

SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION:  
QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD

FROM THE NOMINATIONS HEARING  
ON MAY 20, 2021

Written Questions Submitted to Richard Spinrad, Nominee for Under Secretary of  
Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere

Questions for the Record from Ranking Member Roger Wicker

Recreational Fishing Management

**Question 1:** I introduced and passed the bipartisan Modern Fish Act to improve the management of recreational fisheries by incorporating the best available science. In the Gulf of Mexico, states like Mississippi have invested significant time and money to develop a more accurate understanding of how much fish recreational fishermen harvest. Despite this effort, NOAA has proposed ignoring the higher quality state data, and treating the less accurate federal data from the Marine Recreational Information Program as though it is of equal quality. If this occurred, it would have unfairly decreased Mississippi's share of the Red Snapper fishery by 60% in 2021. In addition, the recent "Great Red Snapper Count" suggests that the actual abundance of red snapper in the Gulf is three times higher than what NOAA had estimated.

- *In April, the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council recognized the high quality of Mississippi's state red snapper survey and voted to delay the calibration of state survey data to the incomplete and low-quality federal survey data so that they can continue further study. Will you commit to working with me to support the Council's actions with regard to red snapper?*

**Response:**

If confirmed, I look forward to learning more about the red snapper fishery, which I know is of great economic and cultural significance to the state of Mississippi and the entire Gulf of Mexico region. As I noted in my testimony before the Commerce Committee, it is critical that NOAA base management decisions - whether for fisheries management or weather forecasting - on the best peer reviewed scientific information available. I will commit to working with you and your staff to learn more about this fishery and its underlying science.

Uncrewed Maritime Systems

**Question 2:** The University of Southern Mississippi is a leader in the use of uncrewed maritime systems. Uncrewed maritime systems are a highly cost-effective way for NOAA to increase the number of observations it collects.

- *Will you work with me to increase NOAA's use of uncrewed maritime systems?*
- *How would you work to promote these and other innovative technologies at NOAA and across the Department of Commerce?*

**Response:**

If confirmed, I will work with you and your office to increase NOAA's use of uncrewed maritime systems to help NOAA and its partners better understand the full earth system, and I look forward to promoting NOAA's exploration and use of uncrewed systems to carry out NOAA's diverse mission from weather forecasting to fisheries management.

As I noted in my testimony, I believe uncrewed systems hold great promise for data collection and in some cases can supplement existing methods efficiently and effectively. If confirmed, I would build upon NOAA's progress in this area by evaluating the broad and complex data needs across the agency and working internally and with external stakeholders to utilize uncrewed systems research, development, and operations where it makes most sense.

**Regional Ocean Partnerships**

**Question 3: Regional Ocean Partnerships are made up of coastal states and promote the effective stewardship of our oceans and coasts by giving those states a strong voice. Last Congress, Senator Cantwell and I introduced the Regional Ocean Partnership Act to codify the existing regional ocean partnerships.**

- *Do you commit to working with me to ensure the states have a strong voice in the stewardship of their oceans and coasts?*
- *What do you see as the benefits of these types of partnerships for taking care of our marine resources and promoting the blue economy?*

**Response:**

I recognize the need for states, local jurisdictions, and tribal governments to have a strong voice in the shared stewardship of our nation's coasts and oceans. NOAA coordinates closely on the management, resilience, and restoration of ocean and coastal areas through collaborative regional efforts led by Regional Ocean Partnerships. These partnerships have enabled states to successfully guide and manage appropriate development and conservation within our coastal and marine resources. If confirmed, I will ensure that NOAA strengthens our critical partnerships with states, local jurisdictions, and tribal governments to address coastal and marine issues across our shared ocean resources.

Dr. Spinrad, if confirmed to be Undersecretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere, you will oversee an agency (NOAA) that enforces our nation's marine fisheries laws. This includes continuing efforts to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. IUU fishing not only has devastating impacts on valuable marine fisheries, but is also tied to various human rights abuses such as forced labor and human trafficking. However, effectively combating IUU fishing is a difficult task for an agency with limited resources considering the vast ocean areas in which the illicit activity occurs.

**Question 4:** Dr. Spinrad, if confirmed as NOAA Administrator, what actions would you take to better prevent or deter IUU fishing in remote marine areas? Could NOAA leverage innovative commercial technologies, such as remote sensing and satellite radio frequency detection, to expand its enforcement reach and capabilities?

**Response:**

I agree that this is a critical issue, from the human rights, marine resources management, international trade, and economic fairness standpoints. If confirmed, I commit to using all the tools at my disposal – including uncrewed systems, remote sensors, and other innovative technologies to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and the human rights abuses it perpetuates.

