Unions Join Businesses in Fight Over Washington Fish Consumption

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SEATTLE (AP) — Unions representing Boeing machinists and mill workers are siding with businesses in a bitter fight over how much fish people eat, and thus how clean Washington state waters should be.

The Machinists union and others are worried a new water quality standard being developed by the state would hurt jobs and economic development — concerns that Boeing Co. and other industry groups have also raised.

The unlikely allies have found common ground, uniting over the topic of environmental regulations.

"We have some common interests because we want to save jobs. I think we have the same goal," said Tanya Hutchins, a spokeswoman for the Machinists union, which represents more than 32,000 workers in the Puget Sound region. She added, "We just want to make sure it's a proposal that works for everyone."

Officials from the Machinists union, the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers, and others held a news conference Monday in Olympia to urge Gov. Jay Inslee to take a balanced approach.

The state Department of Ecology appears ready to sharply increase Washington's fish consumption rate, an obscure number that has huge implications because it helps set water quality standards. A higher number means fewer toxic pollutants would be permitted in waters.

The agency has been deliberating for months, with tribes, commercial fishermen and environmental groups lining up on one side to argue for more stringent regulations, and Boeing, business groups and municipalities on the other.

A draft rule is expected this summer that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency must approve.

The EPA has told Washington that its current rate doesn't sufficiently protect those who eat the most fish, particularly Native Americans and Pacific Islanders. The federal agency also has warned Washington officials it plans to take over the process if the state doesn't come up with a final rule by the end of 2014.

"The governor has been clear that this decision will be guided by a commitment to healthy people, clean water and a strong economy," Inslee's spokeswoman, Jaime Smith, said Monday.

Studies have shown Washington residents eat more fish than other people nationwide. The state currently assumes people eat about 6 1/2 grams a day — or about a small fillet once a month.

The state is considering raising that fish consumption rate to between 125 and 225 grams of fish a day. Oregon set its rate at 175 grams a day, the highest for a U.S. state.

Tribes, environmental groups, commercial fishermen and others are pressing for a higher rate that protects all people. They urge Inslee and the state to prevent cancer-causing pollutants from entering the state's waters.

Northwest tribes, in particular, are concerned about the fish consumption rate because fish and shellfish play an important role in the diet and culture of its members.

Businesses, cities and counties, meanwhile, worry standards will be set so high they can't be achieved. Boeing in March raised concerns to Inslee that the proposals "will have unintended consequences for continued Boeing production in the state."

They note technology doesn't exist in some cases to limit certain pollutants. Environmental groups argue the standards would drive technological innovations.

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