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# America's Blueprint for Sustainable Fisheries

The History and Future of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act

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# Introduction and summary

*“The most valuable food fishes of the coast and the lakes of the U.S. are rapidly diminishing in number, to the public injury, and so as to materially affect the interests of trade and commerce.”*

– Congressional Resolution 22, establishing America’s first Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries, February 9, 1871<sup>1</sup>

One hundred and thirty-five years ago, Congress first acknowledged that perhaps the ocean’s cornucopia of seafood was not bottomless. In passing a joint resolution establishing the Office of Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries, Congress laid the first brick in a road that would ultimately lead to a new discipline of science that helps inform and manage America’s multibillion-dollar commercial fishing industry.

The United States oversees the largest exclusive economic zone, or EEZ, in the world, covering 4.4 million square miles of ocean, an area larger than that of all 50 states combined.<sup>2</sup> From turquoise Caribbean waters to the nutrient-rich currents coursing through the Bering Sea, U.S. fisheries span a variety of oceanographic regions and ecosystems. And thanks to strict science-based management measures, Americans can make a strong case that their fisheries are better managed than those of any other nation in the world.

Globally, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, or FAO, estimates that more than 58 percent of the world’s commercial fisheries are fully exploited and one-third are overfished.<sup>3</sup> This is troubling enough in its own right, but even more so when considering that the health of ocean ecosystems—including the number of thriving fish stocks—is a leading indicator of how resilient the oceans will be against environmental pressures such as climate change and ocean acidification.<sup>4</sup> And when fish are managed effectively, they not only provide ecological benefits but economic and social returns as well.

Specific legislation has governed U.S. federal fisheries management for decades: The original Fishery Conservation and Management Act celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act of 2006, or MSRA, has now been in effect for 10 years. In recognition of these anniversaries, this report provides a timeline of formative fisheries legislation and reflects in depth on the past decade of fisheries management in the United States. It then highlights successes and challenges in rebuilding fish stocks and ending overfishing in domestic waters. Finally, it provides recommendations for ensuring that U.S. fisheries continue to rely on ever-improving scientific data to lead the world in sustainability measures while sustaining coastal communities and economies over the next decade. Specifically:

- **Regulators should work to account for changes in fishery dynamics that fishermen around the country are already experiencing as a result of climate change, including ocean acidification and warming.** To the extent that legislative amendments are necessary to permit such action, Congress should act to grant regulators such authority. Climate change will affect each region's fisheries differently and the law must be strong yet flexible in managing geographically shifting fish stocks and changes to species composition, particularly in adjacent regions, including by facilitating discussion between regional management councils.
- **Ecosystem-based management should be prioritized as a tool to facilitate holistic, science-based fisheries management.**
- **To increase accountability and data collection, NOAA should aggressively pursue the development and deployment of electronic monitoring systems for fishing vessels, particularly in lieu of continuing to rely on the use of costly and contentious on-board fishery observers.** It should also promote the use of technology, such as Global Fishing Watch—designed by Oceana, Google, and Skytruth—and Eyes on the Sea, developed by the Pew Charitable Trust.
- **Congress should appropriate additional funding for ocean observation and baseline research to facilitate data collection and stock assessment science.** In addition, the next reauthorization of the MSA should include provisions for an outside review of fishery management plans and the corresponding status of fish populations.

- **Using the MSA's strong international provisions, the Obama administration should finalize regulations aimed at curtailing illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing abroad.** The next administration should continue to enhance and develop these regulations, including expanding the national seafood traceability program to include all species imported to the United States.
- **U.S. leaders and government officials should press the International Maritime Organization to expand application of its vessel monitoring and registration standards to include all fishing vessels operating on the high seas.**

While the authors recognize that recreational fishing is a critical component of U.S. fishery management, they have chosen to focus exclusively on the effect of the MSRA's reforms on America's commercial fishing sector. They have also deliberately chosen not to address aquaculture under the auspices of this report. They expect to address both of these vital issues in future products.

In 2011, former NOAA Administrator Jane Lubchenco stated, "rebuilding all U.S. fish stocks would generate an additional \$31 billion in sales impacts, support an additional 500,000 jobs and increase dockside revenues to fishermen by \$2.2 billion, which is more than a 50 percent increase from the current annual dockside revenues."<sup>5</sup> Ensuring that U.S. fisheries remain on track to achieve these projections without compromising the long-term health of fish populations or other aspects of our ocean ecosystems must remain a priority for champions of sustainable fishing in Congress, the executive branch, and coastal communities nationwide.

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