**Question 5:** In Oregon, the timber community and a group of environmental and conservation groups have come to an historic agreement to modernize Oregon forest practices called the Private Forest Accord. The first part of the agreement was Oregon state legislation passed in 2020, which resulted in enhanced protections for streams. The parties are now in extensive negotiations and engaging in a collaborative and science-based effort to identify potential changes to Oregon's forest practice laws that could be included in a state-wide Habitat Conservation Plan. Such plans can create win-win situations by promoting long-term conservation benefits and creating economic growth. Can you commit to NOAA engagement and participation in the Private Forest Accord process as the parties negotiate? And can you commit to working with me to find other areas where we can promote conservation, while enhancing our economy?

**Response:**

If confirmed, I would work to promote NOAA's active engagement and environmental stewardship responsibility while also working to advance the nation's economic viability and security. As a native Oregonian, I would welcome the opportunity to engage and learn more about this particular collaboration as well as possible collaboration in other areas.

## **Questions for the Record from Senator Dan Sullivan**

### **Surveys.**

**Given your experience, I'm sure you understand how critical fisheries surveys are for reducing uncertainty in stock assessments and facilitating sustainable harvest rates. Unfortunately, the NOAA Federal fisheries surveys program faced a severe and consequential setback in 2020, when NOAA leadership cancelled many fisheries surveys due to operational challenges created by the pandemic. Outgoing NOAA leadership developed a plan for resuming surveys in 2021, but it will fall on you to ensure that NOAA resumes these surveys. My understanding is that NOAA is currently planning for a full complement of surveys in the upcoming season, however my concerns go far beyond the current year. It is critical that NOAA maintain or increase surveys into the future.**

**Question 1: Can you commit to ensuring NOAA is fully accountable for both the 2021 surveys and for maintaining fisheries surveys into the future?**

### **Response:**

I understand the importance of conducting regular fisheries surveys in Alaska and around the country to ensure that NOAA has the best data available to set fishing quotas that maximize fishing opportunity, while maintaining sustainability of fish stocks. If confirmed, I am committed to advocating for resources needed to continue required fishery surveys into the future.

**Secondly, I know there is interest regarding unmanned systems and new technology to get fisheries data. While I certainly appreciate attempts to use other tools and approaches to collect data and support stock assessments, I do not want to see these efforts diminish our current at-sea efforts as a replacement without proper testing and coordination with traditional surveys to ensure scientific integrity is maintained.**

**Question 2: As NOAA works to develop these tools and technologies, can you commit to me that funds will not be diverted away from at-sea survey funding while you explore the implementation of these tools?**

### **Response:**

In some cases, uncrewed maritime systems can be deployed to collect ocean, coastal, and atmospheric data at a similar caliber as data from crewed survey platforms. In such cases, using these systems may present a cost-effective opportunity to expand, supplement, or enhance the data collection capabilities to meet NOAA's mission. However, these systems do not make sense in every case and, if confirmed, I will ensure such systems are appropriately deployed.

## **NOAA/NMFS personnel in Alaska**

**I understand there has been an assessment of NOAA’s facilities footprint in the Northwest region and Alaska reviewing the agencies presence. Currently, there are a large (approx. 261) number of Alaska focused personnel located in Washington State that would more appropriately be based in Alaska. The Ted Stevens Marine Research Institute in Juneau has plenty of vacant space. There are 100 NOAA vacancies in Alaska. Previously, Secretary Ross committed to “working expeditiously” to fill these roles by using relocation and retention tools.**

**Additionally, science sometimes happens in a vacuum. In Alaska however, a systemic or interdisciplinary approach in solving critical issues in fishery management is imperative. The science needs to happen in the place – taking Alaskan science outside of Alaska creates a disconnect that is not acceptable.**

**Question 3: Can you commit to maintain (or increase) personnel located in Alaska’s coastal communities?**

### **Response:**

If confirmed, I look forward to working with you on this issue. Alaska is the state with the longest coastline and highest volume commercial fisheries in the U.S, and I understand the importance of ensuring a robust NOAA presence in the state of Alaska.

**Question 4: Can you commit to working with the Alaska delegation if any discussions or efforts are taken?**

### **Response:**

If confirmed, I will ensure that NOAA maintains an open and active dialogue with the Alaska delegation on relevant workforce and facilities issues.

