

The budget measure — backed last week by the full Senate Appropriations Committee and its Commerce, Justice, Science subcommittee — would steer \$150 million into long-awaited disaster aid for Massachusetts fishermen as well as those in other New England states, Alaska and Mississippi.

That money, though it must hold up through approval by the full Senate and then reconciliation with a sister Appropriations measure from the House, would come nearly a year after the Department of Commerce recognized the Northeast groundfishery, with Gloucester's beleaguered fleet of small, independent and family-owned fishing boats, as an "economic disaster" in a declaration issued by then-Acting Commerce Secretary Rebecca Blank last September. And the bill would require NOAA to direct a portion of its revenue from seafood import duties toward the expanded fisheries research, as required by the 1954 Saltonstall-Kennedy Act.

According to the bill — geared toward the 2014 federal fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1 and runs through Sept. 30, 2014 — 10 percent of the revenues generated by the Saltonstall-Kennedy Act tariffs would have to be used for competitive grants toward community-based efforts that will help both fishing communities and industry itself modernize their fleets, shore services, and port facilities. The Saltonstall-Kennedy Act funds also could not be used for internal NOAA management; NOAA has instead used the tariff revenues to fund its operations for several years in spite of the 1954 provisions.

The Senate Appropriations measure, however, also states that, "given NOAA's lack of cooperation and reversal of commitment, the Committee has no choice but to take action and direct NOAA to close NERO (the Northeast Regional Office) immediately and to dissolve all necessary operations into existing facilities located throughout the region."

"Specifically, NOAA is directed to improve outreach and services to the fishing industry by configuring fishery science centers and fishery statistic offices as newly configured and less stove-piped portals to the local fishing communities," the bill reads. "With minimal overhead investment, including technology investment and updated staffing plans, these offices could be much better utilized to serve a larger NMFS (National Marine Fisheries Service) purpose. Instead of relying on, or having to travel to, the NERO office for direct industry support, fishermen would have better and more immediate access to NMFS support services at existing NMFS offices in their home states, if not their home ports.

"The committee directs NOAA to ensure that core NMFS support services be retained and accessible in all regions currently served by NERO, including New England, Mid-Atlantic, and South-Atlantic regions, at these local centers and offices. NOAA, in consultation with the Committee, shall work with the General Services Administration immediately to develop a plan to resolve NERO's current leased space (at Blackburn) and create a plan to redirect an adequate portion of NERO's larger operational costs to outfit the local regional offices."

The move is not the first time bill that Maryland U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, who chairs the full Appropriations Committee, has pushed to shut down the Gloucester-based Northeast Regional headquarters, from which NOAA Northeast Administrator John Bullard and some 200 other federal employees carry out regulation, enforcement and other services for East Coast fisheries ranging from Maine to the Carolinas,

Mikulski, citing NOAA's penchants for essentially ignoring congressional and other calls under then-chief administrator Jane Lubchenco, also sought to close the Northeast office and fold its operations into NOAA's national headquarters in Silver Spring, Md., in April 2012. But that bid never advanced after drawing swift and intense opposition from then-U.S. Sens. John Kerry and Scott Brown and from Congressman John Tierney.

The latest move to shut down the Gloucester's regional headquarters also comes on the heels of a February letter to Mikulski sent by Northeast fishermen themselves, including several whose boats run out of New Bedford and out of Gloucester as well.

In that petition, fishermen urged the Appropriations panel to eliminate all funding for the NOAA Northeast Office and the reallocation of "any salvaged funds to relief for the Northeast groundfish fleet."

The petitioners argued that by "closing the Northeast Regional Office in Gloucester and redirecting these funds to relief and programs benefiting the Northeast groundfish fleet, the Committee stands to support and advance important scientific research ... as well as much-needed more frequent assessments of the condition of managed species."