



# St. Thomas Fishermen's Association

## Protecting our Natural Heritage and Culture

May 28, 2011

Hon. Gary Locke  
U.S. Department of Commerce  
1401 Constitution Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Locke;

We have recently been told that you are not going to sign the Allowable Catch Limits set by the Caribbean Fishery Management Council. Since these ACLs impose no catch reductions on Puerto Rico where overfishing has been well documented, we tend to be in agreement with your unwillingness to approve them.

However, we have been told that the reason for your reluctance is based upon the need for additional coral reef protection and that, yet again, Virgin Islands fishermen are likely to be punished when their actions represent a very small portion of the problem facing corals in the Virgin Islands. Now NMFS is trying to backdoor additional reductions by using Protected Resources threats in order to force ACL levels below those set by the Council. This needs to stop!

Fishermen have done enough and they need to be credited for their sacrifices. Over the past several decades St. Thomas fishermen have:

- Lost 51 square km. of fishing area which was illegally appropriated by the Dept. of Interior from Virgin Islands Territorial waters for the National Coral Reef Monument.
- Supported 16 sq. mi. of spawning aggregation MCDs for red hinds and yellowfin groupers.
- Sacrificed 25% of the fishing year for snappers and groupers.
- Agreed to an additional 15% reduction for snappers and for parrotfish in the ACL process.
- Increased fish trap mesh size to 2 in in order increase release of bycatch.
- Carried out research programs dealing with by catch release, lost traps and escape vents to further increase by catch escapement.
- Agreed to a 20% reduction in the number of fish traps in use.

Throughout this same period, development on land has near totally replaced marine sediments with terrestrial run off, killing near all inshore *Acropora* and threatening coastal nursery grounds. Hovensa, Cruzan and now Diageo have released uncounted millions of gallons of toxic chemicals in St. Croix. The government of the Virgin Islands has contaminated important nursery grounds with sewage and landfill leachate. Fishery impacts pale when compared to these.

The Department of Commerce and its various agencies need to man up and deal with the real problems which stem from land based development, industrial pollution and governments release of untreated sewage and seepage from landfills.

Again, it is time for government to get serious and do something about these difficult problems which truly threaten coral reefs. You cannot simply keep asking fishermen to pay the price for coral protection.

We support the following:

A “Coral Conservation Superfund” should be created to fund actual restorative, offset and protective activities which can be undertaken with a reasonable chance of success. Funds should come from:

- Permit fees for every development project on the islands.
- Pollutant fees imposed upon Hovensa, Cruzan , Diageo and the Territorial Government.
- Tourism fees imposed on cruise ship visitors, hotel visitors, dive shops, charter boats and other aspects of the tourism industry which enjoy local reefs.
- Federal government contributions.

The fund should be co-managed by both Federal and Territorial entities in order to insure that activities are both meaningful and likely to achieve success. If progress is made to deal with these issues we would willingly participate because we understand that healthy reefs can only benefit our fisheries.

You cannot protect coral reefs by continually throttling back fisheries activities and ignore the real culprits. It is time for the Department of Commerce, Coastal Zone Management, and National Marine Fisheries Service to deal meaningfully with protection of coral reefs and quit using fishermen as scapegoats.

Thank you;



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Cc: Donna Christiansen, Delegate to Congress  
Jane Lubchenco, NOAA Administrator  
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