

Testimony

What were the causes of the decline?

Perhaps this is a never ending question because the causes are many and dependent on one's own perspective. First, addressing the official term environmental groups had submitted into the Magnuson-Stevens Act verbiage, OVERFISHING, points to the harvesters as the culprits of depleted stocks. However, the Magnuson-Stevens Act now requires the overfishing term to be used any time a stock is depleted, no matter what the cause. The government's and managers' willingness to blame the fishermen and appease the environmental groups leads the industry to believe that congress is so gullible that it is willing to hold no managers accountable for fishery management. FISHERMEN HAVE ONLY DONE WHAT THE LAW AND MANAGERS HAVE ALLOWED THEM TO DO FOR OVER TWENTY YEARS. The fishermen of this nation feel that the partnership created to free our waters of foreign fleets has backfired in our faces and the government has set us adrift to fend for ourselves. The managers are the real culprit of our fishery demise because they are not held accountable for their decisions.

Another perception conveyed by the budget structure that effects how the fishermen feel about management and their scientists is the fact that a major part of NMFS's budget is derived from Saltonstall/Kennedy funds which comes from tariffs on imported fish. Instead, their money should come from the successful management of US fisheries not imported fish. The perception fishermen have is that the NMFS deliberately lowers quotas to increase imports.

The level of science that managers use to determine harvest levels could fit into a thimble, and yet they call it the best science available. The science community is as scattered as the fishing fleet itself. Oceanographers rarely talk to the biologist and visa versa. If the science is to be believable then the fishermen need to be an integral part of the data collection system. Most managers and scientist believe that fishermen can not be trusted to gather the data whether they do it alone or with an agency personnel. Data gathered and used for fishery evaluation is mostly done by non-fishermen agency personnel where very small samples are taken and extrapolated to paint a picture of the entire ocean. The data is then manipulated with computer syntheses and the final results of these evaluation studies are presented as gospel by people that rarely, if ever, go out to sea. These results are often at the other end of the spectrum of what fishermen see everyday out on the ocean so fishermen have a hard time believing what they hear rather than what they see.

Ocean conditions may also have had a hand in the decline of fish. Warming oceans and shifts in the warm spot locations changed the up-wellings and currents. Fish move when conditions warrant it and can not be found in their usual places. Just because fish aren't where they were last year, doesn't mean the fish have disappeared off the earth, they just moved and left no forwarding address.

Impacts

Every entity that fishes is impacted by the managers decisions. Sport fishermen as well as the commercial fishermen are impacted. The coastal communities are also impacted in every way imaginable. Fishermen may have brought in 60 million dollars to a community just six years ago, but

today that same community may only realize 20 million dollars. That kind of money removed from small communities has a very hard impact not only on the community government but also on schools, families and most that live in the community whether they fish or not.

Short/Long term solutions

The infrastructures of the communities are melting away. Processors, watching the quotas getting lower and lower, have virtually removed the latent processing capacity from each community. Successful processors have lowered the price of fish which has forced smaller processors out of business. The more powerful processors buy out the now defunct plants, gut them and close the doors for ever. Jobs are lost and never replaced. The structure are left to rot as they refuse to sell because if they do they just increase their competition. With the competition gone, lower prices are offered to the fishermen for their products. When we try to resist the lowering of prices we are told the processors can't pay more because imported fish sells for less and there is plenty of imported fish coming into this country. U.S. exported fish have to compete with countries that subsidize their own fish efforts and with countries that have very little environmental regulations. The government needs to provide incentives to discourage imported fish of undermining the American fish-based economy.

Our fishery managers have to change their relationship with the fishermen. We need to be true partners in fishery management. We need to communicate with each other, we need to brainstorm together, we need to work together to improve this renewable resource. We need to move beyond who is to blame to how can we fix the system. The frustration level has reached such a high level that managers are starting to bail-out of the system and fishermen are going broke and being forced out of business.

We need programs that would re-train fishermen and their families for new careers. We need to encourage replacement industries to move to these communities to take advantage of these displace workers. We need tax relief to these communities so they can take charge of the revitalization of their industrial areas that provide good family wage jobs.

We want to thank you for working on amendments to the Capitol Construction Fund which was the first step to help bring some relief to some that feel they are captured in the industry and can't get out.

One thing that can be done that is not a solution but rather a reaction to management measures, is to reduce the fleet to a level that is more consistent with the harvest level. To most of us this is the most important thing that needs to be done to ward off bankruptcy of fishing business is to help reduce the fleet through a buy-back program. While the states need to cap the open access fishery, all of the fleet needs to be reduce. There is not enough fish to allocate the entire buy-out so some form of federal assistance will be needed.

Future Prevention

Money must be made available for groundfish research that utilizes a true partnership with the scientist and fishermen.

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Summary

What were the causes of the decline?

- Unaccountable management
- Funding source from tariffs
- Inadequate science
- Ocean conditions
- Pollution

Impacts

- Fishermen and their families
- Communities
- Schools
- Local Government

Solutions

- Discourage Imports
- True partnership between managers and fishermen
- Retraining displaced fishermen
- Capital Construction Fund reform
- Fleet reduction

Prevention

- Funding