

# Fishing Rights for the Few Is Un-American

To the Editor:

"Without fanfare, Washington has begun to turn over to private interests the exclusive rights to the multi-billion-dollar harvest of fish off the United States coast" (front page, April 22).

I think that turning over the right to fish commercially to a select group is counter to the American spirit of free enterprise. This system of individual transferable catch quotas is the latest experiment in fisheries management, the result of at least 30 years of mismanagement of the fish stocks that live in Federal waters by the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Here is a case where the Federal Government is going to bestow an economic windfall on relatively few people and eliminate the majority's chance to make a living from the sea. This policy is an attempt to end a citizen's right to own and operate a small fishing boat business for the capture and sale of fish.

Can you imagine the government trying to allocate the number of restaurants or supermarkets based on economic efficiency? Who would dare to say that there are too many establishments and that we must set the number that makes every participant a profit regardless of quality? Where is the free market capitalistic spirit that allows us to choose what we want to do?

Fish stocks would be more abundant if Federal laws did not allow fishermen to kill and discard millions of pounds of juvenile fish, just to catch the relatively few adults. Both the Marine Fisheries Service and the so-called Fishery Management Councils — the eight regional groups dominated by local fishing interests that are being allowed to hand out exclusive rights to the catch — are trying to avoid the political fallout of mismanagement from influential boat owners by giving them the soon-to-be-limited right to fish.

What about the captains and crews who work the ocean in the hope of making enough money so that they can own their own boats and businesses? What has the Federal Government really done to improve the economic efficiency of fishing?

This policy creates more problems than it attempts to eliminate. The reduction in the number of fishing boats will result in a significant loss of revenue and jobs in the transportation, shipbuilding, marine electronic, fuel, repair and other marine-related industries. There will be problems in

the transfer of fishing effort from Federal waters to state waters.

If this Federal policy continues, then the next logical step is for the Federal Government to sell the exclusive rights away from the millions of recreational fishermen to the few wealthy boat owners.

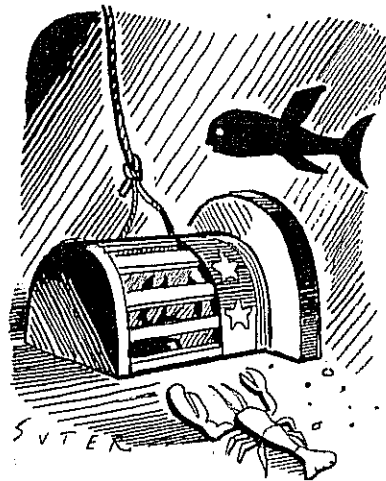
The best idea for the Federal Government is to develop fishery management plans that would facilitate the rebuilding of fish stocks and eliminate bi-catch kills and waste, and that allow the free market system to work.

MITCHELL A. ROFFER  
President, Roffer's Ocean Fishing  
Forecasting Service  
Miami, April 23, 1991

## No to Inefficiency

To the Editor:

Your April 22 front-page article on the allotment of fishing rights in coastal waters reports: "State commissions still control fishing within three miles of shore, and some have tried to close entry to new boats. But in every case the action has come when there were already too many



boats. Another tactic is to limit technology. In the Chesapeake Bay waters controlled by Maryland, for example, oyster boats must be sail-powered and the gathering must be by hand."

Regulations mandating inefficiency are common in commercial fisheries. They are adopted with social considerations in mind — since we have to limit the catch, let's help the fishers by keeping as many of them employed as possible. A result of this Luddite thinking is to raise prices to the consumer. Imagine what would happen to the price of farm commod-

ities if farmers were required to use oxen instead of tractors.

When it has been shown that the total take of a wild renewable resource for commercial purposes must be limited, it is in the public interest that it be taken as efficiently as possible, with safeguards only as appropriate against monopoly. Fishing or hunting for pleasure by amateurs is, of course, an entirely different matter.

JOHN P. WISS  
Washington, April 23, 1991

The writer is a consultant on marine fisheries.

## Conflicts of Interest

To the Editor:

Your April 22 front page article on fishing rights brings to light the issue of privatization of a common resource, the United States fisheries. This problem has been exacerbated if it was not originated by a conflict of interest illustrated by the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council. This council selects which boat owners should get the exclusive rights of the fishery.

You quote Clem Tillion, an adviser to the Governor of Alaska and a council member. He has children who would be recipients of part of the multibillion-dollar permit program despite his statement that he "does not care who gets the gravy."

Another member of the council is the paid director of a vessel owners' association, and two other council members are owners of boats in the fishery. This blatant conflict of interest would seem to make it impossible for the council to make any objective decision in the public interest.

Action must be taken to manage this renewable resource before it is irreparably depleted as the Atlantic fishery has been. However, the problem lies within appropriate management of the fisheries. Giving the fish to a relatively few self-serving individuals does not benefit anyone except them. If the American public is not going to get any return for this resource through a public auction, the rights should be leased to qualified individuals free, with a "use it or lose it" policy so that the next person would have the chance to fish as well.

If we can afford even to consider giving this resource away, we can certainly afford to manage it properly.

LAURA COOPER  
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Fisheries Protection Association  
Seattle, April 23, 1991