

RESTORING AMERICAN SEAFOOD COMPETITIVENESS

OVERSIGHT HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, WILDLIFE AND
FISHERIES

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

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HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES
CHAIRMAN BRUCE WESTERMAN

To: House Committee on Natural Resources Republican Members

From: Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries staff: Annick Miller, (annick.miller@mail.house.gov), Doug Levine (doug.levine@mail.house.gov), Kirby Struhar (kirby.struhar@mail.house.gov), and Thomas Shipman (thomas.shipman@mail.house.gov) x58331

Date: Monday, June 2, 2025

Subject: *Oversight hearing titled “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness”*

The Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries will hold an oversight hearing on “*Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness*” on **Wednesday, June 4, 2025, at 10:15 a.m. in room 1324 Longworth House Office Building.**

Member offices are requested to notify Jackson Renfro (jackson.renfro@mail.house.gov) by 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, June 3, 2025, if their Member intends to participate in the hearing.

I. KEY MESSAGES

- President Trump and Committee Republicans are committed to pursuing a policy agenda that secures public access to natural resources and restores America’s seafood competitiveness.
- Enjoyed by millions, recreational fishing is both a major pastime activity and an important economic driver for coastal communities. Similarly, commercial fishing is an engine for job creation and economic growth that makes a significant contribution to the nation’s food supply chain.
- The system developed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) has made America the world’s gold standard in fisheries management. Operating under this system and by engaging with stakeholders, regulators, and other experts, Congress can identify new opportunities to support fishing in the United States, safeguard fishing’s role in the national economy, and meet responsible stewardship obligations.
- The hearing will examine opportunities to partner with the Trump administration and sector stakeholders to develop the policies needed to steward and promote the productive harvest of our seafood resources.

II. WITNESSES

- **Mr. Rick Bellavance**, Chair, Council Coordination Committee, U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils, North Kingstown, RI
- **Mr. Dustin Delano**, Chief Operating Officer, New England Fishermen’s Stewardship Association, South Portland, ME
- **Ms. Martha Guyas**, Southeast Fisheries Policy Director, American Sportfishing Association, Tallahassee, FL
- **Mr. Larson Hunter**, Chairman, Board of Directors, Coastal Villages Region Fund, Scammon Bay, AK
- **Ms. Jamie O’Connor**, Deputy Executive Director, Alaska Marine Conservation Council, Anchorage, AK [*Minority witness*]

III. BACKGROUND

Fishing in the United States

Fishing, in both its recreational and commercial forms, is an essential feature of American life. Recreational fishing is enjoyed by millions nationwide and fosters a deep appreciation for the country's natural resources. A recent study found that 57.7 million Americans participated in recreational fishing in 2023.¹ This total, the largest participation ever recorded for a single year, includes 4.2 million new participants, 13 million youths, and 21.3 million females.² In addition to bringing joy to millions of Americans, recreational fishing also contributes significantly to the national economy. The Bureau of Economic Analysis, for example, found that outdoor recreation activities, including fishing, accounted for 2.3 percent of overall gross domestic product in 2023, or nearly \$640 billion.³

America's commercial fishing industry is no less vital. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the primary federal regulator of the United States' marine fisheries, found that the commercial fishing and seafood industry generated more than \$183 billion in economic value in sales and supported 1.6 million jobs in 2022.⁴ Total landings revenues for the commercial sector totaled \$5.9 billion that same year.⁵ Beyond these sizable economic benefits, commercial fishing also supplies the country with a healthy food source.⁶

Despite the importance of these sectors, they have faced considerable difficulties over the last several years. Diverse stakeholders have alerted Committee Republicans to challenges ranging from serious concerns with the science and data that NOAA has used to inform management decisions, to measures that have unduly restricted fishing communities' access to marine resources, and overly burdensome regulatory structures that have developed under statutes like the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

Committee Republicans and President Trump are dedicated to solving these problems and reinvigorating the commercial and recreational fishing sectors in the United States. This commitment reflects actions taken in President Trump's first term. In 2020, the President issued Executive Order (EO) 13921, titled "Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth,"⁷ which outlined a federal policy to "identify and remove unnecessary regulatory barriers restricting American fishermen and aquaculture producers."⁸ The EO also included provisions to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, sought to remove barriers to aquaculture permitting, and established an Interagency Seafood Trade Task Force.⁹

President Trump built upon these efforts promptly after returning to office. On April 17, 2025, as part of his first 100 days agenda, the President signed an EO titled "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness."¹⁰ The EO stated that, despite the opportunities that the United States has to lead the world in fishing and seafood production, "seafood is one of the most heavily regulated sectors in the United States."¹¹ The EO cited some of the many challenges faced by American fishermen, including "restrictive catch limits, . . . inaccurate and outdated fisheries data, and delayed adoption of modern technology."¹² To ameliorate these problems, the EO directed the federal government to address unfair trade practices, promote integrity in the seafood supply chain, reduce regulatory burdens, and level the playing field for American companies.¹³

The EO also directed the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) to consult with the fishing industry and the Secretary of Health and Human Services to "immediately consider suspending, revising, or rescinding regulations that overly burden America's commercial fishing, aquaculture, and fish processing industries."¹⁴ It further required the Secretary to identify the most overregulated fisheries within 30 days and work with each of the Regional Fishery Management Councils (Councils) to reduce that regulatory burden. Additionally, in line with the President's EO from 2020, each of the Councils is directed to provide a list of recommendations "to reduce burdens on domestic fishing and to increase production" within 180 days,¹⁵ with goals of increasing profitability, preventing closures, and stabilizing access.¹⁶ The Councils will each develop a work plan to implement these actions. Alongside those efforts, the Secretary is directed to work with the public, experts, and stakeholders to improve management and science in accordance with requirements under the MMPA, ESA, and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA).¹⁷ Finally, the EO also directs the Secretary, through the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to "incorporate less expensive and more reliable technologies and cooperative research programs into fishery assessments,"¹⁸ and to "take all appropriate action to modernize data collection and analytical practices" to improve fisheries management.¹⁹

The United States is the gold standard for fisheries management. Signed into law in 1976,²⁰ the MSA is the principal statute that governs marine fisheries management in the United States' federal waters up to 200 miles offshore, within the nation's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).²¹

Map of the United States and Surrounding Regions, Color-Coded by Time Zone

Legend:

- Caribbean:**
 - U.S. Virgin Islands (Pink)
 - Puerto Rico (Purple)
- Other Regions:**
 - New England (Teal)
 - Mid-Atlantic (Dark Blue)
 - South Atlantic (Orange)
 - Gulf of Mexico (Red)
 - Central (Light Blue)
 - Mountain (Yellow)
 - Pacific (Green)
 - North Pacific (Pink)
 - Western Pacific (Green)

Inset Maps:

- Alaska (North Pacific):** Shows the state of Alaska with numbered locations 1 through 11.
- Hawaii (Western Pacific):** Shows the Hawaiian Islands with numbered locations 1 through 11.
- Caribbean:** Shows the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

Map Labels:

- North Pacific:** Label for the Alaska inset.
- Western Pacific:** Label for the Hawaii inset.
- Pacific:** Label for the Pacific time zone.
- New England:** Label for the New England region.
- Mid-Atlantic:** Label for the Mid-Atlantic region.
- South Atlantic:** Label for the South Atlantic region.
- Gulf of Mexico:** Label for the Gulf of Mexico.
- Caribbean:** Label for the Caribbean region.

Map Notes:

- 1) Guam; 2) Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI); 3) Wake Islands; 4) Midway Atoll; 5) Johnston Island; 6) Hawaii Island; 7) Palmyra Atoll and Kingman Reef; 8) Jarvis Island; 9) Baker and Howland Islands; 10) American Samoa; 11) Line Islands.
- Other States/territories are represented as follows: Alaska (pink), New England (teal), Mid-Atlantic (dark blue), South Atlantic (orange), Gulf of Mexico (red), Central (light blue), Mountain (yellow), Pacific (green).

The Councils develop FMPs based on 10 guidelines included in the MSA known as the National Standards.²⁴ These standards are:²⁵

- Over time, changes have been made to these standards consistent with direction from Congress. For example, in 2016, NOAA released a final rule to revise guidelines for National Standards 1, 3, and 7,²⁶ to meet requirements that Congress included in the 2007 reauthorization of the MSA.²⁷ The Biden administration, by contrast, attempted to update National Standards 4, 8, and 9 in 2023,²⁸ even though Congress had not made changes to MSA directing NOAA to do so. Reclaiming Congress' role in updating these standards and their application in the development of FMPs is therefore critical, particularly in the wake of the Supreme Court's recent decision overturning Chevron deference.

The MSA also established the Council Coordination Committee (CCC), which consists of the executive director, chair, and vice chair of each of the 8 Councils.²⁹ The CCC was created to “discuss issues of relevance to all Councils, including issues related to the implementation of this Act.”³⁰ Accordingly, the CCC provides the Councils with a forum to share information and expertise at the regional level and engage with headquarters staff from NOAA and NMFS.

The CCC normally meets twice a year; once in the spring or summer, hosted by each of the councils on a rotating basis, and once in the fall, hosted by NMFS in the Washington, D.C., area.³¹ Most recently, the CCC gathered in May 2025 in New Bedford, Massachusetts,³² where each of the Councils provided their own updates and heard presentations from various NOAA and NMFS officials on recent presidential EOs, fisheries science and research priorities, and budgetary matters.³³

In line with the broader goals outlined in President Trump's EO, this hearing provides an opportunity to consider the discussions that took place at the most recent CCC meeting. Considering those discussions can help Congress determine how best to partner with the administration to support the council system. An effective partnership can encourage the continued sustainable management of our natural resources while allowing our recreational and commercial fishing sectors to thrive.

Management and Permitting Challenges

Although the management process under the MSA has often garnered broad approval from those involved in U.S. fishing, the fishing industry has faced challenges in recent years. In recent years, members from both the commercial and recreational fishing sectors have raised substantial concerns about the management and operation of American fisheries. Stakeholders in both communities, for instance, have repeatedly expressed their lack of confidence in the science that informs management decisions and in the dearth of timely stock assessments. Additionally, regulations developed under the ESA and MMPA have often placed burdens on recreational and commercial fishing, creating unnecessary hardship. Efforts under the National Marine Sanctuary Act (NMSA), or through the establishment of marine national monuments, have also restricted access to fisheries resources. This can place the United States at a competitive disadvantage compared to international competitors, including our adversaries.

Stakeholders have also voiced concern over issues plaguing NOAA's data collection and survey efforts. The timely collection of data is critical for NOAA to inform stock assessments and the development of FMPs. Stock assessments based on inaccurate or outdated data—which have proliferated in recent years—can lead to shorter fishing seasons or more restrictive catch limits and quotas. Additionally, if NOAA or other partners are delayed in collecting the data needed to make key management decisions, openings or early closures of fisheries could also be delayed, which could produce other negative consequences. Industry and recreation advocates have called for deploying technologies that could improve these data collection efforts, with the potential to both reduce costs and boost efficiency.³⁴ In the recreational fishing community, there have also been concerns with the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP).³⁵ NOAA's data program that seeks to estimate total recreational catch to inform management for recreational fisheries.³⁶ Recent discussions have also examined how NOAA can better partner with anglers and state agencies to gather the data needed to manage recreational fisheries.

These issues were discussed at great length at the most recent CCC meeting. In his presentation, Dr. Evan Howell, NOAA's Acting Chief Science Advisor and Director of Scientific Programs, talked about the importance of NOAA engaging with each of the Councils on their scientific priorities.³⁷ This issue is important, given the requirements under the MSA for each of the Councils to submit their multi-year research priorities to NOAA³⁸ and for the Secretary to publish a strategic plan for fisheries research for a five-year period.³⁹ Dr. Howell also talked about the importance of cooperative research and engaging with industry participants in formulating stock assessments and gathering other social and economic data.⁴⁰ Given the numerous ways in which the President's EO focused on engaging stakeholders and modernizing technology to improve data collection, the Committee has an opportunity to seize on these CCC meeting topics and partner with the Trump administration to fix some of the longstanding issues that have afflicted fisheries management.

The Committee has also been heavily engaged on regulatory issues related to the MMPA and ESA. In February, the Committee held an oversight hearing in which stakeholders testified that both statutes contain requirements and ambiguities that can negatively impact the fisheries sector. Under the MMPA, the requirement for NOAA to make a negligible impact determination for commercial fishing operations⁴¹ is challenging to implement, particularly because the statute does not define "negligible impact." It was also noted during the February hearing that the formula NOAA uses to develop negligible impact determinations is widely viewed as overly precautionary.⁴² MMPA issues haven't just impacted the commercial sector, however. States have also faced recent challenges and delays under MMPA in obtaining permits and authorizations for various fisheries research programs. For

example, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department has spent several years working with NOAA to obtain permits for its research activities. After years of discussion, the proposed rule and request for comments for the permit were finally published in the Federal Register in May 2025.⁴³

The ESA also raises significant obstacles, including the designation of critical habitat by NMFS or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Under the current framework, Section 4 of the ESA charges FWS and NMFS with reviewing and acting on petitions to list species as threatened or endangered and designate their critical habitat.⁴⁴ Designation of critical habitat can lead to the enactment of measures that similarly restrict access, which can also challenge fisheries management. Two examples from the Biden administration were NOAA's proposed rule to designate critical habitat for Rice's whales,⁴⁵ along with another proposal to dramatically expand an existing vessel speed restriction along the Atlantic coast to protect the North Atlantic right whale.⁴⁶ Both proposals would have had devastating consequences for industries that operate offshore, including fishing. During the 118th Congress, these proposals were the subject of extensive Committee oversight and faced criticism from many Committee Members.

While both proposed rules were never finalized, underlying challenges with the ESA still exist. To address this issue, Chairman Bruce Westerman (R-AR-04) has introduced the "ESA Amendments Act of 2025," which would make critical reforms to the permitting process and address statutory ambiguities. More information on that legislation can be found here.

