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Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Response: Congress should keep fishermen and coastal communities working

Background

On May 12, 2010, the Obama Administration proposed a legislative package to initially respond to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill that included an unemployment assistance program and fisheries disaster funding. The proposed unemployment assistance program would provide up to 26 weeks of benefits to self-employed workers that are unemployed as a result of the spill.

Fisheries disaster funds would provide compensation to fishermen for their lost earnings. To be eligible for these funds, the Secretary of Commerce must declare a fisheries disaster (which the Secretary did on May 24, 2010) and Congress must appropriate funds for this purpose.

Although these benefits would provide temporary unemployment assistance and compensation to help fishermen and coastal communities in the short-term, this spill threatens to be a long-term problem that could keep fishermen off the water and out of work for months or even years.

Congress cannot rely on BP to support our fishing fleet as fisheries recover. BP currently employs some fishermen to do oil spill response work, but early issues regarding liability waivers and the prospect of future liability claims has made participation controversial.

The Coastal Jobs Creation Act

H.R. 4914, the Coastal Jobs Creation Act of 2010, was introduced in March by Representatives Pallone (D-NJ), Shea-Porter (D-NH) and Pingree (D-ME) to create jobs for fishermen and coastal communities nationwide as depleted fish populations rebuild. While no one bill will solve all of the problems we face in the wake of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the Coastal Jobs Creation Act will create jobs for Gulf fishermen and coastal communities that would improve data collection and restoration efforts:

1. The Coastal Jobs Creation Act authorizes \$80 million a year over the next 5 years for grants that will be administered through existing programs to employ fishermen and benefit coastal communities, for a total of \$400 million.
2. While not drafted as a response to the Deepwater Horizon spill, the Coastal Jobs Creation Act includes provisions that would facilitate post-spill assessment, mitigation and restoration programs that are urgently needed in the Gulf region. Specifically, the bill would:
 - Support cooperative research between fishermen and scientists to:
 - Collect data on economic and social impacts of fisheries management;
 - Restore habitats; and
 - Enhance stock assessments.

- Preserve and restore the ocean environment, including research and restoration within the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, the National Marine Sanctuary System, and coral reef ecosystems;
 - Use fishermen and their boats to reduce and prevent marine debris; and
 - Revitalize working waterfronts and ports.
3. The Coastal Jobs Creation Act includes important provisions that will ensure maximum benefit for the Gulf's coastal economy and ocean ecosystem, including a requirement to employ the maximum number of fishermen possible, and an administrative cap of 5%.

Gulf fishermen face unprecedented economic and environmental uncertainty, and Members of Congress should take decisive action for fishermen that will improve the ocean environment and preserve their coastal heritage.

While the spill will keep fishermen from fishing in affected areas, it does not have to keep them off the water. Fishermen have unique skills and capabilities that come from years of on-the-water experience. Those skills and capabilities can be put to good use helping the Gulf ecosystem recover from the spill.

For more information, please contact:

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