

OLSEN'S RESIGNATION LETTER

THE TEXT OF THE STATEMENT

Wednesday, July 20, 2011

I submitted my resignation to Governor LePage, effective at 0915 hours this morning.

As you all know from my confirmation hearing testimony, my interviews with some of you, and from repeated appearances before the Marine Resources Committee, I took this job with several aims, all of which I discussed with the seven-person committee that unanimously recommended me as the sole candidate for Commissioner of Marine Resources, and with the Governor when I met him December 30 and he offered me the job.

Among those aims were to manage Maine's marine resources for sustainability: of our resources, of our fishing industry, of our coastal communities, and for all the people of Maine.

The marine resources of Maine are, we should all recall, the resources of the people of the entire state, not just those who, by having been in the industry at the right time, now have not only the exclusive right to harvest lobster, scallops, sea urchins, sea cucumbers, and, in many towns, even clams, but enjoy, on their own and without recourse to other authority, the right to enact, and then alter as they wish, regulations to exclude all others.

The other 1.3 million residents of Maine who have been excluded from these fisheries and from the opportunity to make a living on the ocean should feel no less a sense of ownership of these valuable resources.

In managing for sustainability, I planned, and the Governor concurred, that we would take advantage of the vastly increasing offshore groundfish stocks and return to Maine the fleet of boats that has, for economic and regulatory reasons, migrated to Massachusetts -- taking with them hundreds of shoreside processing jobs.

We would also seek to adapt the laws and regulations by which interest groups exclude from their fisheries all competition and new entrants, enacting instead transparent means for new entrants to join each fishery, while prudently maintaining sustainable resources.

We would manage our resources based on science -- both biology and economics -- not based on how many lobstermen can fill a legislative hearing at the Augusta Civic Center.

The Governor was clear that those were his aims, as well as mine, and he pledged his resolve to pursue that course for the benefit of all the people of Maine. Speaking at the Maine Fishermen's Forum in March, he said "Commissioner Olsen is in charge."

Let me be clear. Had the Governor not been perfectly clear on those points of agreement, I would not have accepted the position. As you all know, I did, after all, grow up in this industry. Like my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before me, I had my own boat by age 12. I worked my way up to a larger boat and fished 550 traps single-handed by the time I was out of college. I spent the first decade of my professional career deeply involved in fishing and fishery management. I knew the challenges of dealing with entrenched groups, particularly those who have taken public resources for their exclusive use, and who can intimidate lawmakers who question such exclusive privilege.

I was equally clear in my statements at my confirmation hearing before the Joint standing Committee on Marine Resources, which saw fit to unanimously endorse my nomination as Commissioner of Marine Resources. At that time, I also pledged both complete transparency, and my determination to maintain a constant dialogue with industry, a determination that I have fulfilled in working every single day since assuming duty January 26.

At the Maine Fishermen's Forum in March, I addressed completely and transparently every question put before me by an audience of some 400, including many members of the press and the Marine Resources Committee. The Governor told the same gathering, "Commissioner Olsen is in charge."

Regrettably, while I have maintained my commitments, the Governor's office has not maintained its resolve.

Since then, the Governor and his senior team have repeatedly given private audiences to groups and individuals objecting to my open discussion of the issues. While legitimate fishing industry representatives wait months for appointments, a single vocal individual with wild accusations can get through the door within days. A group with a photocopier can generate a hundred letters of complaint.

I learn about such meetings only when these individuals go back to their colleagues, or their fellow lobster zone council members, or, frankly, my own DMR staff, to draw from three known cases, to say that they got to the Governor and he's going to fire the commissioner.

Instead of backing me in our joint aims of managing Maine's marine resources for the benefit of the entire state, the Governor and his senior team cut me off. As a Commissioner of the State of Maine, I had to wait six full weeks, from early May to late June, to get a meeting with the Governor on time-critical issues of resource management worth tens of millions of dollars to the State.

When I did get a meeting, and presented my initiatives to the Governor, he rejected them all:

- No further collaboration with the City of Portland to develop measures to return our groundfish boats to Maine, despite the work already done to secure the support of visiting Commerce Department officials. Portland was against him, he said, and we will not work with that city. Rather than work with Portland, he said, we'll build a new port somewhere.
- No further collaboration with the Director of the federal National Marine Fisheries Service to secure emergency federal assistance that could help return the fleet to Maine.
- No consideration of measures to properly and prudently manage the heavily overcapitalized shrimp fishery so that Maine could gain the most value-added from this resource.
- No collaboration with the federal government to jointly manage resources in federal waters. Instead, he instructed his deputy legal counsel to find a way for Maine to supersede federal authority outside the three-mile limit.

Yet more disturbing, after that meeting in late June, the Governor sent his chief of staff and his chief of boards and commissions to threaten me with firing if I would not do whatever necessary to stop the complaints reaching him from special interest groups. I was not allowed to know the source of the complaints, or their content, but I was to back off. "If you don't turn this around by the end of summer, Commissioner Olsen, the Governor will have to make a hard decision, and you don't want him to have to do that, Commissioner Olsen."

In addition, the Governor has adopted a policy of prohibiting me from attending meetings that he has with industry members, even those for whom I initiated the meeting request. I learn the outcomes of these meetings -- and his positions on the topics that they raise -- from a staff aide who reports to me whatever she feels like reporting.

Finally, with the initiation July 1 of the still-ongoing top-to-bottom, all-agency review of the Department of Marine Resources by a team of outside experts, and the uncovering of deficiencies there, those industry members, grant recipients and DMR staff members who have collaborated for the past decade to their mutual benefit, and against the best interests of the State, have found common cause in attacking me. That's understandable, I suppose. It must be very uncomfortable when the Commissioner's investigations

uncover the fact that your supposedly well-run program essentially doesn't exist.

In the latest development, a senior DMR bureau director has ordered key staff members to no longer provide me with information that I am seeking.

This morning, I asked the Governor for his direct support to take action. He urged me to do so, including via firings, and confirmed that I have led his agenda of responsible fisheries management and government reform, but he declined to go public with that support. Instead, his aide said, after Labor Day they would call unspecified people to get their opinions on me, and those poll results would determine whether I stay on as commissioner. If such support was evident from the telephone poll, then, the governor pledged, he would hold a press conference to voice his unequivocal support for me. If not, I would be relieved. In short, my future, and that of Maine's fishing industry, would depend on a staffer's telephone poll.

In that regard, and with me no longer here to ensure transparency, I urge each of you to insist on the publication of the review study, as required by law, and reject the attempt, already under way, at a cover-up. I am confident that the report will reinforce my own findings that the Department is in need of major overhaul.

I still find it amazing that a tiny faction of industry members seeking to protect their state-granted monopolies over a public resource -- perhaps a hundred and fifty out of some 12,000 marine resource license holders -- and signing pre-printed letters, can trounce a supposedly iron-willed Governor. But, clearly, they have done so.

So, I am leaving, not for health reasons, and not to spend more time with my family, and not to pursue other interests, which are all the commonly used themes for such resignations, but because this administration is more interested in pacifying special interest groups than in responsibly managing Maine's marine resources for the benefit of the entire state. I cannot be part of that. The legacy of my fishermen father, grandfather and great grandfather will not allow it.

I leave with regret for the people of Maine, who have allowed public resources to become the private domain of a select few, and especially for those other Mainers who have been prevented from earning a living.

Finally, I regret leaving that portion of DMR employees who, in the face of their supervisors' and colleagues' intransigence and willful disregard of the State's greater interests, try their hardest to manage our state resources and enforce our laws for the benefit of all Mainers. To them I give my heartfelt thanks and my best hopes for avoiding the retribution that they are even now facing.