In addition to critical habitat, sanctuary designations under the NMSA and the enactment of marine monuments can also be detrimental for commercial and recreational fishing. In the Pacific Ocean, the designation of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument had historically closed off access to commercial fishing for the United States' fleet. This measure put the United States at a competitive disadvantage and threatened geopolitical security given China's presence in the region. On April 17, 2025, however, President Trump corrected this historic mistake by issuing a proclamation "Unleashing American Commercial Fishing in the Pacific," which expanded commercial fishing from 50 to 200 miles within the EEZ.⁴⁷ This change was met with a great deal of enthusiasm from leaders in the region.⁴⁸

Moving Forward

The challenges that the recreational and commercial fishing sectors have faced in recent years, along with the Trump administration's keen focus on them, present the Committee and the Congress with a tremendous opportunity. The 119th Congress should work with federal agencies, states, experts, and other interested stakeholders to ensure that the goals of President Trump's recent executive actions are met. This will require engagement with NOAA, the Councils, and other federal agencies to ensure that all voices are represented at the discussion table. This work has the potential to be transformative across the United States by encouraging greater recreational opportunities for families and individuals, strengthening the commercial industries that contribute to the American economy and food supply, and solidifying the United States's position as the gold standard for advancing each of these pursuits far into the future.

- ¹ Outdoor Foundation & Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation. 2024 Special Report on Fishing. [https://asa.fishing.org/reports/2024-special-report-on-fishing/#lightbox\[a0ec0b2d1f55a2bc38210\]](https://asa.fishing.org/reports/2024-special-report-on-fishing/#lightbox[a0ec0b2d1f55a2bc38210]).
- ² *Id.*
- ³ *Id.*
- ⁴ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Fisheries Economics of the United States 2022. November 2024. <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.fisheries.noaa.gov/2024-11/FEUS-2022-SP02-483.pdf>.
- ⁵ *Id.*
- ⁶ See Bennett, Abigail, Pawan Patil, Kristin Kleisner, Doug Rader, John Virdin, and Xavier Basurto. 2018. Contribution of Fisheries to Food and Nutrition Security: Current Knowledge, Policy, and Research. NI Report 18-02. Durham, NC: Duke University. https://nicholasinstitute.duke.edu/sites/default/files/publications/contribution_of_fisheries_to_food_and_nutrition_security_0.pdf.
- ⁷ White House. Executive Order 13921. "Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth." May 12, 2020. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/05/12/2020-10315/promoting-american-seafood-competitiveness-and-economic-growth>.
- ⁸ *Id.*
- ⁹ *Id.*
- ¹⁰ White House. Executive Order "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness." April 17, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/restoring-american-seafood-competitiveness/>.
- ¹¹ *Id.*
- ¹² *Id.*
- ¹³ *Id.*
- ¹⁴ *Id.*
- ¹⁵ *Id.*
- ¹⁶ *Id.*
- ¹⁷ *Id.*
- ¹⁸ *Id.*
- ¹⁹ *Id.*
- ²⁰ NOAA Fisheries. Laws & Policies: Magnuson-Stevens Act. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/topic/laws-policies/magnuson-stevens-act>.
- ²¹ *Id.*
- ²² *Id.*
- ²³ U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils. About the Councils. <https://www.fisherycouncils.org/about-the-councils>.
- ²⁴ *Id.*
- ²⁵ Section 301, Magnuson-Stevens Act. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/dam-migration/msa-amended-2007.pdf>.
- ²⁶ NOAA Fisheries. National Standard Guidelines. Last Updated February 7, 2025. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national-laws-policies/national-standard-guidelines>.
- ²⁷ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Magnuson-Stevens Act Provisions; National Standard Guidelines. October 18, 2016. Final Rule. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-10-18/pdf/2016-24500.pdf>.
- ²⁸ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. National Marine Fisheries Service. National Standard 1 Guidelines Summary of 2016 Revisions. Updated Presentation as of October 19, 2016. <https://media.fisheries.noaa.gov/dam-migration/ns1-councils-webinar-presentation.pdf>.
- ²⁹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Fisheries of the United States; Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act; National Standard 4, 8, and 9 Guidelines. May 15, 2023. Proposed Rule. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2023-05-15/pdf/2023-10794.pdf>.
- ³⁰ Section 302 (j), Magnuson-Stevens Act. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/dam-migration/msa-amended-2007.pdf>.
- ³¹ *Id.*
- ³² U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils. Council Coordination Committee. <https://www.fisherycouncils.org/ccc>.
- ³³ U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils. Council Coordination Committee. May 2025 CCC Meeting. <https://www.fisherycouncils.org/ccc-meetings/may-2025>.
- ³⁴ *Id.*
- ³⁵ FlyWire. Letter to NOAA Acting Administrator Laura Grimm RE: Electronic Monitoring of Fisheries. April 8, 2025. https://naturalresources.house.gov/uploads/files/noaa_administrator_grimm_letter_4.8.25.pdf.
- ³⁶ House Natural Resources Committee Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries. "Modernizing NOAA and Using Best Available Science." June 27, 2024. <https://naturalresources.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=116219>.
- ³⁷ NOAA Fisheries. About the Marine Recreational Information Program. Last Updated April 21, 2025. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/recreational-fishing-data/about-marine-recreational-information-program>.
- ³⁸ NOAA Fisheries. Science Update, Dr. Evan Howell. CCC. May 14, 2025. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56c65ea32b77e3a78d3441e/t6823b0fd6907cc6ec41620af1747169537341/Final+-+May+2025+CCC+NOAA+Science+Update+NewBedford+MA.pdf>.
- ³⁹ Section 302(h)(7), Magnuson-Stevens Act. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/dam-migration/msa-amended-2007.pdf>.

³⁹ Section 404(b), Magnuson-Stevens Act. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/s3/dam-migration/msa-amended-2007.pdf>.

⁴⁰ NOAA Fisheries. Science Update, Dr. Evan Howell. CCC. May 14, 2025.

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56c5ea3f2b77e3a78f3411a1/t/6823b9fd6907cc6ec41620af1747169537341/Final+-+May+2025+CCC+NOAA+Science+Update+-+New+Redford+MA.pdf>.

⁴¹ Testimony of Paul Weiland. Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries. February 26, 2025. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250226/117865/HHRG-119-II13-Wstate-WeilandP-20250226.pdf>.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Notice, receipt of application for Letter of Authorization, request for comments and information. May 19, 2025. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2025-05-19/pdf/2025-08869.pdf>.

⁴⁴ *The Endangered Species Act: How Litigation is Costing Jobs and Impeding True Recovery Efforts: Oversight Hearing Before the H. Comm. On Natural Resources*, 112th Cong. (2011) (testimony of Karen Budd-Falen, Budd-Falen Law Offices, LLC, at 10).

⁴⁵ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Endangered and Threatened Species; Designation of Critical Habitat for the Rice's Whale. Proposed Rule. July 24, 2023. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/07/24/2023-15187/endangered-and-threatened-species-designation-of-critical-habitat-for-the-rices-whale>.

⁴⁶ 50 C.F.R. §224.105; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), “Amendments to the North Atlantic Right Whale Vessel Strike Reduction Rule,” 87 Federal Register 46921-46936, August 1, 2022. Hereinafter NOAA, NMFS, “Amendments to the North Atlantic Right Whale Vessel Strike Reduction Rule.”

⁴⁷ White House. Proclamation. Unleashing American Commercial Fishing in the Pacific. April 17, 2025.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/unleashing-american-commercial-fishing-in-the-pacific/>.

⁴⁸ Congresswoman Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen. Amata Hails President Trump's Proclamation Restoring Fishing. April 17, 2025. <https://radewagen.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/amata-hails-president-trump-s-proclamation-restoring-fishing-0>.

Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness

Wednesday, June 4, 2025
U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, D.C.

The Subcommittee met, pursuant to notice, at 10:16 a.m., in room 1324, Longworth House Office Building, Hon. Harriet Hageman [Chair of the Subcommittee] presiding.

Present: Representatives Hageman, Wittman, Bentz, Kiggans, Ezell, Maloy, Crank, Westerman; Hoyle, Magaziner, Dingell, Golden, Min, Rivas, Soto, and Huffman.

Also present: Representatives Begich and Rutherford.

Ms. HAGEMAN. The Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries will come to order.

Good morning, everyone. I want to welcome members, witnesses, and our guests in the audience in today's hearing.

Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare a recess of the subcommittee at any time.

Under Committee rule 4(f), any oral opening statements at hearings are limited to the Chair and the Ranking Member. I therefore ask unanimous consent that all other members' opening statements be made part of the hearing record if they are submitted in accordance with Committee rule 3(o).

Without objection, so ordered.

I also ask unanimous consent that the Congressman from Alaska, Mr. Begich; the Congressman from Georgia, Mr. Carter; the Congressman from Florida, Mr. Rutherford; and the Congressman from South Carolina, Mr. Fry, be allowed to participate in today's hearing.

Without objection, so ordered.

We are here today to hold an oversight hearing titled, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness." I now recognize myself for a 5-minute opening statement.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. HARRIET HAGEMAN, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF WYOMING

Ms. HAGEMAN. Today the Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries is holding a hearing on restoring America's seafood competitiveness. We will be specifically focusing on how we can bolster both commercial and recreational fishing across the United States.

Millions of Americans depend on fishing for their livelihoods and to connect with their communities. Both recreational and commercial fishing are tremendous economic drivers. Ensuring access to our abundant fishery resources supports millions of jobs and generates millions of dollars in conservation investments through excise tax revenues. Our domestic seafood sector, including its role

in our food supply chain and as a major part of our trade strategy, makes massive contributions to our economy. Enhancing the commercial sector can also serve important geopolitical goals, like countering the aggression of the Chinese Communist Party and Russia.

In recent years, however, both our fishing sectors have faced tremendous challenges. Whether it is issues related to the science and data collection used to inform management decisions under the Federal Fisheries Management System, regulatory challenges associated with implementation of the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, or additional efforts to restrict access to our waters, fishing in the United States has become quite complicated, with our smaller, independent fishermen facing the most challenges.

The good news is that President Trump is committed to addressing these issues. In April he signed an executive order titled Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness which is intended to reduce regulatory burdens and restrictions to ensure that the American fishing industry can thrive. President Trump's executive order directed the Secretary of Commerce to work with the eight regional fishery management councils to make the necessary changes to reduce regulatory burdens, to adopt new technologies to improve management, and work with stakeholders across this community.

Today's hearing is intended as a signal to those stakeholders that Congress will support President Trump in these efforts, and will work with this Administration to develop the necessary approach to chart a better path forward. We look forward to partnering with the Trump administration to carry out these shared goals.

The United States has long served as the world's gold standard for fisheries management. The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act is a cooperative, stakeholder-driven approach to fisheries management in the United States. This approach has long been supported and trusted by the many stakeholders working with the Fishery Management councils. And yet challenges still persist.

As the President's executive order states, one central challenge for both the recreational and commercial sectors has been the lack of adequate data to inform fisheries management decisions. A lack of complete data can lead to shorter fishing seasons and more restrictions. That is why conducting thorough, complete stock assessments and fishery surveys to sustainably manage our Federal fisheries is at the core of NOAA's mission. This work must not only continue, but it must be prioritized.

A common theme throughout our WWF hearings on a variety of topics has been the need for certainty and stability for our industries and small businesses. Perhaps the biggest driver of economic instability has been the Federal Government's promulgation of overburdensome regulations. Within our jurisdiction the ambiguity and lack of clarity of environmental statutes like the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act are the main drivers in this area. Our fishermen and women simply do not know what the rules are going to be from administration to administration. That isn't fair to them, and such

a situation undermines their ability to invest in their fleets and in infrastructure.

As we have heard in recent months and years, both the commercial and recreational sectors have faced undue burdens under both the ESA and the MMPA. Reforming and modernizing these statutes will help reduce burdens, promote access to our marine resources, and provide certainty and clarity for the regulated community while at the same time protecting our fisheries and marine resources. We can, in other words, continue to protect our marine and mammal species while also protecting our fishing industries.

Above all, we must promote access to our fisheries while continuing to serve as good stewards of our resources. Today's hearing is a first step to lay out a vision for the future of Federal fisheries management, one that embraces the cooperative approach between fisheries managers and stakeholders, demands better science and data, and embraces the role that technology can play in solving these issues.

With that I want to thank our witnesses for being here and the members for their interest in these important issues.

Ms. HAGEMAN. And I yield back. I now recognize Ranking Member Hoyle for her opening statement.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. VAL HOYLE, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF OREGON

Ms. HOYLE. Thank you, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today. I know some of you traveled a long way.

From coast to coast, the American fishermen and fisherwomen fuel the economy and feed the world. Our fisheries are some of the best managed and most sustainable in the world. Science-based management, led by members of the fishing industry in close collaboration with scientists, protect the balance of our ocean ecosystems and ensure that fishing can continue for generations to come.

I appreciate that the Trump administration wants to support the competitiveness of our domestic seafood industry. Certainly, it is an important part of the economy of my district. I hope to work with the Administration and my colleagues in the majority to achieve that goal. But I don't see how the Administration is going to succeed when it spent the last 4 months haphazardly cutting the funding and workers that our fisheries rely on. Fishing communities in my State and many fishing communities around the country have been thrown into chaos due to these DOGE cuts. You are not going to make our seafood industry more competitive by firing staff at NOAA, canceling research, banning NOAA staff from traveling to meetings, or by instigating trade wars with erratic and unstrategic tariff policies.

Over one third of the NOAA fisheries positions are now vacant. Fishery science centers across the country are bleeding talent, and key NOAA fisheries staff have been fired. For example, this spring, hatcheries that normally release millions of Chinook salmon are in limbo because the single NOAA employee, Krista Finlay, was abruptly terminated in February by DOGE. Her job was to ensure hatchery operations met Federal standards under the ESA and

provide permits to release them. Now NOAA isn't processing compliance reviews, the hatchery fish can't be released, and this isn't just a this-year problem. It hurts the long-term future of West Coast salmon runs.

