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Packed crowd addresses NOAA leader; residents express deep concerns about catch shares, Navy testing

By JUSTINE FREDERIKSEN Ukiah Daily Journal -

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A crowd of concerned fishermen, environmentalists and others filled the chambers of the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors Thursday afternoon, Dec. 9, to share their complaints, ideas and worries with Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"I can tell you that Rep. Mike Thompson is a very eloquent and persuasive champion for your concerns and interests," said Lubchenco, addressing the packed room. "And it is at his request that I am here, because it is important that I hear from you directly. We may not agree, but it is important for me to hear what you have to say."

Lubchenco, who wore a red crab pin, praised the newly signed National Ocean Policy, which she said "in no uncertain terms declares that healthy oceans and coastlines matter, and provides a way for the federal government to work with local communities" to protect them.

"Currently, we manage activities [such as shipping, water usage] in a very piecemeal way, and that hodgepodge approach isn't working, [because] it isn't allowing us to address the inevitable conflicts between these actions," she said. "We all want clean beaches, fresh, healthy seafood and vibrant coastal communities — to have that, we need to work together, and that's what the National Ocean Policy

is all about."

Lubchenco also addressed catch shares, which many of the citizens came to voice their concerns about.

According to NOAA, catch share programs include "limited access

privilege programs and individual fishing quotas and dedicate a secure share of fish to individual fishermen, cooperatives or fishing communities."

"Catch shares are just one tool, and I believe they are a valuable tool if they are well-dispersed," said Lubchenco.

However, many fishermen who spoke last Thursday believe catch shares will mean the end of their livelihoods.

"There are six trawl fishermen in Fort Bragg, and all are concerned [whether] they are going to be able to stay in business," said Daniel Platt of Fort Bragg, while another fisherman from Fort Bragg had similar concerns.

"I take issue with catch shares being described as only one tool. According to the [Pacific Fishery Management Council], that is the tool," said Tom Estes, who said he shares a family fleet with his sons. "The more we talk, the more frightened I get. My son says that this might be the nail in the coffin, and I agree."

Vivian Helliwell described catch shares as "social engineering and market manipulation" that "the little guys always lose out on." She added that they would take the "fishing out of our community," and "mean the end of the fishing industry on the West Coast."

Judith Vidaver of the Ocean Protection Coalition had

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stronger words.

"We've taken such good care of our oceans, we don't really need you," Vidaver said. "I suggest you take your programs somewhere else."

Dusty Dillon, who said he was a property owner in Fort Bragg, provided the crowd with some comic relief when he suggested to Lubchenco that "we've got a lot of empty buildings if you'd like to open a local office. We're trying to revitalize our waterfront."

Other speakers urged Lubchenco to rescind the permit NOAA recently granted to the U.S. Navy to begin five years of "warfare testing and exercises" in the Northwest Training Range Complex, which includes Northern California, Oregon, Washington and Idaho.

Lubchenco then took 10 minutes to address the numerous concerns raised.

"Thank you for your heartfelt, respectful and passionate comments, which give me hope that we can find solutions for the majority of these issues," she said. "I share many of the concerns that many of you raised, and you've also put new issues on our radar."

As for catch shares, Lubchenco said, "I urge you to keep an open mind. The results depend on the design of the catch share program, which is a much more powerful tool for creating sustainable fisheries than the traditional management. My commitment to you is to continue to work to address these concerns."

When a member of the audience asked her what she planned to do about the Navy's testing permit, Lubchenco said that was "also an area where I have serious concerns. We are in active discussions with the Navy. There is a lot we don't know about the

impact of sonar on whales, and we will continue to get the information we need to reach the best possible outcomes."

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