

West Coast trawlers score win in new federal spending plan

*The Columbia Press
and news services*

West Coast trawlers scored a major win in the 2020 federal spending plan signed into law by President Trump at the end of December.

The pair of bills set funding for every agency in the federal government, providing many with a significant spending boost.

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., proposed the government forgive more than \$10 million in accrued loan interest that was forced onto the West Coast groundfishing fleet.

“(It’s) a huge victory for our coastal communities in Oregon and up and down the West Coast,” said Merkley, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, which negotiated the spending bills.

He blamed mismanagement by the National Marine Fisheries Service for the debt debacle.

“It was outrageous that the federal government forced family fishermen to foot the bill because of bureaucratic incompetence,” he said. “This win will lift a huge burden off our trawlers’ backs, helping them keep their small businesses afloat and keep our coastal economies humming.”

The language added to the bills was co-sponsored by Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore.; Sens. Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, both D-Wash.; Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Kamala Harris, both D-Calif.; and U.S. Reps. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore.; Greg Walden, R-Ore.; Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Wash.; Kurt Schrader, D-Ore.; Suzanne Bonamici, D-Ore.; and Jared Huffman, D-Calif.

After the Secretary of Commerce declared the West

Coast groundfish fishery an economic disaster in 2000, the NMFS provided a \$36 million buyout loan to retire one-third of the fishing fleet to reduce overcapacity.

After providing the loan, however, the NMFS inexplicably failed for nearly two years to implement a repayment mechanism and refused to allow the owners of the remaining vessels to start paying off the loan.

As a result, \$4 million in interest accrued before repayment was even permitted to start.

The additional interest has grown over time; the industry today owes at least \$10 million more than

it would have if repayment had started immediately as intended.

Over the years, this additional interest has created an albatross around the

neck of an industry that already faces significant challenges.

“Oregonians working on trawlers along the coast can now enter the new year without this senseless burden on the bottom line of their fishing operations,” Wyden said.


“Fishing on the Oregon Coast for a living is a key piece of our state’s economy that never should have been a victim of this bureaucratic bungling, and I am glad to have teamed up with fishermen and my congressional colleagues to get this problem fixed.”




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