The Pacific Northwest needs a functioning Federal partner that takes its responsibilities seriously. Meanwhile, the President's budget would eliminate or zero out over a dozen programs that support fisheries and coastal communities, including the Sea Grant.

Oregon's Sea Grant scientists provide resources that help fishermen sell more seafood, prevent and treat boating injuries, and reduce plastic pollution. This program leverages \$5 in additional funding and economic benefits for every Federal dollar invested, and that is a good return on investment. It certainly seems like a worthy and efficient investment to me, and yet the second hearing in a row NOAA leadership has refused to appear in person to answer the Committee's questions about their plans to eliminate the Sea Grant program and many others.

I want to support our fisheries by investing in them and the tools they need to be sustainable and successful. That is something we should all be able to get behind and I look forward to hearing more from our witnesses today.

Ms. HOYLE. Thank you, and I yield back.

Ms. HAGEMAN [continuing]. I now recognize the Ranking Member of the full Committee for his opening statement.

STATEMENT OF THE HON. JARED HUFFMAN, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Mr. HUFFMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair, and welcome to our witnesses. I am looking forward to this conversation. I would love to have a serious bipartisan discussion on what is going on with our fisheries, what is going on with leveling the playing field for American fishers who we hold to very high standards, a serious discussion about IUU fishing and any number of other really important issues. So I applaud you, Madam Chair, for having a hearing on this subject.

But pretending that what is going on right now with NOAA and this Administration, pretending that that is OK, pretending that this Administration is somehow on the right track toward these statements about restoring seafood competitiveness is just deeply disingenuous if not gaslighting. You can't speak these things into action. You have to do actual policies that make them happen, and we are not on the right track in that regard.

Let's be clear. President Trump's imperial edict on restoring American seafood competitiveness doesn't restore anything. It certainly doesn't help American fishers. It dismantles the programs, the science, and the safeguards that have made U.S. fisheries among the most sustainable in the world. You don't strengthen American fisheries by gutting the systems that keep populations sustainable. You don't support fishers by sidelining science-based decisions, which everybody agrees is the core to maintaining a sustainable fishing economy. You don't help American fishers by ignoring illegal, unreported, and unregulated,

or IUU, fishing that floods our markets and sabotages their livelihoods.

Now, I understand that in his imperial edict President Trump said he wanted to crack down on IUU fishing. But in the same breath he is dismantling the one program that we have to confront it: the Seafood Import Monitoring Program, SIMP. He is absolutely crippling the one agency that we have to manage fisheries, who has a significant role in confronting IUU fishing. So there is an incredible disconnect between these catchy phrases and the title of this hearing and what is actually going on with the policies and actions of this Administration.

President Trump and his DOGE cronies are thoughtlessly slashing budgets. They are firing seasoned scientists. They are pushing disruptive, bureaucratic reshuffling schemes, including moving commercial fishery regulation over to an agency that has zero experience and zero capacity to even deal with commercial fishing. They don't even know what it is at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. So that is the kind of thoughtlessness and recklessness that we are seeing right now. And we sure ought to be talking about that instead of gaslighting and pretending that everything is on the right track.

Science should be at the core of fisheries management, and that requires consistent investments in things like stock assessments, ecosystem monitoring, data collection. These are the tools that give us a clear picture of fish populations and how to manage them responsibly so that we don't crash them, so that we don't have to close fisheries, so that people can continue to be out on the water earning their living.

And I represent a lot of those people on the water, and I promise you they are not woke liberals. Most of them are not even Democrats. I fight for them because I believe in what they do. And many of them are telling you, Madam Chair, and they are telling this Administration and raising alarms in every way they can that this stuff is not OK: what is going on with DOGE, what is going on with NOAA, some of these wrong-headed proposals, the notion that you can talk about confronting IUU fishing but then do things that absolutely cripple our ability to take it seriously.

So, look, this should be a bipartisan subject. I have always approached this issue, and I have been working on it for many, many years, I have always approached it in a bipartisan manner, whether that was working with the late Don Young or whether that was working with Garret Graves or any number of my other colleagues. I will soon be reintroducing my bipartisan bill, Sustaining America's Fisheries for the Future, with Mr. Moylan, as well as Mr. Case and others. We are attempting to reauthorize the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and also modernize it, include some significant updates to our fisheries law to address new challenges facing the fishing community in the era of climate change, to support emerging technologies, and do a lot more. I will also continue to work on and introduce legislation to seriously confront IUU fishing, which is going to require a lot more than lip service and gaslighting titles of hearings.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses, and I hope they won't hold back because it is very important that we hear from

people that know what they are talking about, that are not just some of the powerful industry insiders who are not interested in sustainable management, who are not interested in actually confronting IUU fishing. We need to hear from the other voices, and I hope we will today.

Mr. HUFFMAN. I yield back, Madam Chair.

Ms. HAGEMAN. I will now introduce our panel of witnesses.

Captain Rick Bellavance, the Chair of the Council Coordination Committee from North Kingstown, Rhode Island.

Ms. Martha Guyas, the Southeast Fisheries Policy Director at the American Sportfishing Association in Tallahassee, Florida.

Ms. Jamie O'Connor, the Deputy Executive Director of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council in Anchorage, Alaska.

Mr. Dustin Delano, the Chief Operating Officer of the New England Fishermen Stewardship Association in South Portland, Maine.

And Mr. Larson Hunter, the Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Coastal Villages Region Fund from Scammon Bay, Alaska.

Now I want to remind the witnesses that under committee rules they must limit their oral statements to 5 minutes, but their entire statement will appear in the hearing record.

To begin your testimony please press the button on the microphone.

And we use timing lights. When you begin the light will turn green. When you have 1 minute remaining the light will turn yellow. And at the end of the 5 minutes the light will turn red, and I will ask you to please complete your statement.

I will also allow all witnesses to testify before member questioning.

I now yield 30 seconds to Representative Magaziner to introduce his constituent, Mr. Bellavance.

Mr. MAGAZINER. Well, thank you to the Chair, and thank you to my friend and constituent, Rick Bellavance, Captain Rick, for being here today.

Rick is a born and raised Rhode Islander who has spent his entire life on the water. He started fishing in the Narragansett Bay at age 10 on a 12-foot wooden skiff. Today he is the captain owner-operator of a charter boat, priority two, out of Point Judith, Rhode Island. He serves as President of the Rhode Island Party and Charter Boat Association, has been a member of the New England Fishery Management Council since 2016, and is Chairman of the Council Coordinating Committee.

Thank you, Rick, for making the trip down here and for advocating for the fishing industry in our State.

And I will yield back.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you. I now recognize Mr. Bellavance for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF RICK BELLAVANCE, CHAIR, COUNCIL COORDINATION COMMITTEE, NORTH KINGSTOWN, RHODE ISLAND

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Thank you, Chair Hageman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Rick Bellavance, Chair of the Council Coordination Committee.

The CCC is made up of the chairs, vice chairs, and executive directors from each of the eight regional fishery management councils. These councils manage commercial and recreational fisheries in Federal waters and ensure sustainable fishing practices. I own and operate a fishing business in Point Judith, Rhode Island, and have served on the New England Fishery Management Council for nearly 9 years. I will be finishing my term and service as council chair this August.

I am honored to appear before you today to provide this testimony on behalf of the Council Coordination Committee. I will discuss the importance of fishing to the United States, the unique role of public participation in fisheries management afforded by the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the current challenges that our fisheries face, and how the Nation can work together to ensure prosperous and sustainable fisheries for decades to come. This includes our current work with NOAA to implement Executive Order 14276, Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness.

Fishing supports over 2 million jobs in the United States and adds billions of dollars to the U.S. economy. In 2022 U.S. commercial and recreational fishing combined to generate \$321 billion in sales, with an additional \$150 billion in added value impacts.

In putting seafood on American tables, the commercial fishing industry involves many more people than the brave fishing captains and crews who go to sea. There are vessel and gear manufacturers, processors, distributors, fishing families, and communities, both large and small, including remote islands. The recreational sector includes private anglers, for-hire vessels, and larger party charter operations that support significant tourism and outdoor recreational economies. Finally, subsistence fisheries is a way of life for many communities.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, councils use a public participatory process to manage fisheries, relying on NOAA science to develop regulations tailored to our regional needs. The collaborative approach has rebuilt many depleted stocks while reducing bycatch. In 2023, 94 percent of U.S. stocks with known status were not over-fished and 82 percent of stocks were not subject to over-fishing.

Councils are also finding ways to help industry efficiently harvest over longer seasons, adopt gear innovations, use more electronic technologies for reporting and monitoring, and increasing safety at sea. We continue to address the differences with what fishermen see on the water and what science says can be caught sustainably through cooperative research. I have personally participated in cooperative research projects, and it is harder to argue against the science when I am part of the collection efforts. When scientists share a day on the water with fishermen, the things we both learn are priceless.

The United States is the gold standard for fisheries management, but domestic fisheries face several challenges. Variability in data across regions, particularly in recreational fisheries, limits understanding of fish populations. Ecosystem changes such as warming waters in the Mid-Atlantic and New England have shifted stock distributions, making some species inaccessible to fishermen.

Additionally, NOAA budget cuts and staffing reductions have hindered fish surveys, stock assessments, and have resulted in prolonged delays in the publications of regulations that allow fishermen to fish. Cancelled or scaled-back stock assessments threaten economically important fisheries like groundfish, monkfish and scallops in New England. Proposed cuts could further erode NOAA's ability to provide critical science for management decisions. These uncertainties often lead to cautious catch limits, reducing harvest limits for both commercial and recreational fisheries. Funding uncertainties also affect public meetings and limit stakeholder participation and transparency.

The council's work to ensure prosperous and sustainable fisheries directly aligns with the stated goal of EO 14276 to promote the productive harvest of our seafood resources. NOAA fisheries has asked that all councils submit recommendations to reduce burdens on domestic fishing and increase production, and to commit to a work plan and schedule for implementation to ensure these actions are prioritized. The councils, with the input of technical staff, advisors, and the public, are now redirecting efforts to update and add to recommendations we made in 2020.

Despite NOAA's stretched resources, the councils are committed to balancing conservation with productive harvests of U.S. seafood. By continuing collaboration, leveraging science, and engaging stakeholders, the councils, individually and working through the CCC, aim to increase fishing opportunities while ensuring that the essential ongoing work of keeping fishing operating is not compromised.

Thank you. I can take your questions.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Bellavance follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF RICK BELLAVANCE, CHAIR, COUNCIL COORDINATION
COMMITTEE, U.S. REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCILS

Chair Hageman and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Rick Bellavance, and I am the Chair of the Council Coordination Committee (CCC). The CCC is made up of the chairs, vice-chairs, and executive directors from each of the eight Regional Fishery Management Councils that manage commercial and recreational fisheries throughout the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, from New England to Alaska, to the territories in the Western Pacific and Caribbean. I am from Point Judith, Rhode Island and am the owner/operator of Priority Charters, a recreational for-hire and commercial fishing business fishing for cod, pollock, haddock, hake, and winter flounder, among other species. I have served on the New England Fishery Management Council for nine years and will be finishing my term and service as Council Chair this August.

I am honored to appear before you today to provide this testimony on behalf of the Council Coordination Committee. I will discuss the importance of fishing to the U.S., the unique role of public participation in fisheries management afforded by the Magnuson-Stevens Act for nearly 50 years, current challenges that our fisheries face, and how the Nation can work together to ensure prosperous and sustainable fisheries for decades. This includes our current work with NOAA to implement Executive Order 14276, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness".

IMPORTANCE OF FISHING IN THE UNITED STATES

Fishing has long-been important to our Nation, today supporting over two million jobs and contributing billions of dollars to the U.S. economy. According to NOAA's "Fisheries Economics of the United States 2022" report, the U.S. commercial and recreational fisheries combined to generate \$321 billion in sales in 2022 and supported 2.3 million jobs. The commercial fisheries and seafood industry generated \$183 billion in sales, \$47 billion in income, and \$74 billion in value-added impacts, as well as supported 1.6 million full- and part-time jobs. Recreational fishing gen-

erated \$138 billion in sales, \$45 billion in income, and \$75 billion in value-added impacts, supporting nearly 700,000 jobs.

Top commercial fishing ports span the nation and can be found in Alaska, Massachusetts, Virginia, Louisiana, Hawaii, Washington, American Samoa south of the Equator, and California, and there are hundreds of ports important to the commercial, recreational and subsistence fisheries in all coastal states and territories.

In putting seafood on American tables, the commercial fishing industry involves many more people than the fishing captains and crew who go to sea. There are vessel and gear manufacturers, dealers, processors, distributors, restaurants, fishing families, and fishing communities large and small, including remote islands. The recreational sector includes private anglers, for-hire vessels and larger party-charter operations that support significant tourism and outdoor recreation economies. Finally, subsistence fishing is a way of life for many communities.

REGIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCILS

The eight U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils manage fisheries that exist primarily within federal waters, from three miles off our coasts to the edge of the Exclusive Economic Zone. They do this through a unique public participatory process where the Councils develop recommendations for regulations that are then approved and administered by NOAA Fisheries within the Department of Commerce.

In 1976, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) set up the Council system to deliberately include those who are directly regulated and most affected by management in the decision-making process. Fishermen, other engaged members of the public, and representatives of each coastal state and territory serve as voting Council members. They also participate in Council advisory panels and attend our many public meetings where they can make comments on the record and interact directly with Council members. Increasingly, meetings of the Councils and their committees are broadcast online, which has helped increase public access.

Councils are required by the MSA to use a scientific body to set maximum catch limits, and they also use other scientific products generated by NOAA and other partners to develop management measures that are tailored to specific fisheries and regions. The scientific support system includes expert biologists, ecologists, economists, sociologists and others from federal and state/territorial agencies and academia who collaborate with professional staff at the Councils to ensure that the best available science is used to support all decisions. Keys to successful management include continued active participation of fishery users, building and sustaining trust in the process, and ensuring that regulations are well-matched with the state of the fishery resources.

