

Rebecca - Speech & Statement file

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STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN LES AUCOIN
MAGNUSON ACT FIELD HEARINGS
MARCH 18, 1985
NEWPORT, OREGON

I'd like to begin the hearing by making a comment or two of my own about these hearings and the process we're about ready to go through in Congress on the Magnuson Act.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Magnuson Fisheries Management and Conservation Act which created the 200 mile coastal fisheries management zone. It was a far-reaching law and its drafters expected that it be looked at top to bottom before being reauthorized at the end of its first ten year period. We're here today in Newport to help do just that. Hearings open later this month on Capitol Hill when the House Merchant Marine Committee begins to look at what parts of the Act are working and what parts are not.

My colleagues and I don't want the record book of those hearings to close without the voices of the people we work for being directly expressed and made part of the consideration of any changes that are to be made to the 200 mile conservation zone act.

So, we've brought this congressional hearing to you today as a chance to tell the Merchant Marine Committee and the Congress how the 200 mile management zone can be changed to work better for all of us.

Congressman Bosco and I began these extraordinarily important field hearings last Saturday in Eureka, California, and we will conclude them here in Newport today. I will have an additional hearing in Astoria in April so that some of the North Coast users can testify. Tomorrow, when I return to Washington, I will lay before my colleagues the record of your testimony and of your colleagues who testified last week in Eureka.

Before we go into the hearing itself, I'd like to make a couple of observations. Number one, the Magnuson Act clearly has not lived up to the expectations of either the fishing industry or its legislative sponsors. To illustrate the point, I've got to quote from the original committee report that accompanied the bill when it passed Congress when I was afreshman in the House of Representatives. These are the words -- I want us all to listen to them:

"The United States, with one of the longest coastlines of any nation and some of the richest fishing areas of the world ocean may well be capable of providing in the order of ten million tons of food per year ... a new opportunity for our people and a new responsibility for our government... a wise and forward-looking program will rehabilitate our domestic fisheries while permitting controlled fishing by foreign fleets on those stocks not used by United States fishermen."

Ringing words. Does it sound like the Magnuson Act as you've come to know it? I don't think, so and as one fisherman told Congressman Bosco and I on Saturday, under this program, instead of ringing words, terms like maximum sustainable yield have been substituted for a concept best described as "maximum sustainable management."

I think the facts bear him out. Among the facts are these -- commercial landings have steadily declined since 1981. America is still a net importer of fish products from abroad. Last year there was no commercial coho season off the coast of Oregon; no commercial season for the species most important economically for our salmon industry. Options for the 1985 ocean salmon season announced just last week offer no relief for the calamity that we've seen in recent years.

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The commercial chinook season is half what it was in 1979. Groundfishermen are operating under daily and weekly catch limits. Processors are going out of business. And none of those facts matches the ringing words in the committee report on the passage of the original Magnuson Act by any stretch of the imagination.

Part of all of those problems can be traced to the impacts of El Nino. You have told me this many times, and I certainly agree. And I also agree with fishermen when they tell me not all of the blame or results can be laid to El Nino. When you have fishermen burning their boats and burning Jack Donaldson in effigy its clear that we have some serious problems in our fisheries.

There is a lack of trust between the Council and between Oregon and West Coast fishermen. There is a lack of coordinated management of the type envisioned in the Act. Those facts disturb me as one of the original sponsors of the Act. We seek today to gather your ideas on ways to change those problems.

While I'll be listening, as will my colleagues, to your ideas, I come to these hearings with a couple of impressions at the outset.

I think the time has come to give users a real voice in their economic destiny and a real voice on the Management Council. That time has come.

Secondly, although this is not the only other observation I go into these hearings with, I think the time has also come fopr the Magnuson Act to get serious about protection and rehabilitation of the critical habitat that this resource depends upon. We need to put teeth in the Act to provide that protection.

You cannot manage the salmon fishery, it seems to me, solely in the ocean. Management by closure and buy-out plans are not what I worked for or what my colleagues worked for when we stood by the fishermen and passed one of the landmark pieces of fisheries legisltion, the 200 mile fishing limit in 1975. Instead of regulation of the wreckage of this industry it's time to deal with root issues. One of those is to put serious effort into how deliberative decisions are made and how to manage on the front end of this business. That means saving and restoring salmon habitat to rebuild this resource for the benefit of all of us.

These are only a few of the issues that I expect to come out in the hearing today as they did in Eureka. There are many more. I am here not to give testimony myself, but to take it -- and to take it back to Washington so we can make the sound improvements we need.

We thank all of you for coming today.