Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

September 17, 2012

The Honorable Harry Reid
Majority Leader
S-221, United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Republican Leader
S-230, United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable John A. Boehner
Speaker
H-232, United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Minority Leader
H-204, United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Majority Leader Reid, Minority Leader McConnell, Speaker Boehner, and Minority Leader Pelosi:

Last Thursday, the Department of Commerce declared a fishery failure for the Northeast multispecies fishery for the 2013 season. As such, the federal government must take timely action to assist fishermen and fishing communities across the Northeast and pursue management policies that both address the long-term situation and the immediate difficulties in the industry. Therefore, working within our fiscal constraints, we request your assistance in providing $100 million in federal economic disaster assistance for the Northeast multispecies fishery.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, once the Department has determined that a commercial fishery failure has occurred, Congress may provide assistance by allocating federal funding to the affected states and providing oversight. We are writing in support of providing such economic relief to assist fishermen and fishing communities in the Northeast as they work to adjust to a perfect storm of events that threatens the future one of our nation's oldest and most storied industries. The assistance would be used to help ease the economic effects of federal regulations imposed to stop what the Department and fishermen anticipate will be dramatic declines in groundfish stocks in the Northeast multispecies fishery, while also providing critical investments to make the industry more sustainable in the long term.

In recent years, our fishermen and fishing communities have been struggling to survive amid federal regulations that have limited fishing opportunities. As a result, many fishermen are drawing on personal income or extended credit, shifting more fishing costs to crew, shrinking crew size, or postponing vessel maintenance.

The problems facing our fishermen and fishing related businesses have been exacerbated by a significant reduction in the 2012 Annual Catch Limit (ACL) for Gulf of Maine cod, an important stock for the Northeast industry. This reduction was precipitated by a 2011 National Marine Fisheries Service ("NMFS") stock assessment that determined that the stock may not be as healthy as previously thought. Preliminary indications are that ACL may be further reduced next year – potentially by as much as 72 percent – and other critical stocks of cod, yellowtail, haddock, and plaice may see similarly dramatic reductions. It is likely that these reduced ACLs would be in place for several years, further compounding the impact of these cuts to the industry. That these cuts would come after Northeast fishermen have already implemented considerable changes to make the

fishery more sustainable, changes to which ample evidence suggests stocks are not responding as predicted, has seriously eroded confidence in the science behind the management.

Therefore, we respectfully request that you work with us to ensure adequate economic relief is available to help Northeast fishermen and fishing communities endure what is becoming one of the most challenging situations in the history of the Northeast groundfish fishery. This includes support for economic development programs including financial counseling and job training assistance.

Specifically, we ask that funds be set aside to cover fully the at-sea monitoring costs for the next two fishing years and that you work with us to ensure a longer term federal commitment on these costs. We are concerned that the at-sea monitoring costs for our fishermen would represent an out of pocket expense that could force many fishermen out of business and reduce profitability of other fishermen at a time when they already face severe economic challenges. Increased observer coverage is critical to strengthening the science, but we also need to investigate options that could reduce costs. Similarly, funds should be set aside to support sector operating costs, which represent another strain on the industry.

In addition, it is critically important that funds be used to improve the quality of - and confidence in - stock assessments. Additional resources are needed for more timely assessments, using the best available technology and new research to determine the causes of recent stock declines. New assessments must be done in the closest collaboration with both local scientific experts and our fishermen. Involving fishermen in the collection of this data through cooperative research could go a long ways toward not only improving our understanding of the status of the stocks but also fishermen's degree of confidence in the reliability of NMFS data. The severity of the potential consequences demand that every possible step is taken to ensure that the data used to set catch limits is as robust and accurate as possible, with buy-in from the people whose livelihoods are most affected by the results. This new assessment approach is essential for building trust and support in the data used to make important management decisions going forward.

Fishermen and fishing related businesses in coastal communities around the Northeast are bracing for these additional limits on fishing, which have the potential to force a significant portion of the industry out of business. It is our understanding that these declines are not related to any recent inappropriate levels of harvest by fishermen who have followed federal management plans and that environmental variables could be affecting stock recovery.

Thank you for your attention and your support for improving conditions for the fishermen throughout the Northeast. We remain committed to preserving and promoting our fishing industry and to lessening the burden of federal regulations on our fishermen and their families. We look

forward to continuing to work with you to quickly and effectively address this very concerning development to this critical industry.

Sincerely,

John F. Kerry
United States Senator

Olympia J. Snowe
United States Senator

Scott P. Brown
United States Senator

Susan M. Collins
United States Senator

Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator

Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator

Charles E. Schumer
United States Senator

Kirsten E. Gillibrand
United States Senator

Jack Reed
United States Senator

Kelly Ayotte
United States Senator

Joseph I. Lieberman
United States Senator

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator