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DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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INTERIOR DEPARTMENT URGES APPROVAL FOR FISHERY DISASTER LOANS

Passage of a Congressional measure to provide disaster loans to fishing vessel owners and operators has been urged by the Department of the Interior on a letter to Chairman Herbert C. Bonner of the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries.

The bill would, in effect, extend the principle established for agricultural disaster aid to the fish food production industry. The Secretary of the Interior would be authorized to make loans to fishing vessel owners and operators when he finds that fishery production failure or resource disaster arising from natural causes has created a need for credit not available from commercial sources.

Assistant Secretary of the Interior Frank P. Briggs suggested several amendments to pending legislation--H.R. 9375--to assure judicious use of the authority granted.

One of the suggested amendments is to change the procedure set forth in this bill for financing the proposal. The Department recommended that the present fishery loan authority in section 4 of the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 be amended to include the provisions of the proposal. No increase in appropriation authorization is believed necessary to carry out the purposes of the bill, assistant Secretary Briggs' letter said. He added that such a step would promote uniformity in present fishery loan procedures and would avoid transferring money from a Department of Agriculture revolving fund, as the pending legislation provides.

Another change suggested by the Department of the Interior would limit eligibility for loans to those adversely affected by a resource disaster estimated to continue no longer than 18 months. The Assistant Secretary's letter also stated that production failure or resource disaster must be temporary and that restoration of the fishery resource be foreseeable and impending. He said he did not believe that the program should be used to "shore-up" financial difficulties of fishermen whose incomes depend upon an eroding or fading resource and that an attempt to so use it would be an injustice both to the fisherman and the national economy.

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