MANAGEMENT SUCCESSES

Over nearly 50 years of Council management, we have rebuilt many depleted stocks and reduced bycatch. In 2023, NOAA reported that 50 stocks had been rebuilt since 2000. Of the stocks with known status, 94% were not subject to overfishing, and 82% were not overfished. Notable recoveries include the mid-water snapper complex in the Gulf of America, Atlantic bluefish and sea scallops, and Washington coast coho salmon.

In addition, Councils are finding ways to help the industry efficiently harvest over longer seasons, adopt gear innovations, use more electronic technologies for reporting and monitoring, and increase safety at sea. We continue to try to address differences between what fishermen see on the water and what the science says can be caught sustainably through cooperative research. I have personally participated in several cooperative research projects, and it is harder to argue against science when I am part of the collection efforts. When scientists share a day on the water with fishermen, the things we all learn are invaluable.

Highlights of successful management from each Council region include:

- **The region supports** ~290,000 jobs and \$28 billion in annual sales and is home to the nation's top grossing port of New Bedford, MA. The sea scallop fishery, one of the most valuable in the U.S. (worth ~\$467 million in 2022), was rebuilt through limited access and rotational area management.
- **Mid-Atlantic:** The Council successfully completed a five-year strategic plan in 2024 that lays the groundwork for continued progress on long-term goals in communication, science, management, ecosystems, and governance.

- **South Atlantic:** Sustainable management of Spanish and king mackerel fisheries supports over \$600 million in sales impacts and 4,200 jobs annually in the U.S. economy.
- **Caribbean:** The Council successfully transitioned to island-based fisheries management to better support small-scale, artisanal fisheries vital to local economies.
- **Gulf:** Goals and objectives of the red snapper and grouper-tilefish individual fishing programs have been updated to further promote access to fishing quota, improve safety-at-sea, reduce discards, and increase profitability.
- **Western Pacific:** The Council restored access to U.S. EEZ areas for pelagic tuna fisheries, incorporated new data-poor methods for catch limits, made protected species bycatch mitigation more practical, and implemented use of archipelagic-based fishery ecosystem plans.
- **Pacific:** The Council's successful groundfish rebuilding plans transformed a collapsed fishery into a \$150 million fishery.
- **North Pacific:** The Alaska pollock fishery (the nation's largest fishery by volume) supports ~30,000 jobs and contributes over \$4 billion to the U.S. economy. Sustainable management has led to consistent supply for thousands of U.S. buyers and restaurants, surimi (imitation crab), and global whitefish markets. This fishery supports significant community development initiatives and projects along the coast of western Alaska and the Aleutian chain.

MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES

While we have arguably the best managed fisheries in the world, domestic fisheries have many challenges. Collectively, we manage over 500 stocks, but the regional approach to management under the Magnuson-Stevens Act results in differences across the Nation and within Council regions in the data available to understand commercial or recreational fishing participation and abundance and life history of species that fishermen rely on. Some stocks are assessed with complex models, but many species rely on simpler approaches because data are lacking. The lack of adequate data is directly linked to how much fish we can catch today to ensure sustainable harvests tomorrow. Uncertainty results in reduced harvest levels for both commercial and recreational sectors because Councils are required by the National Standard Guidelines to account for scientific uncertainty when setting catch limits.

Ecosystem changes are outpacing our existing tools to measure fish stocks, understand environmental driving factors, and adapt management. Recent short-term changes in water temperatures severely impacted species like Pacific cod and snow crab in the North Pacific. The New England and Mid-Atlantic ocean regions are warming at some of the fastest rates in the world resulting in shifting stock distributions and reduced access for fishermen. Personally, I have seen many changes on the water over 30 years of fishing, including cod disappearing and black sea bass inundating southern New England waters. I am catching sandbar sharks for the first time, but instead of landing them, I tag and release them to help improve science.

The Councils' budgets have not been fulfilled in Fiscal Year 2025, and it is unknown if and what additional funds will be provided from now through September and beyond. Public meetings in fishing communities are critical to the Council process, but lack of certainty in the current fiscal year has hampered our ability to plan for robust public participation. Councils are scaling back, and in some cases, canceling meetings, which means we cannot do our jobs to recommend management measures to the Secretary of Commerce, as required by the MSA.

Budget and personnel reductions at NOAA and uncertainties about the availability of funds in the near term and beyond have been challenging for the Councils. Under the proposed cuts to NOAA, we expect to face increasing uncertainty in the science that underpins fisheries management decision-making, and reduced capacity to develop measures that foster prosperous fisheries. NOAA has had reduced capacity to conduct fishery-independent surveys, assess fish populations, and provide the Councils and public with timely information to make well-informed management recommendations.

This spring, planned assessments for many fish stocks have been scaled back or canceled. Reduced stock assessment capacity causes uncertainty in setting catch limits, such as for the groundfish, monkfish, and skate fisheries in New England. In the Western Pacific, the human observer program's future is uncertain due to NMFS budgetary constraints, putting monitoring of the Nations' largest tuna longline fisheries in a precarious position. The Councils are supportive of

cooperative research, including the use of advanced technologies; however, these approaches may be limited under the proposed cuts.

Additionally, there have been delays in the publication of regulations required for allowing fishermen to be able to fish. Reductions in NOAA support have already caused delays in implementing fishing specifications for the New England scallop fishery, one of the most valuable fisheries in the Nation, and freezes on Federal contracts and grants have impacted vital surveys in most regions.

Reduced science, policy, and administrative staffing at NOAA is likely to limit our capacity to increase flexibility and maximize U.S. seafood production in the future. The fisheries science and management enterprise may need to be simplified, which could present challenges to adapt and respond to resource conditions and the needs of fishing communities.

Examples of challenges faced by all Regional Fishery Management Councils include:

- Science / Data Collection
 - Lack of fishery-independent surveys for regional stocks
 - NOAA research vessel maintenance and repairs
 - Recreational data uncertainty (Marine Recreational Information Program)
 - For-hire reporting
 - Headboat sampling
 - Delays in availability of commercial catch data
 - Limited life history information
 - Data poor and model resistant stocks
- Management
 - Burdensome regulations
 - Lack of flexibility
 - Slow bureaucratic and regulatory processes that result in untimely responses
 - Reduced programmatic support (e.g., reductions in Federal resources)
 - Shortcoming of U.S. international negotiations to follow the “Ensuring Access to Pacific Fisheries Act”
 - Litigation
- Funding
 - Difficult to plan for future staffing and priority needs
 - Funding needs to be consistent with statutory requirements
 - Inability to address the fishing and seafood industries holistically
 - Reduced opportunities for public participation
- Environmental Changes
 - Inadequate baseline data on stocks and environmental conditions
 - Shifting fish distributions and changing productivity regimes
 - Inability to account for external driving factors in static management system
 - Depredation issues
- Financial Crisis in Fishing Industry
 - Increasing costs of monitoring
 - Loss of infrastructure needed to process fish and support fishing operations
 - Longterm decline in seafood production
 - Unfair trade practices and tariffs affecting markets for U.S. fisheries
 - Survival of small boat fisheries being threatened
 - Highlighted example:
 - From 2022 to 2023, Alaska’s seafood industry suffered a \$1.8 billion loss, with a 50% decline in profitability, due to 1) low seafood prices due to global market forces; 2) reduced global consumer demand; 3) subsidies and lower cost of seafood processing in countries that compete with U.S. seafood products.
- Stakeholder Confidence in Process/Outcomes
 - Concern about the quality of stock assessments
 - Substantial changes in stock size estimates harm scientific credibility
 - Frequent lack of agreement across data sources

- ESA/MMPA actions continue to burden fisheries and fishing communities
- Stocks in rebuilding plans with unrealistic targets can constrain fisheries indefinitely (for example, stocks reacting poorly to a changing marine ecosystem are still required to be rebuilt even if fisheries have little to no impact on their rebuilding success)
- Communication challenges with stakeholders to avoid confusion and dissatisfaction with management

Examples of challenges faced by individual Regional Fishery Management Councils include:

- New England/Mid-Atlantic Region
 - In the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions, the 2025 stock assessment schedule has been altered in response to staffing and budget constraints at NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center. Several planned assessments have been downgraded to data updates, which provide less robust scientific information for setting catch limits. Adjustments to the 2026 schedule are also underway, and further disruptions are anticipated. Furthermore, all research track assessments originally scheduled for 2026 and 2027, except for longfin squid, have been paused. Research track assessments are critical to address complex scientific questions that increase our understanding of individual stocks and support sustainability.
- South Atlantic Region
 - The Southeast Regional Office Social Science Branch, which is made up of economists and social scientists and responds to the needs of the South Atlantic, Gulf, and Caribbean regions, is down by three positions which is half of their recent total branch staff. As a result, their capacity has notably decreased and there will likely be delays in completing analyses necessary for evaluating fishery management actions and submitting amendments to modify regulations. Stock assessment capacity available to the South Atlantic Council has long been inadequate and is further reduced due to loss of an analytical position. Despite managing over 60 stocks, the Council will receive only 2–3 assessments per year for the foreseeable future. Additionally, travel restrictions have reduced the efficiency of recent regional assessment workshops. Approval and implementation of amendments submitted by the South Atlantic Council to improve and modernize commercial fishery data through an electronic logbook and modernize the Wreckfish ITQ program have been delayed.
- Caribbean Region
 - The U.S. Caribbean fisheries depend on larvae and juveniles of shared species with other Caribbean countries. The reduction in NOAA personnel and budget has affected the Caribbean Council's capacity to interact with key Caribbean institutions such as the FAO Western Central Atlantic Commission (WECAFC), which is in charge of the fisheries in the Caribbean Sea. This has reduced the Council's efforts that started in the 1970s for pan-Caribbean management of important species like spiny lobster, the most important species in the U.S. Caribbean economy.
- Gulf Region
 - Nearly all finfish species (representing 36 species) managed by the Gulf Council have been impacted by the recent loss of funding for the dockside sampling component of the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS). This survey has allowed samplers to interview for-hire headboat participants at the dock to ask about the fish they have caught and collect biological information on individual fish (i.e., fish lengths and weights) since 1986. A continuously running decades-long (nearly 40 years) fishery survey, like the SRHS, is rare in any region and provides an essential long-term time series to monitor the abundance and health for numerous fish stocks. Data from the SRHS is either used or considered for use in every Gulf finfish stock assessment. For lane snapper, the SRHS is the only landings data stream used when conducting that data limited stock assessment. A dockside intercept component is fundamental in a survey design to provide validation to the catch logbooks reported by survey participants. If that validation/dockside intercept methodology is absent, data from that survey is not considered suitable for input in stock assessments or management decision making. [1] Thus, nearly all other

fleet-specific fishery surveys, whether conducted by a state or the Federal government, have a dockside sampling component. Therefore, this funding loss will disrupt the historical fishery time series, introduce greater uncertainty into stock assessments, and tremendously restrict the Gulf Council's ability to monitor a substantial portion of the economically important fish species it is tasked to manage.

- Western Pacific Region

- In the Western Pacific Region, funding for the Hawaii and American Samoa longline observer program to monitor for protected species interactions is facing reductions and may be phased out as early as 2026. The transition from resource-intensive human-observers to a more cost-efficient electronic monitoring (EM) program in these longline fisheries is dependent on federal funding availability, which is currently on hold due to the contract review process. NMFS reported at the May 2025 CCC meeting that the sole fishery independent survey (Bottomfish) conducted in the Pacific Islands has been postponed. The information from this survey is used to inform the data-poor stock assessments for bottomfish in the region.

- Pacific Region

- Reductions in staffing at NOAA have hampered the ability to move Pacific groundfish regulations through the Council process and into implementation phase. The slowdown is occurring due to delays in reviewing analytical packages prior to final action by the Council, as well as a slowdown in the review and approval of final regulatory packages that are being transmitted by the Council for implementation. Actions that have been slowed include several which alleviate regulatory restrictions upon Pacific groundfish fishermen.

- North Pacific Region

- The North Pacific Council is currently contending with funding shortages, loss of profitability of the fishing industry due to global market forces, and ecosystem instability that has resulted in mass mortality events due to marine heatwaves and steep declines of Chinook and Chum Salmon populations.

EXECUTIVE ORDER 14276

The Councils' work to ensure prosperous and sustainable fisheries directly aligns with the goal of EO 14276 to "promote the productive harvest of our seafood resources." In New England, we are looking at constraints to our skate and monkfish fishermen that have resulted in underutilization of quotas. In April, the North Pacific Council took action to allow more Bering Sea halibut quota to be fished on fewer vessels to respond to fishermen's requests to address economic changes in the fishery.

To comply with the EO tasking, NOAA Fisheries has asked that all the Councils submit recommendations to reduce burdens on domestic fishing and increase production, and to commit to a work plan and schedule for implementation to ensure these actions are prioritized. Councils, with the input of technical staff, advisors, and the public, are now redirecting efforts to update and add to recommendations made in 2020 that responded to EO 13921 "Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth." While we look forward to increased opportunities to promote U.S. fishing under EO 14276, we recognize that NOAA resources are stretched thin. The Councils and NOAA are working closely to increase fishing opportunities while ensuring that the essential, ongoing work of keeping fisheries operating is not compromised.

The Councils, individually and working through the CCC, remain committed to sustaining public engagement in managing the fishery resources of the United States and promoting the productive harvest of our seafood resources.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony and share perspectives from the Regional Fishery Management Councils.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD TO CAPTAIN RICK BELLAVANCE, CHAIR,
COUNCIL COORDINATION COMMITTEE

Questions Submitted by Representative Bruce Westerman

Question 1. Mr. Bellavance, the President's Executive Order, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness," directs the Secretary of Commerce to work with the Secretary of Agriculture to "develop and implement an America First Seafood Strategy to promote production, marketing, sale, and export of United States fishery and aquaculture products and strengthen domestic processing capacity." In your opinion, how could the Saltonstall-Kennedy Program help advance this effort?

