industry -- with skilled fishermen, vessel suppliers, and seafood processors -- does not disappear from Oregon's coastal communities in the process.

With this in mind, I look forward to reviewing the testimony of all of today's witnesses. I hope this field hearing will add to our understanding of the problem and ultimately lead to the resolution of this federal fishery failure.

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

