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Groups criticize Corzine for "business as usual"

Audubon Society, Sierra Club speak out after nomination

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The New Jersey Audubon Society and Sierra Club are pressing their criticism of Gov. Corzine's nominations this week to the state Marine Fisheries Council, with arguments that the panel needs representation from interests outside the fishing community.

"After the Marine Fisheries Council vote of 5 to 4 along special interest lines, I am extremely disappointed with the governor supporting business as usual," Eric Stiles of Audubon said in a statement today, referring to a close council vote Feb. 11 that rejected extending the moratorium on harvesting horseshoe crabs.

The state Department of Environmental Protection had asked the council to approve extending the 2-year-old ban, as a measure to maximize horseshoe crab eggs for feeding red knot shorebirds on Delaware Bay beaches.

Corzine on Monday nominated Rutgers University marine scientist Eleanor Bochenek and recreational fisherman Kenneth Jennings Jr. from Paramus to a pair of vacant seats on the council, which is unusual among state advisory panels in its power to veto proposed DEP regulations.

Audubon and the Sierra Club referred to Bochenek, who works at the Rutgers Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory, as a "commercial fisheries researcher" and suggested she would side with commercial watermen who oppose crabbing restrictions.

"I really haven't made up my mind yet," said Bochenek, who holds a doctorate degree and has worked from many years with both recreational and commercial marine groups, as a Rutgers extension worker and scientist. "I'm going to look at the science. It's what the at-large (public) members of the council should do."

By law the council "has 11 members representing recreational and commercial fishermen, fish processors, the general public and the Atlantic Coast and Delaware Bay sections of the Shellfisheries Council," according to DEP documents. But two of those positions had been vacant for some time, a fact that council Chairman Gil Ewing blamed in part for the DEP's failure to win a moratorium vote.

The DEP has taken a stance that the moratorium must continue; in the center of its Internet home page, the agency has for weeks maintained a posting that calls the council Feb. 11 vote "an unfortunate decision with serious implications for the red knot and the entire Delaware Bay ecosystem. Governor Corzine, DEP Commissioner Lisa Jackson and the Legislature are pursuing a legislative remedy to overturn the decision and maintain the horseshoe crab harvesting moratorium to protect the red knot from extinction."

Bills have been introduced in both houses of the state Legislature to reimpose the moratorium. But environmental groups want the administration to do more, and they are getting nervous as the state's

budget crisis sucks up more and more energy inside the Statehouse.

"There's been no mention of an AO (administrative order) or emergency order" as officials had talked of a few weeks ago, said Jeff Tittel of the Sierra Club. "I think we're doing good (with legislation). I think we'll get it passed, but I don't know. Anything could happen."

Tittel and Stiles say the council seats could be filled with an unaffiliated marine scientist, environmental educator, or a coastal business owner to represent marine interests outside fishing.

That pitch echoes recent trends on the federal-level regional fishery management councils, which for years tended to be peopled with membership from sectors of the fishing industry and regulatory agencies.

That changed as national environmental activist groups took more interest in ocean fisheries issues, and well-known Long Island activist and author Carl Safina became the first from that community to take a seat on the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council.