Answer. The Saltonstall-Kennedy (S-K) Program could be highly effective for advancing the objectives outlined in the President's Executive Order, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness," in several ways. By aligning its funding priorities with the goals of the Executive Order, the S-K Program can play a strategic role in advancing a comprehensive America First Seafood Strategy by bolstering domestic seafood production, processing, marketing, and exports while supporting innovation, sustainability, and economic opportunity in U.S. fishing communities.

Supporting Innovation and Technology in Domestic Seafood Processing

The S-K Program can prioritize funding for projects that directly align with the EO's aim to strengthen domestic processing capacity:

- Enhance automation and efficiency in domestic seafood processing
- Develop value-added products from U.S. fisheries and aquaculture
- Promote sustainable practices that increase yield without degrading resources

Promoting U.S. Seafood Through Marketing and Consumer Education

By funding projects focused on stimulating demand and boosting the sale and export of American seafood:

- Domestic and international marketing campaigns that highlight the quality and sustainability of U.S. seafood
- Public awareness initiatives about the benefits of buying American seafood (e.g., nutrition, environmental sustainability, job creation)
- Branding and traceability technologies that build consumer trust in U.S. seafood

Supporting Aquaculture Development

The EO emphasizes expanding aquaculture as part of an "America First Seafood Strategy." S-K funds can:

- Support research and pilot programs that reduce barriers to aquaculture expansion
- Fund development of cost-effective, environmentally responsible systems, including offshore and recirculating aquaculture
- Promote training and workforce development for aquaculture-related jobs

Enhancing Data and Infrastructure for Fisheries Management

Robust fisheries data and infrastructure support competitive and sustainable seafood production. S-K grants can:

- Improve stock assessments, catch data, and traceability tools
- Invest in port infrastructure and facilities that support domestic landing, storage, and processing
- Support collaborative projects with fishermen and processors to inform science and policy

Building Resilience and Expanding Opportunities for Coastal Communities

S-K projects can also help smaller operations and communities by:

- Supporting local processing and distribution systems
- Providing grants for small-scale businesses to expand their operations or enter new markets
- Enhancing economic stability in fishing communities

Question 2. Additionally, in remarks submitted for the record, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) mentions 14 camera-based electronic monitoring programs across different fisheries. NOAA states that the adoption of new technologies can improve the management process while also reducing costs. How do you think the Regional Fishery Management Councils and the Council Coordination Committee can work on these issues going forward, particularly considering the Executive Order's mention of new technology?

Answer. The Regional Fishery Management Councils (Councils) and the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) are in a strong position to help implement the Executive Order's call for the adoption of new technologies to improve fisheries management and reduce costs. By actively promoting and coordinating the adoption of electronic monitoring and other new technologies, the Councils and CCC can play a central role in realizing the Executive Order's vision of a modern, efficient, and competitive American seafood industry.

Integrate Electronic Monitoring (EM) into Fishery Management Plans

Councils can assist in aligning with the EO's emphasis on innovation and effective resource management:

- Incorporate EM requirements or options into existing and new Fishery Management Plans (FMPs), especially where traditional observer programs are costly or impractical
- Tailor EM systems (e.g., cameras, sensors, e-logbooks) to specific fishery needs, balancing regulatory compliance, data quality, and cost-efficiency

Standardize Best Practices Across Regions

The CCC can support standardization to increase adoption, reduce duplication of effort, and enhance regulatory efficiency:

- Facilitate the sharing of best practices, data protocols, and performance metrics across all Councils
- Encourage inter-council pilot projects to compare technology outcomes in different fisheries and regions

Foster Partnerships for Innovation

Councils and the CCC can promote the kind of research-to-operations activities the Executive Order envisions:

- Partner with NOAA, academic institutions, and industry to test and refine camera-based monitoring technologies
- Support public-private collaborations that help scale successful innovations and reduce costs over time

Guide Funding Opportunities

The Councils can provide guidance to funding sources to ensure that new technology adoption addresses real-world management challenges:

- Identify and advocate for funding, including through NOAA programs (like Saltonstall–Kennedy or Cooperative Research) or public-private investment
- Provide guidance to NOAA on funding priorities that align with council-identified technology needs

Engage Stakeholders to Build Support and Ensure Equity

New technology can raise concerns about cost, privacy, and impacts on small-scale fisheries; ensuring buy-in will be critical to widespread and sustained adoption. Councils should:

- Actively engage fishermen and stakeholders to gather feedback, explain benefits, and address concerns
- Consider scalable and flexible approaches that work for both small and large operations

Monitor Outcomes and Adapt

Councils and the CCC should promote a data-driven approach consistent with the Executive Order's goals:

- Track the performance of EM technologies in terms of cost savings, data accuracy, and compliance improvements
- Use an adaptive management framework to update FMPs and practices based on results

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you, Mr. Bellavance. I now recognize Ms. Guyas for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF MARTHA GUYAS, SOUTHEAST FISHERIES POLICY DIRECTOR, AMERICAN SPORTFISHING ASSOCIATION, TALLAHASSEE, FLORIDA

Ms. GUYAS. Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to speak today on behalf of the American Sportfishing Association regarding restoring American seafood competitiveness.

In 2023, 57.7 million people went fishing in the United States. Recreational fishing supports more than 1 million jobs and contributes more than \$230 billion to the economy. For Americans, fishing is more than a pastime. It is a cultural and economic engine rooted in conservation. The recreational fishing community contributes \$2 billion annually towards conservation through license fees, excise taxes, and direct support. No other user group contributes nearly as much towards ensuring our Nation's fisheries and waterways are healthy and accessible to the public.

While much of the President's executive order on restoring American seafood competitiveness pertains to commercial fishing and seafood trade, many of the policies and priorities apply to the United States marine fisheries more broadly, including recreational fisheries. Recreational fishing is also a significant source of seafood for millions of Americans who consume their own catch. My testimony today will focus on challenges faced by the recreational fishing community, particularly in the Southeast, and opportunities to address them.

One of the biggest challenges we faced is management based on inaccurate and uncertain recreational catch and effort estimates from MREP, which is the Federal recreational data collection system. Originally designed for estimating long-term trends, it is currently used to enforce strict harvest limits based on inflated and uncertain estimates that have error margins so high that NOAA warns against using them. Despite the lack of confidence in these estimates, they are all too often used to close or restrict fisheries to the detriment of not only anglers but the businesses that support them. In response, several States have stepped up with State-run data programs that are designed to deliver more accurate and timely recreational catch information that is trusted by anglers. Many of these programs are NOAA-certified and are being used to inform Federal assessments and management.

One example where we have seen success in this regard is with Gulf red snapper, where State-led data collection has enabled State-led management of the private recreational component of the fishery. This allows management to not only be based on more reliable catch information, but also tailored to local needs. In contrast,

red snapper in the South Atlantic is a significant challenge, despite being a rebuilding success story. Anglers and scientists agree that this fishery is more abundant than ever, yet the recreational season was reduced to a single day last year, and the outlook for this year is uncertain.

On top of this extremely limited harvest access, NOAA has proposed rulemaking known as amendment 59 that would create a large seasonal area closure off the east coast of Florida that would close fishing for 55 species to prevent anglers from interacting with red snapper while they fish for other species. NOAA's proposal is based on flawed and highly uncertain estimates of red snapper that are caught and released by recreational anglers. At the same time, NOAA acknowledges that Atlantic red snapper is no longer over-fished, and that it should no longer be considered to be undergoing over-fishing. While ASA welcomes this recognition from NOAA, the proposed closure will cause irreparable harm to coastal economies with little benefit to anglers.

To that end, the ASA supports the Red Snapper Act which would pause harmful closures until better data like the South Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count is incorporated into the ongoing stock assessment. With the amendment 59 imminent, a growing red snapper stock, and new data feeding into a new stock assessment, Atlantic red snapper anglers are wondering whether they can expect to have reasonable access to harvest. Increasingly, South Atlantic States are expressing interest in bringing the Gulf red snapper model of State data collection and management to the South Atlantic.

Before the Gulf States were delegated authority to manage Gulf red snapper, they were able to test State management for 2 years via Excepted Fishing Permits, or EFPs. President Trump's executive order calls for expanding EFP programs to promote fishing opportunities. As in the Gulf, EFPs to test State management in the South Atlantic could be a game changer. ASA supports consideration of this approach, which could provide a major breakthrough if adequate quota is allocated to the South Atlantic States.

The last issue I will touch on today is shark depredation, which is where sharks eat hooked fish before fishermen can land them. Depredation is becoming more common, and these interactions are not only frustrating but can impact survival and sustainability of target species. ASA supports the SHARKED Act, which would create a task force to bring scientists, managers, and anglers together to find practical, science-based solutions to address this issue. We thank Congressmen Wittman, Webster, and Soto for their leadership on this legislation, which notably has already passed in the House. We look forward to introduction and passage in the Senate.

Thank you for the opportunity today to share perspectives from the recreational fishing industry and, as always, we are committed to working with the Committee to continue strengthening the management and conservation of our Nation's natural resources.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Guyas follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MARTHA GUYAS, SOUTHEAST FISHERIES POLICY DIRECTOR,
AMERICAN SPORTFISHING ASSOCIATION

On behalf of the American Sportfishing Association, I am honored to have been asked to testify before the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries regarding legislation that affects marine resources and the recreational fishing industry.

The American Sportfishing Association (ASA) is the sportfishing industry's trade association committed to representing the interests of the sportfishing industry as well as the entire sportfishing community. We give the industry and anglers a unified voice when emerging laws and policies could significantly affect sportfishing business or sportfishing itself. ASA invests in long-term ventures to ensure the industry will remain strong and prosperous, as well as safeguard and promote the enduring economic, conservation and social values of sportfishing in America. Recreational fishing is truly an all-American activity. Our fisheries resources, which are held in the public trust and conserved through sound laws and policies, are envied the world over. In 2023, 57.7 million people went fishing in the U.S.¹ Recreational fishing supports 1,111,920 jobs and contributes \$230.5 billion to the economy.² Fishing is the third most popular outdoor recreation activity, behind only running and hiking.³

All of this fishing activity supports the economy, connects people to the outdoors and provides substantial funding for conservation. Through fishing license purchases, excise taxes and direct donations, the recreational fishing community contributes approximately \$2 billion toward aquatic resource conservation each year. I am confident in saying that no other user group contributes nearly as much toward ensuring our nation's waterways and fisheries are healthy and accessible to the public.

Fishing participation is dependent on two primary factors—access and healthy fisheries. Access can take several forms, including physical access to water (e.g., boat ramps, piers, public shorelines) and regulatory access (e.g., seasons, bag limits, size limits, closures). While simply being outdoors and wetting a line is a large part of the enjoyment of fishing, at some level, most people want to actually catch fish too. There are many more effective ways of catching fish than a rod, reel and hook, so for recreational fishermen to have a decent probability of encountering a fish, there have to be a lot of fish in the water.

On April 17, President Trump issued his Executive Order for “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness.” While much of the Executive Order pertains specifically to commercial fishing and seafood trade, many of the policies and priorities apply to United States marine fisheries more broadly, including recreational fisheries, such as addressing overregulation, ensuring access, improving fisheries management and science, and modernizing data collection. Recreational fishing is a significant source of seafood for millions of Americans who consume their own catch. In 2022, recreational anglers in the United States took over 200 million fishing trips and caught an estimated 1.1 billion fish. Of these, approximately 61% were released alive, while the remaining 39% were harvested.⁴ ASA looks forward to working with the new administration on advancing the goal of the Executive Order while strengthening the recreational fishing industry. My testimony will focus on challenges faced by the marine recreational fishing community, particularly in the southeastern United States, and opportunities to address them.

Recreational Catch and Effort Data

In most cases, the foundation for fisheries management and conservation decisions is scientific information. Credible data on catches and fishing effort, along with information about the biology and ecology of fish stocks, are critical to ensuring fisheries stock assessments accurately characterize the status of stocks and in turn, ensure that management decisions are informed by the best science.

This is particularly the case with federal fisheries management, in which harvest is monitored relative to annual catch limits (ACLs), and accountability measures such as seasonal closures and ACL paybacks are used to constrain harvest. The

¹ Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation. 2024 Special Report on Fishing. Available online at: <https://www.takemefishing.org/getmedia/7d775bde-f3a1-4f97-b9bb-845dcb9e05ba/Special-Report-2024-Infographic.pdf>.

² American Sportfishing Association. 2025 Economic Contributions of Recreational Fishing. Available online at: <https://asafishing.org/economic-impacts-of-recreational-fishing/>.

³ Outdoor Foundation. 2021 Participation Trends Report. Available online at: <https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2021-Outdoor-Participation-Trends-Report.pdf>.

⁴ NOAA Fisheries Service. Fisheries of the United States 2022. Available online at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/fisheries-united-states-reports>.

federal government, via the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), manages fisheries in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which for the purpose of fisheries management is 3–200 miles off the South Atlantic coast and 9–200 miles in the Gulf.

Too often, especially in the southeastern U.S. where I live, fisheries stock assessments have high levels of uncertainty (if assessments are even available) due to unreliable or sparse fishery data. The uncertainty caused by use of questionable fishery data to inform the status of fisheries and make management decisions can have severe implications for fish stocks, anglers, businesses, communities and the economy.

The Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) is a NOAA program that provides estimates of recreational fishing catches and trips that occur from Maine to Mississippi and Hawaii. These data are used to assess and manage state and federal fisheries in the Atlantic, Gulf and Hawaii. MRIP is the product of two different components:

1. Dockside interviews administered by state partners that gather information on angler catch rates (i.e., number, types and sizes of fish caught); and
2. A mail survey administered by NOAA known as the Fishing Effort Survey (FES), which is used to estimate fishing effort (i.e., the number of fishing trips that occur).