## **Partnership Programs at NOAA.**

**In Alaska, NOAA’s investment in partnership programs such as the Alaska Ocean Observing System (the Integrated Ocean Observing System program), Sea Grant, and others have helped increase marine safety with infrastructure such as radars, wave buoys and co-located AIS and weather stations, provided lower-cost water level observations to remote areas, detected and helped understand the impact of ocean acidification on state fisheries and aquaculture, and coordinated sampling of harmful algal blooms, a major concern of subsistence users and aquaculture farms in Alaska.**

**Question 5: How do you see NOAA’s investment in these partnership programs growing?**

### **Response:**

Thank you for recognizing the importance of partnership programs like the U.S. Integrated Ocean Observing System and the National Sea Grant College Program. Marine navigation

safety is critical for Alaska and across the U.S., and I agree that we need to continue investing in NOAA's marine navigation infrastructure, data, and services. If confirmed, I will work with you and the Committee to ensure that these partnership programs continue to be a priority.

**Question 6: How do these programs help other efforts at NOAA?**

**Response:**

The U.S. Integrated Ocean Observing System provides essential tools and forecasts to improve marine navigation safety, promote the economy, strengthen food security, and protect our environment. Integrated ocean information is available in near real time. Promoting easier access to this information improves our ability to understand and predict coastal events, such as storms and sea level rise. If confirmed, I will work with you and the Committee to ensure that these partnership programs continue to be a priority.

## **Questions for the Record from Senator Rick Scott**

**Question 1: NOAA designated areas off southern California and in the Gulf of Mexico as Aquaculture Opportunity Areas in response to former President Trump's Executive Order on Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth. This is a big industry in my state, with so many families dependent on its success, and it is important for the U.S. to continue efforts to build a resilient, domestic food supply chain through aquaculture and fisheries management.**

- **Could you detail your plans to strengthen and bolster domestic fisheries and aquaculture?**

### **Response:**

Aquaculture holds promise to increase the nation's seafood supply at a time when pressure on wild fish stocks is at a maximum. Aquaculture development strategies should be specific to species, and tailored to account for regional, state, tribal, and local considerations.

If confirmed, I would work to understand better the views of Congress and local communities by engaging regional fishery management councils, state fishery managers, aquaculture industry representatives, tribes, fishermen, environmental organizations, and others to determine whether, where, and what types of aquaculture might make the most sense.

**Question 2: During my time as Governor of Florida, we experienced several hard-hitting hurricanes that devastated communities. We know first-hand that preparedness saves lives, and NOAA's work to develop and improve weather predictive services has been critical to our preparedness efforts.**

- **How do you plan to improve NOAA's weather forecasting services, so that families can have the best information to stay safe?**

### **Response:**

I understand and appreciate the challenges of living in a region of the country that experiences regular extreme weather, such as hurricanes. NOAA's predictive, warning, and outreach capabilities are central to its mission to protect lives and property from the devastating effects of hurricanes, tornadoes, fire weather, and other types of extreme weather.

If confirmed, I would promote advancements to NOAA's observational infrastructure, improve weather models internally and by engaging private sector expertise, and increase NOAA's computational capacity. I would also focus on the workforce needs to ensure the forecasts are timely and effectively disseminated. Each of these efforts would help NOAA better predict hurricane track and intensity, improving the quality and utility of weather advisories and warnings.

In addition, I would identify ways to improve NOAA outreach to ensure communities get weather warnings in an understandable and actionable manner and with enough advanced warning to allow them to make sound decisions about their personal safety.



**Question 3: Florida's commercial fishing industry is still working to recover after hard-hitting impacts of the coronavirus. I sent a letter to Secretary Raimondo requesting that Florida's commercial fishing industry receive equitable treatment as NOAA considers permit allocation for the 2021 Red Snapper Individual Fishing Quota program.**

- **How will you work with industry and local stakeholders to gather input and take a transparent, evidence-based approach to red snapper permit allocation? How can you apply this method in order bolster sustainable fisheries?**

**Response:**

I understand both the economic and cultural significance of the red snapper fishery to the Gulf of Mexico and southeastern United States. I take seriously the National Standards of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, and I respect the processes of the Regional Fishery Management Councils, which uphold the principle of fair and equitable treatment to all fishermen in the quota allocation process. Furthermore, as I noted in my testimony before the Commerce Committee, it is critical that NOAA base management decisions - whether for fisheries management or weather forecasting - on the best peer reviewed scientific information available.

If confirmed, I look forward to engaging with Regional Fishery Management Councils, state fishery managers, commercial and recreational fishermen, and other stakeholders to ensure that fishery resources are allocated as equitably as possible among different sectors.