Remarks by Congressman Jared Huffman (CA-02)
April 10, 2015

Zeke’s Catch of the Day, a special event in honor of William F. Zeke Grader
Hosted by The Pacific Coast Federation of Fisherman’s Associations & The Institute for Fisheries Resources

Let’s go back in time to the sweltering summer of 2009. CA was weathering a third consecutive drought year. Federal water deliveries to the junior CVP contractors south of the Delta had been cut to 10%. The Central Valley economy was reeling – mostly from the Great Recession and the real estate crash, but some areas on the West Side of the SJV were hit hard by the drought, as well.

As we’ve come to expect, the powerful PR Machine at the Westlands Water District was in full swing. In places like Mendota – where high unemployment and poverty are chronic problems, even in wet years – fallowed fields and out of work farmworkers were being used as props, like Hollywood Storefronts, to spin a narrative that blamed all this pain and calamity NOT on the recession, NOT on the drought, but on “environmental whackos” (some of them are here tonight -- you know who you are!) and on their Democratic proxies like Nancy Pelosi and Barack Obama who valued a tiny 2-inch fish over the family farmers and farm workers who provide America’s food supply!

Never mind that farm employment and agricultural output remained strong throughout that drought, as the data would later show. Or that replacement supplies and groundwater pumping made up for much of the reduced water deliveries. Or that just a few fields over, farmers were getting 100% of their federal water deliveries for free. Or that some of the fallowing was because savvy growers were making millions selling their water to Southern California. Never mind all that! Westlands had a story to tell. And Fox News sent Sean Hannity to the West Side to help them tell it, in a 5-part series called “The Valley that Hope Forgot.”

The crescendo was a huge rally where Hannity threw red meat to an amped-up crowd of Valley farmers. It was staged in a parched field – with carefully chosen camera angles to avoid showing neighboring areas that were in normal ag. production. There this huge screen behind Hannity where he planned to conduct the Fox equivalent of a public execution: a live interview with one of the “environmental whackos” he was blaming for all the Valley’s problems. All he needed was a sacrificial lamb -- someone crazy enough to do a live interview in the lynch-mob setting Fox had constructed. Who do you think he found?
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I’m honored to join with all of you tonight in paying tribute to a man that all of us who have worked on CA water and fisheries regard as a living legend, a friend, and the greatest “fish head” of them all.

Zeke’s incredible life and career is rooted in the North Coast congressional district I’m privileged to represent. He grew up in the coastal fishing community of Fort Bragg where his father founded Grader Fish, Co., to buy, process and broker fresh, local fish. Zeke spent much of his childhood on the family dock, helping fishermen to unload their catch. He graduated from Fort Bragg High School and moved south to attend Sonoma State University, where he studied political science and graduated in 1970. Zeke served his country honorably in the United States Marine Corps, and when he returned home he went to law school at USF. During his studies at Sonoma State and as a law student Zeke managed his family’s second fish receiving station, Ocean Traders Co., at the Spring Street dock in Sausalito.

1975 was one of those fortuitous alignments of the stars: Zeke became a lawyer just as “small boat” fishermen in California – those who caught primarily salmon and crab – were organizing themselves so that they could better address a fast-changing political environment: they faced coast-wide fish habitat concerns, and the need to engage in new multistate regional and federal fishery rulemaking that would affect their future in a big way. They decided to form ‘Pacific Coast Federation of Fishermen’s Associations’. All they needed was a politically-skilled, fish-savvy, affordable executive director. That’s what they got in Zeke Grader, and the rest is history.

At a time when many commercial fishing groups felt threatened by the emerging ‘environmental movement’, Zeke took PCFFA in a different, more productive and sustainable direction: he understood that environmentalists were essential allies.

Under Zeke’s leadership, PCFFA embraced the California’s Coastal Act of 1976 arguing that fishermen, their families and communities would only benefit from protection of the coastal environment. This was the beginning of decades of collaboration with the environmental community that included battles over offshore oil and gas development, land-use, timber harvesting, water allocations, and issues of social equity and environmental justice.