For years, MRIP catch estimates have been a source of contention for anglers, state agencies, and other fishery managers that depend on accurate and precise data for decision-making. MRIP was originally designed to provide broad (imprecise) information about recreational fishing catch and effort trends. However, MRIP is currently used to manage federal fisheries to exact, poundage-based ACLs, in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). In most cases, MRIP is the only information available on recreational catch and effort due to a lack of alternative data sources, and is considered best scientific information available by default. NOAA cautions use of MRIP estimates in fisheries management when percent standard error (PSE), which is a measure of precision or margin of error around an estimate, is greater than 30 and does not support use of MRIP estimates with PSEs above 50.⁵ Unfortunately, MRIP estimates routinely have PSEs that are well above these thresholds but are nonetheless used by NOAA as the basis for fisheries management decisions. Using data that does not meet data quality standards to manage our fisheries is incompatible with the recent executive order, “Restoring Gold Standard Science,” results in lost access when fisheries are closed due to unrealistically high and highly uncertain catch estimates, is detrimental to conservation, and further erodes public trust in the fishery management process.

In response to longstanding concerns with MRIP or its precursor, the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistical Survey (MRFSS), several states designed their own recreational data collection programs to supplement or replace MRIP to better align data collection with their management needs. The most recent state surveys are those developed and implemented over the past 10 years by the Gulf states, such as Louisiana’s LA Creel. There is a long history of state—run recreational fishery surveys being used to generate recreational fisheries data that are used for management of our nation’s fisheries. For example, California, Oregon, and Washington replaced MRFSS with state surveys that better meet local needs about 20 years ago. Many state surveys are certified by NOAA, meaning they have undergone a rigorous scientific peer review process and have been found to be scientifically sound and defensible.

Since FES was overhauled in 2018, replacing a survey design based on calls to coastal landlines to a mail-based survey, many anglers and state agencies have expressed concerns that MRIP effort estimates have been greatly inflated, often producing unrealistically or impossibly high estimates. Indeed, a 2023 pilot study⁶ conducted by NOAA in response to these and other concerns about MRIP estimates found that the order of mail survey questions in FES may be causing overestimation of recreational catch and effort by 30–40%. While ASA appreciates that NOAA recently conducted a follow-up study to further investigate this issue (the results of which are expected to be released in July), it is clear that changes beyond adjusting

⁵ NOAA Fisheries Service. An Introduction to Marine Recreational Information Program Data. Available online at: <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/recreational-fishing-data/introduction-marine-recreational-information-program-data#data-use-considerations>.

⁶ NOAA Fisheries Service, Office of Science and Technology. Evaluating Measurement Error in the MRIP Fishing Effort Survey. Available online at: https://apps-st.fisheries.noaa.gov/rpts/main/public_docs/Evaluating%20Measurement%20Error%20in%20the%20FES%20Consolidated%20Final%20w%20Review.pdf?method=PUB_MANUSCRIPT&id=32268.

MRIP are needed to meet the needs of anglers and fisheries managers. MRIP and recreational fisheries data collection is in need of an overhaul, not tweaks around the margins.

State-led, NOAA-certified recreational data collection programs that are designed to address MRIP shortcomings are providing alternative recreational catch and effort estimates that are increasingly used in federal management and assessments and are trusted by the anglers from which they collect data. In line with the Executive Order's directive to promote fishing opportunities, and modernize data collection for responsive fisheries management, these programs provide a model for recreational data collection improvements that are tailored to local needs and management and are trusted by anglers. For example, data from Florida's State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS), which is specifically designed to provide better recreational catch and effort data for 13 reef fish species, has now been used in federal stock assessments on Florida-centric stocks including Gulf gag grouper, yellowtail snapper, and mutton snapper. SRFS data is currently or expected to be used for federal management of these species in lieu of MRIP.

State-led data collection also provided a path toward innovative management led by the states for Gulf red snapper that was not possible under MRIP. After two years of testing the concept of state management under exempted fishing permits, in 2020, NOAA delegated each of the Gulf states the ability to set red snapper seasons, bag limits, and size limits for their anglers in adjacent federal waters. State management has been a game changer by providing reasonable private angler access to red snapper harvest that is tailored to local needs while improving recreational catch monitoring compared to the federal Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Prior to state management, the federal Gulf red snapper seasons got shorter every year and was down to just a handful of days. Last year, private recreational angler red snapper seasons set by the states ranged from 49 to more than 150 days.

Under state management, each state must monitor and constrain harvest relative to their allocated portion of the private angler component of the recreational ACL. To do this, each state uses their own data collection program that is designed to meet the needs of their state and its anglers. For example, Louisiana's program, called LA Creel, replaced MRIP in 2014 to provide more precise, localized, and near real time data on all saltwater recreational fisheries, including red snapper.

Alabama and Mississippi designed programs that also provide red snapper harvest estimates independent of MRIP and recently adopted changes to their data collection methodology similar to LA Creel. Florida's program, called the State Reef Fish Survey, was designed to provide more precise and more timely catch and effort data on 13 reef fish species, including red snapper, by supplementing MRIP. Texas has always used their own data collection program (rather than MRIP) to monitor recreational saltwater landings trends. The surveys from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are "MRIP certified" by NOAA, which means they have been peer-reviewed and determined to be statistically valid for monitoring recreational catches.

Overall, state-led data collection and management has delivered recreational fisheries data improvements that in turn led to management improvements that promote conservation, angler access, and economic growth. Crucially, state management is viewed favorably by Gulf anglers, so much so that a focus group of Gulf anglers recently requested and the Gulf Council has expressed interest in considering state or regional management for greater amberjack.

South Atlantic Red Snapper

In terms of rebuilding, Atlantic red snapper is a success story. The fishery has responded to the strong regulatory measures taken by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) to rebuild the stock. Since 2010, South Atlantic red snapper have rebounded so much that scientists and fishermen both agree the stock is at record abundance and biomass, such that there are now more red snapper in the South Atlantic today than any living person has ever seen.

Recruitment of young fish into the population has also been consistently high for nearly a decade. However, success in rebuilding has not translated into successful management that provides reasonable harvest opportunities. The recreational fishery has largely been closed for the past 13 years except for a few weekend openings. Last year's recreational harvest season was a single day.

Rather than exploring ways to improve management and access to this abundant fishery, on January 14, NOAA Fisheries released Amendment 59 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic that would prohibit fishing for 55 species, including red snapper, off much of the Florida Atlantic coast for three months of the year. This proposed Secretarial Amendment

was prepared unilaterally by NOAA Fisheries as part of a legal agreement that requires the agency to take action to end overfishing of red snapper in the South Atlantic. As part of this legal agreement, the final rule for Amendment 59 must be submitted to the *Federal Register* by June 6. However, the consensus from an overwhelming number of public comments from South Atlantic fishermen over the past several years, discussions and decisions by the SAFMC, and recommendations from the SAFMC's Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel is that additional management measures to end overfishing are not necessary.

The results of a stock assessment update completed by NOAA Fisheries and used as the basis for Amendment 59 confirms what fishermen already knew: Atlantic red snapper is no longer overfished. In recognition of the growth of the red snapper fishery and recent above average recruitment, as part of Amendment 59, NOAA Fisheries recommends changing the definition of overfishing for red snapper such that red snapper is no longer classified as undergoing overfishing. In other words, the status quo is working and management restrictions via Secretarial Amendment are simply not necessary to allow the stock to rebuild by the 2044 deadline.

While the Amendment 59 proposals to remove the overfished and undergoing overfishing designations for red snapper and an increase in quota are positive steps, NOAA Fisheries' proposed closure to snapper grouper fishing is based on notoriously unreliable estimates of fish released by recreational anglers. During the proposed closure, all recreational hook-and-line fishing (including trolling) would be prohibited from December–February each year in federal waters from Cape Canaveral to the Florida / Georgia border (an area the size of the Virginia).

The 55 species proposed to be closed include snappers, groupers, jacks, sea basses, porgies, triggerfish, hogfish, tilefishes, and grunts. If adopted, this drastic action will cause irreparable economic damage to the coastal communities and businesses in the area of the closure that rely on recreational fishing, as well as recreational fishing manufacturers and suppliers across the country. In exchange for this large area closure to 55 species, NOAA Fisheries proposes a 4–9 day recreational harvest season for red snapper. In terms of both angling opportunities and economic impact, this proposal is not a good trade. While an increase in the recreational season is certainly warranted, it is unjustified to simultaneously propose drastic closures.

ASA is grateful to Florida Congressman Rutherford, as well as subcommittee members Congressman Soto, Congressman Webster, and Congressman Ezell for taking a stand against this harmful proposal by sponsoring the Red Snapper Act (H.R. 470), which would stop NOAA Fisheries from unilaterally closing the South Atlantic red snapper fishery until reliable and accurate data from the South Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count is incorporated into the ongoing stock assessment. Over the past three years, Congress has invested \$8.7 million in independent survey data over the past three years, including \$3.3 million for the South Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count, which will provide an independent estimate of red snapper abundance. This study, along with other ongoing and recently completed studies aimed at addressing data needs such as reliable recreational discard information, will help address data deficiencies to improve management of the Atlantic red snapper fishery.

With the imminent release of the final rule for Amendment 59, a growing red snapper stock, and new data feeding into a new stock assessment, Atlantic red snapper anglers are wondering whether they can expect to have reasonable access to red snapper harvest. Many have watched state recreational red snapper seasons increase in the Gulf and have asked when it will be their turn. Likewise, recent statements from Governor DeSantis of Florida,⁷ Governor Kemp of Georgia,⁸ and Members of Congress from South Carolina⁹ all express interest in bringing the Gulf red snapper model of state data collection and management to the South Atlantic.

Before the Gulf states were officially delegated management authority for Gulf red snapper, they were able to test state management for two years via exempted fishing permits (EFPs) following a directive in Senate Report language 114–239 accompanying the 2017 Appropriations Bill.¹⁰ Section 4(c) of President Trump's Executive Order on seafood, which calls for expanding exempted fishing permit (EFP) programs to promote fishing opportunities, could provide this break for Atlantic red snapper if adequate red snapper quota is allocated to the South Atlantic states. Given the ongoing federal management challenges to provide reasonable harvest access to Atlantic red snapper despite successful rebuilding, ASA

⁷<https://floridapolitics.com/archives/730659-snapper-desantis-trump/>.

⁸<https://ccaga.org/2025/04/10/kemps-letter-on-red-fish/>.

⁹[https://fry.house.gov/uploadedfiles/final_5.28.2025_-_](https://fry.house.gov/uploadedfiles/final_5.28.2025_-_sc_delegation_letter_to_sec_lutnick_re_state_management_of_red_snapper.pdf)

[sc_delegation_letter_to_sec_lutnick_re_state_management_of_red_snapper.pdf](https://fry.house.gov/uploadedfiles/final_5.28.2025_-_sc_delegation_letter_to_sec_lutnick_re_state_management_of_red_snapper.pdf).

¹⁰<https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/114th-congress/senate-report/239>.

supports consideration of this approach. As in the Gulf, EFPs to test state management in the South Atlantic could be a gamechanger.

Shark Depredation and SHARKED Act of 2025 (H.R. 207)

Imagine hooking the fish of your lifetime, enduring a long, hard fight to get it to the boat, and at the last second before landing the fish, a shark emerges and engulfs your catch. Few experiences can match the highs and lows of fishing as shark depredation, and unfortunately it is becoming an increasingly common occurrence.

Shark depredation occurs when a shark eats or damages a hooked fish before the fish can be landed. These interactions can be frustrating for anglers when they result in damage to or loss of fish, bait, and/or fishing gear. There are also concerns that increasing levels of shark depredation on hooked fish and scavenging of released fish is reducing fish survival, negatively impacting fisheries, and will eventually contribute to stricter regulations intended to offset or avoid shark interactions. The sportfishing community cares about conservation of all marine life, and the escalating issue of shark interactions with recreational fishing must be addressed for the benefit of all fisheries and the fishing public.

A recent study found that, “77% [of anglers surveyed] had experienced depredation in nearshore and pelagic fisheries in the last five years, with depredation more commonly reported in the southeastern United States.”¹¹ 87% of charter guides surveyed said they experienced depredation with clients, resulting in a negative business impact. This research underscores the economic burden and negative attitudes generated from shark interactions.

In the United States, sharks are managed at state, interstate, and national levels and through international treaties. Historically, shark populations were significantly reduced primarily due to overfishing. Over the past few decades, management under MSA has focused on rebuilding overfished stocks and maintaining sustainable shark fisheries. As such, the United States has achieved increases in populations of many shark species.¹² Despite this progress, several shark species are expected to be in rebuilding plans for decades because they are slow to grow and reproduce; prohibited from harvest for conservation purposes; and/or listed under the Endangered Species Act.¹³

Although this multi-layered management framework has contributed to the success in rebuilding shark stocks, it also presents constraints in how fishery managers can respond to increasing shark interactions. Human conflicts with sharks are expected to further increase as shark populations continue to improve. This will require fishery managers and scientists to collaborate with the recreational fishing community on solutions, while considering the complexities of shark fishery management and science.

Increasing shark depredation is negatively impacting fishing experiences, threatening the safety of sharks and humans, and negatively impacting the sustainability of targeted fish populations. ASA believes that fishery managers need to move beyond identifying the challenges with shark interactions and begin working collectively on solutions.

The SHARKED Act (H.R. 207), which has already passed the House, is a huge step toward addressing this issue. H.R. 207 would establish a task force of experts, including state and federal fishery managers and shark researchers to develop ways to improve coordination and communication to address shark depredation, identify research priorities and opportunities, develop recommended management strategies to address shark depredation, and coordinate development of educational strategies to help the fishing community minimize shark interactions. ASA is grateful to House Natural Resources Committee members that have championed this bill: Vice Chairman Wittman, Congressman Webster, and Congressman Soto. We look forward to introduction and passage of the SHARKED Act in the Senate.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide the sportfishing industry’s perspective on some of the top challenges and opportunities for marine recreational fishing, particularly in the southeastern U.S. We are grateful for the ongoing work

¹¹ Grace A. Casselberry, Ezra M. Markowitz, Kelly Alves, Joseph Dello Russo, Gregory B. Skomal, Andy J. Danylchuk. When fishing bites: Understanding angler responses to shark depredation, Fisheries Research, Volume 246, 2022.

