DECLARATION OF DISASTER
AFFECTING THE NEW ENGLAND FISHING INDUSTRY

Groundfish resources (e.g. cod-like fishes, flounders and hakes) off New England have experienced significant changes in abundance during the past 30 years and have now fallen to all time record lows. In 1965, about 780,000 metric tons of groundfish were harvested off the New England states and the adjacent Canadian provinces. Total landings of groundfish off New England declined to only about 100,000 metric tons in 1993, and will be lower yet in 1994. United States landings of groundfish have declined from about 200,000 metric tons in 1980 to about 65,000 metric tons in 1993, and expected landings will be significantly lower in 1994.

The spawning stock biomasses of all major stocks are at or near record low levels and recruitment, especially since 1987, has been poor. As a result, stock abundance is at very low levels. Three of the most important groundfish species, cod, haddock and yellowtail flounder, could produce sustainable yields in excess of 100,000 metric tons; however, the actual yield of these three species was only 26,000 mt in 1993 and will likely decline to 17,000 mt in 1994.

The size of the Georges Bank haddock stock peaked in 1965 and declined substantially throughout the 1960's and early 1970's. A subsequent increase in spawning biomass in the 1970's was due to two moderate size year classes (1975 and 1978). Since that time haddock spawning biomass has declined to record low levels of less than 10,000 metric tons in 1994.

The spawning biomass of Georges Bank cod peaked in the early 1980's and again in 1989-1991. During the last three years, the spawning stock biomass of cod has declined by about half, to an estimated 35,000 metric tons in 1994. Strong year classes supported the cod landings throughout the 1980's, but recruitment to that stock in the past several years has declined substantially. Landings of this stock in 1994 are predicted to be the lowest level since 1962.

The spawning stock biomass of Southern New England yellowtail flounder is now estimated to be about 1,000 mt, down from 21,000 mt as late as 1989. The collapse of this stock is attributable to the lack of significant year classes spawned since 1987, combined with high exploitation.

Adequate spawning stock biomasses are the key to assuring sustainable harvests at higher levels in the future. Variations in biomass are dependent upon the combined effects of natural and fishing mortality. There is no doubt that groundfish stocks off New England have declined primarily because of excessive fishing. However, those variables that determine fluctuations in natural mortality are not fully known, especially at low stock levels. Thus, our understanding of the mechanisms determining stock

levels is incomplete. The probability and frequency of "good" year classes increases as spawning biomasses are built-up. Thus, even though there may be year-to-year fluctuations in recruitment due to changing environmental conditions, there is adequate stock biomass to sustain moderate levels of harvest, even when spawning is poor in any one year. This resilience in the population is the key to building sustainable fisheries. The present condition of the spawning stocks suggests that recruitment and therefore catches will not increase in the near future unless spawning stocks are rebuilt.

Amendment #5 to the Northeast Multispecies Fishery Management Plan (groundfish), was designed to halt, over five years, the decline in selected stocks. Amendment #5, however, will not result in significant rebuilding for the majority of the groundfish stocks. Economic analyses of Amendment #5 project fleet groundfish revenues to decline eleven percent per year for five years and profits to decline by six percent for three years. The situation will be disastrous for many marginal firms.

The National Marine Fisheries Service's Northeast Fisheries Science Center estimated employment in all fisheries in New England at 28,000 persons in 1987. Employment in the processing sector, including New York and New Jersey, was estimated at 11,000 persons. Assuming that a 50 percent reduction in fishing effort is necessary to address the fishery resource disaster, up to 20,000 jobs are expected to be lost.

Therefore, in light of the foregoing facts, I hereby declare that a fishery resource disaster exists under section 308(b) of the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act of 1986, as amended.

Ronald H. Brown
Secretary of Commerce

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