

# Dear Senator: Don't gut fish laws

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The last thing the American public expects from the 104th Congress is environmentally friendly legislation, but the U.S. Senate may be ready to deliver just that. The Magnuson Fishery Management and Conservation Act (S.39) is expected to reach the Senate floor soon. The U.S. House of Representatives passed its version (H.R. 39) last fall.

The Magnuson Act was enacted in 1976 to protect U.S. waters from foreign factory trawlers and established a 200-mile U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone. At that time, the Act also provided loans for U.S. fishermen and companies to enter the fisheries now vacant of foreign industrial vessels. Finally, the Act established regional fishery management councils for continuing management of U.S. fisheries. For the past four years, debate has continued for the current reauthorization effort.

In the same two decades, U.S. fisheries have seen the introduction of multinational companies, fishing leviathans who exploit the fisheries with little regard for the health of fish stocks and whose lobbyists have been manipulating the legislative process in Washington, D.C. and the management process in the regional councils. As a result, the councils have spent more effort working on behalf of the economic health of a few large corporations than for the biological health of our marine resource. The result: collapsed fisheries and decimated fishing communities.

The shortcomings of the current

Magnuson Act continue to endanger our fisheries. Equally important, because the Act has been manipulated to favor only economic efficiency, failure to amend the law could lead to further industrialization of our fisheries. The industrialized fleet of factory trawlers, owned by multinational corporations and other overcapitalized fishing fleets, could dominate and possibly own exclusive rights to fish our oceans at the expense of the fish stocks.

Another victim of fishery industrialization are traditional small scale fishing communities. Although some criticize the notion that fishing communities can be stewards of the ocean, they are far more trustworthy and capable than Wall Street driven corporations.

In late 1995, the House of Representatives passed a strong reauthorization of the Magnuson Act. The H.R. 39 gives clear directions to regional councils to stop overfishing, reduce bycatch and waste of unwanted fish, protect ocean habitat and to stop large corporations from gaining exclusive rights to public fisheries by stopping Individual Transferable Quotas. An additional amendments would require consideration of fishery-dependent communities and preserve our nation's fishing heritage. The Senate is now considering a similar Magnuson reauthorization bill and should pass it.

It should not be surprising, then, that Washington Senators Patty Murray (D) and Slade Gorton (R) are bowing once again to the pressures of the Seattle-based factory trawl fleet. Because his fish-wasting

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constituents don't want this improved Magnuson Act to disturb their stranglehold on our fishery managers, Senators Gorton is threatening an anti-Magnuson filibuster on the Senate floor.

To compromise our fisheries for the short-term economic benefit of a factory fleet is a bargain we can ill afford. Fishermen, fishing organizations and fishing communities from New England to Alaska, as well as the public and environmental organizations, recognize the need for a

strong Magnuson Act. We recognize that to restore the health of our oceans and the dignity of our fishing communities, the Senate needs to follow the House of Representatives with a strong bill.

The first environmental bill with the potential to pass this Congress must not be compromised. The unique opportunity to save our fisheries and jobs in our fishing communities presented by this Magnuson reauthorization needs the support of our senators from sea to shining sea. The future and health of our seas depend on it.