

**Testimony of
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**Before the
Senate Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard**

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Good morning Chairman Begich, Ranking Member Rubio, and members of the Committee. I am Lori Swanson, the Executive Director of Groundfish Forum and co-vice chair of the Advisory Panel for the North Pacific Fishery Management Council.

I am here today representing the members of Groundfish Forum, a Seattle-based industry association comprised of five companies currently operating 16 trawl catcher-processor vessels in the non-pollock multispecies groundfish fisheries off the coast of Alaska. Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments to the Committee on the reauthorization of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). My comments will focus on North Pacific groundfish fisheries in general, with some specific points about the sector I represent.

In the North Pacific, we are particularly blessed with a very productive ecosystem, which stays that way thanks to the work of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council (NPFMC). In the nearly 40 years since enactment of the MSA, American harvesting and processing capacity has gone from almost nothing to the complete Americanization of our fisheries. We have transitioned from foreign fishing, to joint ventures (where US vessels delivered to foreign processors), to full Americanization. Through the entire process, the NPFMC has addressed harvest levels, conservation concerns, habitat protection, marine mammal protection, and community and tribal concerns. As a result of the NPFMC's efforts, the ecosystem and the fisheries it supports are strong and healthy, and there no overfished groundfish species.

Groundfish fisheries consistently harvest and process almost 2.0 million tons (4.4 billion pounds), of fish every year, which account for nearly 47% of the nation's total groundfish harvest. These fisheries are worth over \$2 billion, and employ thousands of people in jobs that pay well and support families. Some of the product is exported and some is consumed in the United States.

One of the key strengths of the MSA is that it allows regional councils the flexibility to address issues in ways that respond to the needs of stakeholders in that region. I would like to briefly explain how this process worked for our sector.

Groundfish Forum vessels are part of the so-called "Amendment 80" sector, named after the NPFMC action that created the catch share program under which we now operate. As the only North Pacific catch share program created from start to finish through the Council process, we are perhaps the best example of how the system works.

Most of our vessels, which range in length from 105' to nearly 300' in length, were not purpose-built for the fisheries in which they operate. They cannot legally do more than primary processing on board; hence the original name 'head and gut' vessels. Our vessels target flatfish, rockfish, Atka mackerel, and Pacific cod in the Bering Sea, Aleutian Islands, and Gulf of Alaska. These are mixed fisheries, and a single haul contains a number of different species. Because the vessels have limited processing capabilities and no fishmeal plants, any unmarketable fish are discarded at sea. Until 2008, these vessels operated in a *race for fish* where the one who caught the most fish the fastest did the best. No fisherman likes to throw away fish, but it was the only way to maintain a viable operation under those circumstances. Anyone who fished slower or more carefully would simply lose fish to those who did not, and any one vessel could shutdown the entire fishery if it reached strict limits on bycatch or hit the overall total allowable catch established annually by the Council for our sector.

Over the course of ten years – with input from scientists, economists, fishermen, environmental organizations, community and tribal entities – the Council developed a catch share program which was implemented in 2008 (Amendment 80). Under this program, our vessels are allocated specific amounts of five target species, as well as strict limitations on non-target species that are significantly lower than our historic catch levels. These vessel allocations may be combined into one or more fishery cooperatives or fished in a limited access fishery within the sector.

As you can imagine, there were many controversial decisions required to get to the final program. But those decisions were left to the Council who determined what species, and how much of those species, to allocate to the sector; how to allocate at the vessel level; requirements for cooperative formation; bycatch limits; protections for other sectors; how to monitor compliance with various regulations and limits; and what information cooperatives should be required to provide to the public. Each of these decisions was vigorously debated through the public Council process, with input from the Scientific and Statistical Committee, the Alaska Fisheries Science Center, the NOAA Fisheries, the U.S. Coast Guard, and various stakeholders, including environmental and tribal organizations.

The result is a true success story for both the MSA and Council process. Since ending the *race for fish*, the Amendment 80 sector now retains over 90% of their catch while operating under the same processing limits. Today, the fishing season runs from January 20th, the start of the fishing year, to December 31st without closures. As a result, fishermen can target their operations to when and where it makes sense; businesses can more accurately plan for their annual shipyard maintenance; and new products and markets are being developed for previously unmarketable species. In addition, there are two NOAA observers on each vessel, strict monitoring and reporting requirements, and annual reports to the Council on cooperative performance.

With stable and more predictable operations, Amendment 80 fishermen have been able to experiment with modifications to their gear, reducing bottom contact in the flatfish fishery by 90%. Further, the sector has been able to engage in discussions with some tribal and community entities to restrict fishing in areas of particular sensitivity. Finally, for the first time in decades,

companies are beginning to build new vessels. These vessels will be world-class, environmentally sensitive, safe, and more efficient.

Groundfish fisheries in the North Pacific have their challenges, of course. The Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands are unique in that there is an absolute cap of 2.0 million tons on the amount of groundfish that may be harvested in a given year. While this is admittedly a lot of fish, the health of the stocks would allow much higher harvests – fifty percent more in some years. Because the fisheries are healthy, the demand for quota exceeds what can be accommodated. Working under this cap, the Council has to decide who gets what after extensive scientific input and public testimony, usually including extensive debate and negotiations.

Further, as fisheries mature, some prior management actions have become obsolete. For example, there are a number of fixed and seasonal closures that were originally enacted to minimize bycatch of particular species. Since fishermen are individually limited on bycatch, the closures may no longer be necessary or even helpful.

I believe the Council has the ability under the MSA – and the track record – to address most of these concerns. The key for our region is maintaining high-quality scientific information, including regularly scheduled stock surveys, and management flexibility. The more the management process can conform to the best use of the resources, the better. This includes mandatory actions, such as area closures to protect specific species and ecosystems, as well as mandates to individual sectors and cooperatives to work together to achieve particular goals without specific regulations.

We support the MSA as written for the North Pacific. It has proven to be a strong yet flexible guide to the Americanization of our fisheries and has provided the management structure that maintains consistently strong and resilient fisheries with protections for the environment and all of us who depend on healthy ecosystems.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide these comments. I will be happy to answer any questions from the Committee.