¹² Peterson et al. 2017. Preliminary recovery of coastal sharks in the south-east United States. Fish and Fisheries (18):845–859.

¹³ NOAA HMS, 2021. 2021 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report for Atlantic Highly Migratory Species. National Marine Fisheries Service, Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Division. 250 pp.

of the House Natural Resources Committee to advance legislation that will strengthen the management and conservation of the nation's public lands and waters. We look forward to working with the Committee on legislation that affects the recreational fishing industry and America's 57.7 million anglers.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD TO MS. MARTHA GUYAS, SOUTHEAST FISHERIES POLICY DIRECTOR AT AMERICAN SPORTFISHING ASSOCIATION

Questions Submitted by Representative Bruce Westerman

Question 1. Ms. Guyas, the President's Executive Order, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness," talks about the use of new technologies and modernizing data collection efforts. How could implementing those provisions improve recreational fisheries management?

Answer. Too often, especially in the southeastern U.S. where I live, fisheries stock assessments have high levels of uncertainty (if assessments are even available) due to unreliable or sparse fishery data. The uncertainty caused by use of questionable fishery data to inform the status of fisheries and make management decisions can have severe implications for fish stocks, anglers, businesses, communities and the economy. New technologies and modernized data collection would benefit recreational fisheries management by providing more accurate information to inform stock assessments and management decisions.

Several efforts led by states in my region are underway to modernize recreational data collection and determine how new technologies can help improve data that feeds into fisheries stock assessments and management. The Gulf states created their own programs to improve recreational catch and effort estimates and address Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) shortcomings nearly a decade ago. These programs allowed for the Gulf states to be delegated authority to manage private angler harvest of Gulf red snapper in federal waters. With the Gulf states in charge of data collection and management of this fishery, recreational harvest access has drastically improved and management is tailored to local needs and trusted by anglers.

In the South Atlantic, the State of Florida is currently using innovative technologies like cell phone apps as part of exempted fishing permit (EFP) research programs to collect much needed data from offshore recreational anglers, such as information on discards (fish that are caught and released rather than harvested). This information is critical because MRIP estimates of recreational discards are highly unreliable but have been cited by NOAA Fisheries as a major source of fishery mortality in fisheries such as Atlantic red snapper and black sea bass, and even used by NOAA Fisheries to justify a draconian proposal to close fishing for 55 species in a large area off east Florida to prevent anglers from catching and releasing red snapper. Better data to characterize recreational fisheries are critical to ensuring management actions are reasonable and appropriate to balance conservation and access.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you for your helpful testimony, Ms. Guyas, and I now yield 30 seconds to Representative Begich to introduce his constituent, Ms. O'Connor.

Mr. BEGICH. Thank you, Madam Chair. It is my honor to Honor to introduce Ms. Jamie O'Connor, a fifth generation commercial fisherwoman from the Bristol Bay region of Alaska, and the Deputy Executive Director of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council.

Jamie has worked every summer since age 12 on her family's salmon boat, and today she leads advocacy on behalf of small boat fishermen and fish-dependent communities across our State. Ms. O'Connor brings a unique, grounded perspective to this hearing. She understands firsthand how fisheries policy affects not just harvesters, but the fabric of coastal Alaska, from infrastructure to

market access to generational continuity. Her voice is especially important at a time when small, independent fishermen are facing mounting uncertainty. I am glad the committee will have the benefit of her insight today.

Ms. HAGEMAN. I now recognize Ms. O'Connor for 5 minutes.

STATEMENT OF JAMIE O'CONNOR, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, ALASKA MARINE CONSERVATION COUNCIL, ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

Ms. O'CONNOR. Thank you, Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, Ranking Member Huffman, and members of the Subcommittee, and thank you for the opportunity to allow me to speak to you today. And thank you, Congressman Begich, for your warm welcome.

My name is Jamie O'Connor, and I am first a fifth-generation salmon fisherman from Ekuk Beach in Bristol Bay, Alaska. I also serve as the Deputy Executive Director of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council, or AMCC, a fisherman-founded and fisherman-run organization committed to ensuring Alaska's marine ecosystems and the communities that depend on them thrive for generations. Today I speak not only for myself, but for over 1,000 small boat fishermen across the country as a founding member organization of the Fishing Communities Coalition. I speak on behalf of rural coastal communities that rely on healthy oceans, and our message is simple: the future of America's seafood industry depends on a fully-funded and fully-staffed NOAA.

Fishing is more than a job. It is a way of life. It is also a small business, a science-based profession, and a deeply rooted cultural identity. I fished on our family crew every summer since I was 12. I learned how to work, how to pay for university, and later bought a small home. Fishing is my American dream. But today that dream is harder to hold on to. In recent years Alaska lost \$1.8 billion in seafood revenue. Profitability dropped by half. Nearly 7,000 fishing-related jobs disappeared. And now NOAA faces the most severe budget and staffing cuts in its history, compromising the systems our industry relies on.

Let me be clear. This isn't red tape. It is the foundation of our food supply economy and the stability of our communities. NOAA's budget underpins virtually every part of the U.S. seafood supply chain. Cuts aren't just numbers on a spreadsheet. They are delayed surveys; outdated stock assessments; long waits for permits, loans, and disaster relief; weakened enforcement; and failure to modernize. Without timely science and vigorous oversight, we can't make good decisions, and we risk losing one of the last wild protein industries on Earth.

Our working waterfronts continue to fall into disrepair nationwide. Processing plants, cold storage, boatyards, and fuel docks form the physical and economic backbone of U.S. seafood. When neglected, the community declines. In many coastal towns fishing is the only economic engine. Without it, families move away, unemployment rises, food insecurity increases, and generations of local knowledge is lost. We must treat working waterfronts as national strategic assets. I urge Congress to prioritize infrastructure projects that restore and expand waterfront

economies through port and community development as well as public works programs.

We also rely on other agencies. The Coast Guard is our lifeline at sea. NIOSH oversees critical safety training in one of America's most hazardous professions. The National Weather Service is responsible for the timely forecasts we use to make daily safety decisions. In fact, the cost of weather disasters we aren't prepared for far exceeds the cost of fully funding NOAA. Under-investment in these systems risks lives as well as billions of dollars of property and critical infrastructure.

The USDA should also treat seafood as a core pillar of the American food system. I urge Congress to support the creation of a USDA office of seafood, and to ensure that seafood is fully integrated into USDA grant and loan opportunities, as well as nutrition and Federal purchase programs.

The vast majority of U.S. fishing vessels are independent, family-owned small businesses. We are not asking for a handout. We are asking for a fair shot alongside the rest of America's food producers. We are business owners, laborers, and marine stewards. And right now many of us are working hard just to hold on.

I see potential in the recent executive orders to restore America's seafood competitiveness. Increasing U.S. consumption of American seafood, investing in infrastructure, and streamlining regulatory barriers are all promising steps. But streamlining can't mean cutting corners. De-regulation and efficiency, done right, are thoughtful, strategic, and inclusive. Together we can build a system that works for fish, for business, and the country. But without a fully resourced NOAA, these investments won't reach our decks, your dinner plates, or the American economy.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. O'Connor follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF JAMIE O'CONNOR, BRISTOL BAY SALMON HARVESTER,
DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ALASKA MARINE CONSERVATION COUNCIL

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee, Thank you for the invitation to speak with you today. My name is Jamie O'Connor, and I am, first and foremost, a fifth-generation salmon fisherman from Ekuk Beach in Bristol Bay, Alaska. I also serve as the Deputy Executive Director of the Alaska Marine Conservation Council, or AMCC—a fishermen-founded and fishermen-run organization that, for over 30 years, has worked to protect the integrity of Alaska's marine ecosystems and ensure that fish-dependent communities can prosper for generations to come.

AMCC is a founding member of the Fishing Communities Coalition, which represents more than 1,000 small-boat commercial fishermen from Alaska to Florida and Maine. Today, I speak on behalf of those fishermen—on behalf of the rural, coastal communities that rely on healthy oceans, fair access to fisheries, and a regulatory system that works with us rather than against us.

My primary message for Congress at this moment is that America's fisheries and the communities that depend on them need the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to be fully staffed and funded. Amidst the exciting opportunity to refocus our efforts in support of domestic seafood producers, our future as fishermen has never felt so uncertain.

Introduction & Personal Background

My great-grandfather, and my first Captain, arrived in Alaska during the Great Depression. He used to say that during the peak of the Bristol Bay run, you could walk between the fishing sailboats on the backs of the sockeye. Standing on the shore of the Nushagak River, he felt awe, relief, and a deep sense of respect. "This is God's country," he thought. "This land will feed us."

And Alaska still feeds us. It produces more than 58% of the nation's seafood harvest and supports over \$6 billion in annual economic activity. Commercial fisheries generate \$183 billion nationwide and support 1.6 million jobs. This work—harvesting the healthiest, most sustainable protein in the world—is our American dream, passed down through generations. It is the backbone of coastal economies and family-owned businesses, sustaining schools, marine trades, and local commerce.

Commercial fishing is more than a job. It is a lineage, a culture, and a deeply held identity. Every season, we pass knowledge between generations. We learn how to read weather, fix gear, clean fish, and anticipate the tide. These traditions anchor entire communities. I've fished as paid crew every summer since I was twelve. That income helped me get through University and buy a small home. I'm proud to be part of this industry that feeds our nation and the world.

Picking salmon out of a net with the smell of tundra on the wind is my heritage and my Alaskan dream.

Economic & Cultural Stakes

Yet today, that dream is at risk. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) latest Alaska Fisheries Economic Snapshot, between 2022 and 2023, we lost \$1.8 billion in seafood revenue. Profitability dropped by half, and nearly 7,000 fishing-related jobs disappeared between 2021 and 2023.

NOAA's budget underpins virtually every aspect of the U.S. seafood supply chain. Funding reductions will have both immediate and long-term adverse effects on the economy and food supply, including disruptions to seafood data collection, a decline in fisheries science capacity, delays in disaster relief, compromised critical weather forecasting, weakened enforcement, and reduced support for seafood marketing and promotion.

The number one barrier to restoring America's seafood competitiveness is uncertainty. While instability has a profound impact on the entire seafood supply chain, from processors to boat builders, retailers, and restaurants, America's substantial numbers of small-boat fishermen are particularly vulnerable to unstable trade policies, rising living costs, and decreased demand.

Fuel prices and supply costs are squeezing razor-thin margins. At the same time, we're facing increasing competition from countries that don't meet U.S. environmental or labor standards, like Russia, which continues to undercut U.S. seafood prices while using the proceeds to fund its war in Ukraine.

Independent seafood harvesters make up 97% of our nation's fishing vessels. These are small, often family-owned businesses. We work hard, not only on the water but at all the administrative and regulatory tasks required of any small business. Unlike many other sectors, fishermen wear multiple hats: we are business owners, laborers, food producers, and environmental stewards. We manage vessels, attend meetings advocating for regional and national regulations, navigate complex permitting systems, handle payroll and insurance, and operate in one of the most hazardous industries in America. We're not asking for a handout. We're asking for a fair shot. Strong, stable federal oversight is essential for profitable fishing businesses and healthy fish populations. Weather data and forecasting systems are essential for our safety and business operations. If this system collapses, we risk losing one of the last remaining wild protein industries on Earth.

In Alaska and across the country, we are losing our working waterfronts, critical infrastructure—processors, cold storage, harbors, fish buyers—are disappearing. When these pieces go, communities hollow out. A recent study in Southeast Alaska found that the loss of infrastructure is directly correlated with the loss of fishery access: once permits and boats are gone, it's nearly impossible to revive commercial fishing. In roadless coastal Alaska, these fisheries are often the only economic engine available. The downstream effects are devastating: rising unemployment, outmigration, reduced access to traditional foods, and rapidly worsening health outcomes.

Working waterfronts are the physical and economic foundation of the U.S. seafood supply chain and broader coastal economies nationwide. These spaces support not just fishing operations but the boatyards, fuel docks, processing facilities, port infrastructure, and transportation hubs that keep seafood moving from ocean to table, and underpin the coastal economy. They are vital to tourism, marine services, mariculture, and other coastal sectors. Without sustained access to the water and the data systems that enable us to interact with it safely and effectively, no investment in boats, science, or technology will be sufficient. Working waterfronts must be treated as national strategic assets. I urge Congress to prioritize infrastructure projects that expand and protect working waterfront access through

the Port Infrastructure Development Program, Economic Development Administration Public Works grants, and Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs).

We have seen what happens when fisheries are mismanaged or neglected. Communities die.

NOAA/NMFS Capacity Crisis

That's why I'm here today. We are at a crucial inflection point. Your choices will have long-ranging impacts. The federal systems that make our work possible—especially NOAA and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)—are under serious strain, and the cracks are widening. These agencies do far more than issue reports. They provide the data, tools, and staffing that enable safe, science-based, and economically viable fisheries management.

We rely on NOAA science not just for fishery management but for economic forecasting, subsistence planning, and climate adaptation. When NOAA is underfunded, it's not just data that's lost—it's capacity, credibility, and community resilience. It's economy, competitiveness, and food security. We are asking small, rural towns to survive rapid ecological and economic change without the tools to see it coming, and risking the significant benefits they provide to the nation.

In Alaska, our fishery management councils rely on NOAA science to establish harvest limits that ensure sustainable fishing practices. Observer programs and emerging electronic monitoring technologies protect accountability. Permitting, rule-making, and stakeholder engagement keep the entire system moving. And all of that feeds a stable, long-term food economy.

But these core functions are faltering. Budget and staffing cuts are already delaying essential fishery surveys, stretching regulatory and enforcement staff, and stalling modernization of aging data systems. I hear directly from fishing families who are waiting too long for permit decisions, navigating outdated stock data, having essential loan programs delayed or revoked, and witnessing the decline in capacity at NOAA offices. This is not red tape—it is our food supply, our economic health, and the stability of entire regions.

