

CMFC SCOPING MEETING - STX

May 7, 2009

STATEMENT FROM DELEGATE DONNA M. CHRISTENSEN

I submit these remarks to you not only in my capacity as the U.S. Virgin Islands Delegate to Congress but also as a concerned citizen.

As a member of Congress and of this community, I support not only our fishermen, but also other stakeholders that have a vested interest in protecting our natural resources.

To this end, I am encouraged to learn that members of the fishing community have become more organized and more active in the decision making processes that govern our fisheries—I am confident that this and other efforts will help us to arrive at regulations that are thoughtful, progressive and sustainable over the long term.

I have worked with the fishermen of this community on various issues over the years. Time and time again, I have consistently seen their willingness to contribute their thoughts, ideas and concerns as it relates to the regulation of the Virgin Islands fishery. Like many of us here this evening, our territory's fishermen hope that we can arrive at a solution that motivates a sustainable fishery for generations to come.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the organizers of this meeting for facilitating an open forum where we can contribute our concerns and perspectives on the issues before the Caribbean Fishery Management Council and the Virgin Islands fishing community and I regret that I cannot be there in person.

As the council listens to public comment on how best to effectively manage our fishery, I implore this body to ensure that the entire process is guided by valid scientific principles, data generated from the Virgin Islands and full stakeholder participation—as this is the only way to ultimately achieve a successful management strategy.

While I cannot be at this meeting in person I want to assure our fishing community and all Crucians - as I had Mr. DeLagarde assure those in St. Thomas and St. John - that I wholeheartedly support the efforts to seek immediate resolve to the issues concerning our fisheries.

In my capacity as a Delegate to Congress, and a member of the Committee on Natural Resources where I am pleased to sit on the Subcommittee on Oceans and Wildlife for the first time, I am concerned about a number of issues before us this evening—

the lack of St. Croix and St. Thomas specific data to guide the proposals at hand, discrepancies in standards between the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, as well as the tendency to continue to hold one sector alone, responsible for the degradation of our fisheries and oceans—the fishing community—while development is allowed to be done and runoff sewage leaked into our waters without similar repercussions.

In previous years, I have proposed legislation that would extend our territorial waters equal to that of our Puerto Rican neighbors and have supported the fishing and conservation communities in other areas and I am going to reintroduce it again shortly, but I would recommend that it also be inserted into the proposed constitutional document.

As we move forward, as I have stated before, I cannot support measures that blatantly do not take into consideration, the geological, biological, ecological and socio-economic differences between St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Similarly, we must ensure that regulations on ACLs and established rulings for recreational fishermen are guided by data that clearly delineates the opportunities and challenges specific to the St. Croix and St. Thomas fishery.

As the council works to become compliant with federal mandates to enact a sound management plan and end overfishing, I am concerned that this has been done in absence of data that strictly explores the ecology of the Virgin Islands fishery and instead simply extrapolates lessons learned from similar cases, elsewhere in the Caribbean.

While I am fully aware of the difficulties and limitations to gathering the 'perfect' data set, I am interested in learning how existing U.S.V.I. data can be vetted and eventually utilized to overcome this obstacle.

If for some reason, it is not possible for existing data to be used, I would encourage this council or some other entity to aggressively pursue real time data that thoroughly establishes strong baselines and captures the current state of the fishery as reliably as possible.

Fishery issues in the Virgin Island and around the world encompass a myriad of biological, socio-economic, political and cultural sensitivities that must be considered when attempting mitigation. Though it is not evident to me that there has been a thorough evaluation of potential socio-economic impacts as stipulated by National Standard 8 of the Magnuson-Stevens Reauthorization Act, given that fishing is such an integral part of our economic, historic and cultural life, I hope it is the intent of this body to address such an important component at some point—sooner, before it is too late.

As we move forward on this and other issues that affect fisheries in the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, we must be ever conscious that management decisions are made in concert with those most intimately connected with the resource—Virgin Islands fishermen, scientists and the community at large.

I along with countless members of the community and my colleagues in Congress will look to see that input from these meetings are given due consideration and incorporated into final decisions and for increased levels of communication and cooperation between NOAA, the CFMC, local agencies and the fishing community.

While it is clear that there is no easy remedy to the challenges facing us—we must be certain that our solutions are equally dynamic, as the problems they are intended to solve.

I thank you for the opportunity to have this statement placed into the record of this scoping meeting and look forward to continuing to work together to seek a sensible and sensitive resolution to the issues before us.