Zeke worked with Bill Kier to pass a state bill creating an anadromous fish doubling plan in 1988. In 1992, Zeke took his “fish doubling” concept from state law and got it included in a historic piece of federal legislation by George Miller: the CVPIA, along with many other critical protections for salmon and anadromous fish.

He worked on modernizing the federal Magnuson Stevens fisheries management law, creating a “Fisheries Conservation and Management Fund,” which provides a funding stream for cooperative research and analysis, for sustainable fish marketing, for financial assistance to fishermen, and for improved data collection. This has helped support the fishing industry around the country, and I’m
actually working on legislation now, as part of the reauthorization of the Magnuson Stevens Act, to expand that program and make sure the government spends the money it’s supposed to.

Zeke has written so many declarations in lawsuits, and testified to state and federal committees so many times over the years – including for me when I was his lawyer at NRDC, and when I was Chair of the Assembly Water, Parks & Wildlife Committee – he’s done that drill so many times that I think he could roll out of bed on any Tuesday morning and start talking, under oath, about the importance of wild salmon to California.

Zeke has received countless awards and accolades – too many to mention them all here. But the fact that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration recognized him as its “Environmental Hero” in 1988 – before he had even achieved most of his landmark accomplishments – tells you a lot about his illustrious career.

Zeke’s career is a story of remarkable persistence, in some cases fighting for decades against long odds. He was an original plaintiff when the Friant litigation to restore the San Joaquin River was filed 1988 and he remained a critical leader in the coalition of environmental and fishing groups that saw that case through to victory in the courts, and negotiated settlement, and ultimately an act of Congress a few years ago. And he’s part of the group that is now fighting to hang on to those victories in the face of Valley Republicans who want to reneg on the deal and keep the San Joaquin River dry and barren in perpetuity.

Those who have worked with Zeke marvel at his toughness: Barry Nelson recently recalled that any time Zeke has signed a joint letter or supported a bill, he always asks the same question. “Is it tough enough? I’m not signing on to something wimpy.” But I think the key to Zeke’s success has been his unshakable belief that fishing men and women – and the families and communities that depend on them – are worth fighting for. That’s been the “true North” on his moral compass all these years.

And that’s why in that summer of 2009, Sean Hannity and Fox News got more than they bargained for. Some Fox News staffer surely lost his job over this, because instead of some pushover “environmental whacko,” Hannity got the great Zeke Grader.

Here’s the lead-in to the segment – I’m going to play Sean Hannity: “In spite of this terrible crisis, there are actually still environmentalists out there defending this 2-inch minnow and I’m joined by one of them right now, on remote from San Francisco, Zeke Grader.”

As the crowd booed and hissed, Zeke took the fight right to Fox News. Hannity was out of his depth and could barely get a word in edgewise as Zeke started laying out the facts. I’m going to play Zeke here: “You need to listen Sean, and listen carefully. The Delta Smelt didn’t’ cause those people’s problems. Sean, what you have to realize is that we’re also talking about salmon. These salmon are food, and they
provide jobs for people. You need to come up and provide some balance here. I want you to come up to the north coast, the place where I'm from: Fort Bragg. Not one of your studios." Right on Zeke!

I'll close with one last thing I appreciate about our friend Zeke – he is a treasure trove of political trivia and incredible stories, especially about the North Coast. As just one example, when I won my race for Congress he dug out this old book, "Member of the House" by Clem Miller, copyright 1962. I doubt many of you have read it, but it meant a lot to me: it's a memoir by the last person to represent my district when it had its current boundaries from the Golden Gate all the way to Oregon – a man who did some great things, like author the legislation Pres. Kennedy signed to create the Point Reyes National Seashore. And he would have done more if he hadn't died in a plane crash near Eureka.

This is just one of many pieces of history Zeke has shared with me over the years to help me better understand the issues, the people I represent, and the giant shoulders I stand on. Zeke, thank you for everything you've done for our environment, our fisheries and the people who depend on them, and for inspiring me and so many others to step up and do our part too.

All my best, Zeke!

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