

Testimony of Ms. Lori Swanson
Executive Director, Marine Conservation Alliance
Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
August 23, 2017
Soldotna, Alaska

Chairman Sullivan,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. My name is Lori Swanson, and I am the Executive Director of the Marine Conservation Alliance, also known as MCA. Our organization is comprised of harvesters, processors, and fishing dependent coastal communities with interests in the Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands, and Gulf of Alaska. MCA is committed to supporting sound, science-based fisheries management in the North Pacific to promote sustainable fisheries and a healthy environment. I am here to talk about how the current Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) has supported these goals and allowed a sustainable annual harvest of over two million metric tons of seafood from our region for decades.

The MSA is built on 10 national standards which have inherent conflicts. This tension drives the balancing act that preserves the health of our fisheries and the environment that supports them. The hallmark of the MSA is the regional fishery management council system, which recognizes one size does not fit all and allows for solutions that are tailored to the specific problems encountered locally. MCA does not believe there are any systemic issues in the Act that need to be addressed. It appears that most of the concerns that exist are regional in nature, so maintaining and expanding regional flexibility provides the best solution.

For example, catch shares are very successful in the North Pacific, reducing bycatch, increasing monitoring levels, and allowing fine-scale catch management. The performance of these programs is reviewed regularly and modifications are made as necessary, through a public process informed by detailed analyses. While recognizing the success of catch share programs in the North Pacific, we also acknowledge that catch shares may not be suitable for all fisheries or regions.

Environmental concerns are also addressed at the regional level. The North Pacific Council has established numerous areas where fisheries or gear types are restricted or prohibited. These areas serve a variety of purposes, from protecting sensitive habitats to providing exclusive access to local fishery-dependent communities. The recent review of Essential Fish Habitat in our region determined that the impact from fisheries on habitat is less than 2% region-wide.

The North Pacific Council has been refining the practice of Ecosystem-Based Fishery Management (EBFM) since the first EBFM committee was formed in 1996. Annual stock assessments update ecosystem components, and Allowable Biological Catches incorporate ecosystem considerations. The Council developed a Fishery Ecosystem Plan (FEP) for the Aleutian Islands and is developing a similar plan for the Bering Sea. These plans require adequate data and a sound scientific base, are extremely time consuming, and are subject to numerous public and scientific reviews. Adding new mandates for FEPs may make the process untenable by putting management in front of science. We believe the development of FEP's, and their content, should remain discretionary. EBFM will continue to be a critical component of our fisheries management.

I would also like to comment on the use of 'Best Available Science' in fishery management. Sound science is the bedrock of sustainable fisheries. There are times when what's presented as the 'best' science available may be anecdotal, biased, or untested. It is very important to understand this information prior to using it. Any research, from any source, should be subject to intense scrutiny before being used in management decisions.

Finally, while I recognize this hearing is not focused on scientific funding, I encourage you to maintain adequate funding for scientific research in the North Pacific. Our fisheries are supported by surveys which are conducted annually in many cases but at least every third year, and annual stock assessments. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this work. Historic survey data provide a long-term view of the effects of years of warm and cold water, changes in the amount of ice cover, and other factors which help scientists understand and predict future challenges. With increased water temperatures, fish are moving between areas and depths and current survey information is even more critical. Continued funding supports a decades-long database of oceanographic conditions in a region faced with climate change. Further, uncertainty requires more conservative catch limits and reduced harvest levels to ensure the stock is protected. Regular surveys provide increased certainty in the status of our stocks.

In summary, the Magnuson Stevens Act has worked well for over 40 years, and we believe that success must be recognized and protected. I encourage you to refrain from sweeping national changes, and to maintain the flexibility for each region to develop and improve upon management programs tailored to their specific needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment, and I will be happy to take any questions.