

Fishing industry to get \$13.4m in aid

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By Christopher Baxter, Globe Correspondent | June 10, 2008

State officials announced a \$13.4 million relief package yesterday for the Massachusetts fishing industry, which has been struggling against staggering fuel costs and fishing regulations, but fishermen said it is not enough to permanently keep the fleets afloat.

"It's bad right now, but this money will help people meet basic needs," said Angela Sanfilippo, president of the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association, who was among several advocates at a press conference announcing the plans. The price of oil has made fleets more expensive to operate, an increase that is passed on to customers who buy fish.

"Now you have to make a catch, otherwise you still pay all the cost, and it just keeps adding up," said fisherman Jerry Leeman III, 26, of Oar Island, Maine. Leeman said he came to Massachusetts for work to support his children's healthcare costs. "We'll see how much of the money we get at the end of the day," he said.

Recent restrictions have reduced the days at sea and catch limits for fishermen, "all of which compounded to have a disproportionate impact on Massachusetts vessels compared to fleets elsewhere in the region," Governor Deval Patrick said as he unveiled the relief package yesterday on the Boston Fish Pier.

About \$11.3 million will help fish permit holders, usually fishing captains, pay for upkeep on commercial groundfishing vessels across the state, said Robert Keough, spokesman for the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs. Another \$750,000 will go directly to qualified crewmembers for personal expenses, such as a home mortgage, and \$630,000 will fund a health insurance program for crewmembers and their families, Keough said. The remaining \$700,000 will cover administrative fees.

Patrick estimated that federally imposed fishing regulations have cost the state \$22 million, making it difficult for families in port towns such as Gloucester and New Bedford to make ends meet.

Tory Bramante, a fleet owner with Atlantic Coast Seafood Inc., said the state's plan is only a temporary solution.

"A better system has to be put in place," Bramante said. "This will just help keep the boats alive."

The relief came as part of the Omnibus Appropriations Bill, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in December.

"It's been a struggle to get the administration to listen to fishermen," US Senator John F. Kerry said at

the press conference. "I've been down to this pier when we had 75 or 80 boats. Now, we're down to a few."

Kerry championed the aid, along with Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

Federal and state fish permit holders will receive applications for aid as soon as tomorrow. The paperwork will also be available at the Division of Marine Fisheries' website, mass.gov/dfwele/dmf/index.html.

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