

Wiggins introduces legislation in support of health care for fishing men and women

Contributed by Editor
Saturday, 31 May 2008

NORTH COAST -‐ North Coast State Senator Patricia Wiggins (D-Santa Rosa) has introduced legislation calling on the U.S. Congress and President George W. Bush to enact the federal "Commercial Fishing Health Care Coverage Act of 2008," which would provide coverage for the nation's commercial fishing men and women.

Wiggins, who chairs the Joint Legislative Committee on Fisheries and Aquaculture, said that even though commercial fishing remains one of the nation's most dangerous professions, the number of men and women in that industry who lack health insurance is "three to four times greater than the national average."

Her measure, Senate Joint Resolution 31, calls on the President, Vice President Dick Cheney, and members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to enact the "Commercial Fishing Health Care Coverage Act," which is contained in two federal bills, S. 2630 and HR 5404, introduced by a bi-partisan group of Congressional representatives. If they were to become law, the federal bills would authorize funding to coastal states for planning and implementation of health care programs specific to the needs of a state's commercial fishing fleet.

SJR 31 has yet to be scheduled for its first hearing. The bill reads as follows:

"WHEREAS, The fishing fleet of California and the nation is essential to provide to the public local fish and shellfish resources, treasured for their flavor and health benefits, to defray imports of seafood from other nations and mitigate the United States seafood trade deficit, to produce fish for export, and to create employment and economic activity in our coastal communities while maintaining and enhancing the historical, cultural, and tourism value of those regions; and

"WHEREAS, Commercial fishing, America's oldest industry, remains one of the nation's most dangerous professions, fraught with economic uncertainty, thus difficult to meet the needs of private insurers to develop group health care or offer individual coverage to fishing men and women and their families; and

"WHEREAS, Fishing incomes are often lower than the national average and fishing men and women struggle with market forces beyond their control, including fluctuations in fish stocks, import competition, rising fuel costs, and natural disasters; and

"WHEREAS, Fishing men and women working aboard United States registered fishing vessels, along with seamen employed on United States merchant vessels, were provided health care from 1799 to 1981, inclusive, through the nation's marine hospitals, which grew into the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) and its contract physicians; and

"WHEREAS, Fishing men and women were never covered under worker's compensation laws due to access to "maintenance and cure" provided to them until 1981 by the USPHS and, since 1981, have found it difficult to find health care coverage tailored for the fishing fleet, creating a population of fishing men and women lacking health care coverage at three to four times greater than the national average; and

"WHEREAS, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts identified fishing men and women as an "at risk" population, even before it mandated health care coverage for all its citizens and, since 1997, has provided low-cost health care coverage for its fishing families; and

"WHEREAS, The Massachusetts Fishing Partnership Health Plan provides coverage to over 2,000 fishing men and women and their families, reducing the rate of Massachusetts fishing families without health care coverage from 43 percent to 13 percent; and

"WHEREAS, The success of the Massachusetts Fishing Partnership Health Plan serving as a model to address the health care crisis facing the rest of America's fishing fleet, members of the Massachusetts and Alaska congressional delegations, in a bi-partisan and bi-coastal effort in the United States House of Representatives and Senate to reestablish federal support for health care for the United States fishing fleet, have introduced "The Commercial Fishing Industry Health Care Coverage Act of 2008," S. 2630 and H.R. 5404, to authorize funding to coastal states for planning and implementation of health care programs specific to the needs of a state's commercial fishing fleet; now, therefore, be it

Resolved by the Senate and the Assembly of the State of California, jointly, That the California Legislature memorializes to the United States House of Representatives and United States Senate that the health care crisis facing America's fishing men and women is acute, threatening the economic viability of the nation's fishing fleet and its associated public benefits and urges, therefore, passage of the Commercial Fishing Health Care Coverage Act; and be it further

Resolved, That the Secretary of the Senate transmit copies of this resolution to the President and Vice President of the United States, to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and to each Senator and Representative from California in the Congress of the United States, and to the author for appropriate distribution."

{mos_sb_discuss:3}