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***Commerce Secretary Daley Announces
West Coast Groundfish Fishery Failure***

West Coast groundfish fishermen, who face a steep drop in their harvest this year, are a step closer to getting federal relief with Commerce Secretary William M. Daley's determination today of a commercial fishery failure for their industry.

The official determination comes after a sharp decline in catches of groundfish -- principally a wide variety of rockfishes -- from California to Washington.

"Our challenge now is to minimize economic and social impacts on fishing communities while protecting and rebuilding groundfish stocks," Secretary Daley said. "This determination is the first step in the process of securing funds from Congress to assist fishermen who have been hit hard in the past several years."

West Coast fishermen have seen catches for the entire industry go from a 20-year average of about 74,000 tons to less than 36,000 tons last year. Landings this year are projected to be about 27,000 tons.

Scientists with the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Commerce Department agency charged with managing marine fish stocks, state the disaster is the result of undetermined, but probably natural, causes. The agency's goal has been to manage the fishery conservatively in the face of scientific uncertainty, which has resulted in reduced quotas and revenues. Factors that may have contributed to the declines include changes in ocean conditions, low productivity, and five El Niño events since 1982.

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The declines are particularly unfortunate, according to NOAA Fisheries researchers, because many of the species take a long time to mature and reproduce, making population recovery a very lengthy process.

The dock-side value of the affected groundfish fell from around \$72 million in 1994 to \$52 million in 1998. It is estimated that as a result of this fishery disaster determination, West Coast fishermen have suffered an \$11 million loss of revenue.

"A major underlying cause for the current situation is the lack of basic scientific data about these fish," said Penny Dalton, NOAA Fisheries director. "If money is made available, we would like to work with fishermen to gather more data and improve our understanding of this valuable fishery."

There are presently no funds appropriated to assist fishermen in adjusting to the effects of the groundfish stock declines. If Congress does appropriate funds, they will likely be used by federal agencies and the states to assess the economic and social effects of the commercial fishery failure, assist individuals and communities, and support activities that would restore the fishery or prevent a similar failure in the future. Federal disaster assistance funds can fund up to 75% of a relief program, while the other 25% percent must come from a non-federal source, typically the affected state.

In other fishery disaster determinations, notably those for New England groundfish and for Northwest salmon fisheries, funds have been used for activities such as vessel and permit buyouts, job retraining, economic diversification, grants for cooperative research, and paying fishermen for habitat restoration work and data collection.

"West Coast fishermen have expressed interest in developing a program to buy out vessels or permits to reduce pressure on the fish stocks as they begin their recovery," said Dalton.

Under Section 312(a) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, NOAA Fisheries can declare a commercial fisheries disaster if requested to do so by a governor, or at the Secretary's discretion. The Secretary must determine that a fishery resource disaster resulted from either natural causes, man-made causes beyond the control of fishery managers, or undetermined causes. Further, if a commercial fishery failure occurred, then it must have resulted from the fishery resource disaster.

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