A strong, functioning NOAA and NMFS is not a luxury. It is a baseline requirement for a stable and competitive seafood industry. These agencies set the scientific and regulatory guardrails that allow the industry to operate sustainably, plan long-term investments, and access domestic and international markets with credibility. Without timely stock assessments, quota decisions, permit processing, and enforcement of standards, the seafood sector cannot function efficiently or fairly. Budget cuts and administrative delays at NOAA and NMFS not only slow down the government but also destabilize an entire food-producing industry.

Without strong, science-based fisheries management, harvest decisions must be overly cautious to avoid the risk of overexploitation. Fishermen understand that when science says a stock is declining, we need to fish less to protect fish populations. However, if we are doing so due to a lack of scientific understanding and an accompanying increase in uncertainty, it could also leave valuable resources in the water and unnecessarily hinder the economic potential of fishing communities. Robust fisheries science is essential not only to maximize sustainable harvests but to ensure the long-term health of both fish stocks and the communities that depend on them. Without continued investment in accurate stock assessments, ecosystem monitoring, and adaptive management, we risk jeopardizing the resilience of our fisheries and the livelihoods of future generations. Without sufficient scientific data, we risk overlooking a stock's decline or growth, leading to unsustainable harvest rates or missed opportunities that could deplete resources, undermine economies, and erode future fishing opportunities.

Strong fishery science also ensures we make the best decisions relating to overall resource development. Fish habitat must be meaningfully considered in federal permitting decisions, particularly those involving oil and gas development, timber sales, and large-scale water infrastructure. Healthy marine and freshwater habitats are the foundation of sustainable fisheries, and permitting processes must be aligned with long-term ecosystem and community resilience.

Regional Fishery Management Councils play a crucial role in balancing sustainable harvests, maintaining ecosystem health, and addressing community needs across the nation's diverse fisheries. These councils bring together fishermen, scientists, managers, and stakeholders to develop and recommend locally informed, adaptive management plans under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). However, their effectiveness depends heavily on sufficient funding to support scientific research, public engagement, enforcement coordination, and timely decision-making. We urge Congress to provide increased and stable funding for the Councils to ensure they have the resources necessary to deliver sound,

science-based management that protects fish stocks, supports fishing communities, and sustains the economic vitality of the U.S. seafood industry.

Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that the cost of weather disasters for which we are unprepared far exceeds the cost of a fully funded NOAA and NMFS nationwide. Hurricanes, flooding, and other natural disasters experienced throughout the year across coastal America cause billions in property damage, threaten American lives, and disrupt both the economy and culture. NOAA programs are critical to ensuring we have the information we need to evacuate, reinforce, and protect communities and critical infrastructure.

Executive Orders and Strategic Implementation

I appreciate the intent of recent Executive Orders aimed at restoring America's seafood competitiveness. Expanding federal procurement of U.S.-harvested seafood, investing in infrastructure, and streamlining regulatory barriers are all urgently needed. These steps are promising, and with robust implementation, they can deliver tangible benefits to small-boat operators and coastal communities.

Implementation matters. Without a fully resourced NOAA and NMFS, these investments will not reach the water. Small-boat operators are already worried about being sidelined by vague timelines and policy shifts that could favor consolidation. Streamlining should not mean removing the safeguards that protect small-scale access.

Many of our existing fisheries regulations stem from public process and compromise, with many serving as revisions of prior rules to ensure policies remain adaptive and responsive to evolving management needs. Fishing regulations are often complex because they aim to balance the competing needs of diverse stakeholders while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the resource through tailored management approaches. NMFS already has the authority to review and revise outdated rules. Many fishermen would welcome updates that move us into the 21st century. Deregulation done well is strategic, fair, and inclusive. With targeted investments and collaborative rulemaking, we can modernize our seafood sector while maintaining high standards and community protections.

Programs such as the Saltonstall-Kennedy Research and Development (SK) program already exist to support domestic seafood marketing and infrastructure. Unfortunately, this tariff-derived funding has been diverted by Congress to support NOAA's core functions, leaving very little leftover to pursue its intended goals. However, if congressional appropriations fully funded NOAA, SK's funds would be available to pursue the restoration of America's seafood through infrastructure, research, and marketing. Releasing these funds for their original purpose would jumpstart local economic development, job creation, and stronger domestic markets.

Congress should also reauthorize and fund the Young Fishermen's Development Act (YFDA), which was passed thanks to the hard work of several members of this committee, including the late Don Young, and signed into law by President Trump in 2020. To ensure the next generation has the tools, training, and support they need to enter and sustain careers in fishing. Without targeted investment in young harvesters, we risk losing not just jobs but a way of life.

Additional Federal Agency Support

We also rely on other federal agencies to ensure our industry remains safe and operational. The U.S. Coast Guard is our lifeline at sea. Consistent funding for air and surface assets is vital, especially in Alaska, where a rescue can be hundreds of miles away. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health administers commercial fishing safety programs, which are indispensable in one of the nation's most hazardous professions. Similarly, the National Weather Service must be supported to provide accurate forecasts and marine safety information.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also plays a significant role. Seafood must be treated as a core pillar of the American food system. I urge Congress to fund the creation of a USDA Office of Seafood in the upcoming Farm Bill and to support full inclusion of seafood in federal nutrition and procurement programs. This will strengthen domestic demand, improve food security, and help stabilize our markets. These changes can unlock new economic opportunities, better integrate seafood into the national food strategy, and help address hunger with one of the healthiest proteins available.

Fishermen are often excluded from the same level of support, investment, and recognition that other food producers receive. Directing resources from the USDA Regional Agricultural Promotion Program (RAPP) and the Community Project Funding process toward modernization of seafood processing plants, cold storage capacity, fleet upgrades, and workforce development would deliver outsized returns. Reforming the NOAA Fisheries Disaster Assistance process by aligning it more

closely with USDA emergency and crop insurance programs would also improve access and fairness.

The Seafood Tariff Relief Program (STRP), implemented during President Trump's first term, was an excellent example of the USDA's ability to swiftly and efficiently provide relief to fishermen negatively impacted by retaliatory tariffs imposed by foreign nations. We encourage Congress to view STRP as a valuable template to help independent harvesters weather current and future trade uncertainties.

Empowering fishermen as entrepreneurs means providing access to small business support programs, low-interest loans, intergenerational succession planning, and workforce training, particularly for rural and Tribal communities. This is how you restore our engine for seafood competitiveness. We need to be recognized in policies targeting small business resilience and rural economic development. By viewing fishermen as small business leaders and rural economic drivers, we can build more resilient coastal economies for future generations.

The Department of State, in coordination with NMFS, supports U.S. fisheries diplomacy, upholding our obligations in critical ongoing negotiations, such as the Pacific Salmon Treaty and Commission, the International Pacific Halibut Commission, the International Whaling Commission, and the North Pacific Anadromous Fish Commission, among others. The work of these bodies must be fully supported to vigorously defend the United States' interests and leadership in global fisheries.

MSA

As you consider reauthorization of the MSA, I urge you to prioritize:

- Strengthening equity and access for rural and Indigenous communities.
- Elevating bycatch accountability and habitat protection.
- Supporting Tribal representation on councils.
- Reinvesting in entry pathways for young and community-based harvesters.

The Act remains a strong framework, but we must modernize it to meet 21st-century challenges and ensure the next generation can participate.

Representative Huffman's bill, Sustaining America's Fisheries for the Future Act, is a step in the right direction toward envisioning a modernized system that addresses the changes and challenges our fisheries are facing. We at AMCC and FCC stand ready to collaborate on an enduring MSA reauthorization that maintains our nation's leadership in fisheries management and sustainability for decades to come.

Conclusion: Key Recommendations for Congress

To support a resilient U.S. seafood economy, vibrant coastal communities, and sustainable fisheries, I respectfully urge Congress to take the following actions:

House Natural Resources Committee Legislative Priorities

- Continue strong, bipartisan oversight of NOAA and NMFS. Support science-based management, accountability, and inclusive stakeholder engagement.
- Pass legislation to protect and expand working waterfronts as strategic national assets. Ensure continued access to the infrastructure needed for seafood production and coastal resilience.
- Promote cooperative fisheries research. Support partnerships between fishermen, scientists, and managers to improve outcomes and trust in the process.
- Protect essential fish habitat in federal permitting. Ensure fisheries values are considered in decisions on energy development, timber sales, and water use.
- Reauthorize the Young Fishermen's Development Act. Equip the next generation with tools for business succession, training, and workforce development.
- Advance reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) that:
 - Strengthens bycatch accountability
 - Enhances Tribal and community-based access
 - Protects fish habitat
 - Supports fairness and transparency in management

Cross-Committee & Interagency Coordination Needs

- Establish a dedicated Office of Seafood within USDA. Coordinate with NOAA and elevate seafood within national food and trade policy.
- Support small-boat fishermen as entrepreneurs. Expand access to USDA and SBA programs for loans, business planning, and workforce development.
- Recognize seafood as a core pillar of U.S. food security. Include it in federal nutrition, procurement, and trade programs alongside other food producers.

Appropriations Recommendations

- Fully fund NOAA and NMFS in FY26. Ensure timely stock assessments, regulatory processing, enforcement, and data modernization.
- Restore the purpose of the Saltonstall-Kennedy (S-K) program. Direct funds to marketing, innovation, and support for small-boat fisheries.
- Invest in working waterfront infrastructure. Leverage programs like the Port Infrastructure Development Program, EDA Public Works, and CDBGs.
- Reform and fund NOAA's Fisheries Disaster Assistance Program. Invest in models like crop insurance to better respond to fisheries disasters.

Together, we can revitalize coastal economies, restore seafood competitiveness, and ensure the next generation of Americans continues to benefit from the ocean's abundance.

Strong science, transparent rulemaking, and fair access are not anti-business—they are the very conditions that allow this industry to thrive. I'm proud to be part of a profession that feeds this country. I believe in the promise of a seafood system that is just, resilient, and deeply American.

We are standing on the edge of a precipice. The decisions you make this year will determine whether coastal communities like mine continue to feed the country or become stories of what once was.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to speak today. I look forward to your questions.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you, Ms. O'Connor, and I now yield 30 seconds to Representative Golden to introduce his constituent, Mr. Delano.

Mr. GOLDEN. Thank you, Madam Chair. Mr. Delano is technically not a constituent of mine, but my wife hails from the region that he calls home. And there is no daylight between the fishermen that I represent in my congressional district and the fishermen in the rest of the State. The job they do is so important to the entire State that I really think of myself as a representative to every one of them, and I care about their communities and what they do.

Dustin has 20-plus years of fishing experience, but in his family alone he has 4 generations of fishing knowledge standing behind him. Dustin is the real deal. He knows his trade and he loves it, but he has also put a lot of time into learning the regulatory and political process that affects his own and other fishing families and communities. And he has made a big decision to join NEFSA to bring his expertise to bear for the good of the fishing communities all over Maine, New England, and I think I can say even for fishing communities all around the country.

So thanks for being here, Mr. Delano, and we look forward to hearing your testimony.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you. I now recognize Mr. Delano for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF DUSTIN DELANO, CHIEF OPERATING
OFFICER, NEW ENGLAND FISHERMEN'S STEWARDSHIP
ASSOCIATION, SOUTH PORTLAND, MAINE**

Mr. DELANO. Chair Hageman and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Dustin Delano. I am the Chief Operating Officer of the New England Fishermen Stewardship Association and a fourth-generation lobster fisherman from Friendship, Maine.

I started going out lobstering with my father as soon as I learned to walk. By the time I could fish commercially, I knew it wasn't just a job; it was a way of life. I spent over 20 years learning not only the skills of the trade, but the values that define Maine's coastal communities. After a decade participating in the regulatory processes in Maine, I saw how disconnected policy had become from reality. That is why I stepped back from full-time fishing to help lead NEFSA, which now represents thousands of fishermen, dealers, processors, and communities across New England. Our mission is to bring fishermen's knowledge directly to the policymakers shaping our future.

Before I go any further, I want to ask you all something, and I want you to really think about it. What is the one thing in your life that gives you purpose? Not a favorite food, not a favorite vacation spot, but the thing that defines who you are. Maybe it is your family. Maybe it is your work. Maybe it is something passed down through generations, a tradition that shaped your identity.

Now imagine waking up every day knowing that the very thing that defines you, your livelihood, your heritage, your future is constantly at risk not because you have done anything wrong, not because the resource is gone, but because layer after layer of regulation has been stacked so high and so fast you can no longer see a clear path forward. That is the reality for many American fishermen today. Fishing isn't just what we do, it is who we are. But that identity is being regulated to the brink. Every new rule, every flawed quota, every rushed mandate sends the message that our way of life is completely expendable.

President Trump's EO was an important step. It prioritizes American-harvested seafood, reduces regulatory burdens, and it supports cooperative science. That kind of leadership is what we need.

One of the most urgent issues is the crisis in the ground fishery caused by over-regulation and flawed quota systems. Fishermen are expected to base their livelihoods on stock assessments from a single Federal vessel, the Bigelow, which consistently under-reports stock levels that leads to quota cuts that put fishermen out of business. That is why we need industry vessels participating in research.

I have worked on the Maine Lobster Ventless Trap Survey myself, a successful collaboration between lobstermen and scientists. It builds trust with fishermen and gives us real-world data. Currently, a pilot program is in the works for industry vessels to do groundfish surveys. The project, if funded, would essentially extend the NEAMAP survey into Federal waters and adjust sampling based on real-world conditions like tides and moon phases.

Another major challenge is the North Atlantic right whale regulations. No one questions the need to protect the species. Fishermen have made enormous sacrifices to help. We have modified our gear, reduced our lines, increased trawl lengths to reduce entanglements. But these changes come at a cost, financially and physically. The longer trawls we now use create dangerous working conditions. The weak links in our ropes can snap under tension, sometimes in our faces, creating serious safety risks.

One of the most damaging changes has been the 1,000-square-mile closure off of Maine's coast, an area I fished for years. It was closed to meet whale protection goals, but by the time it reopens the lobsters have moved offshore into places we can't access, and the winter conditions make gear shifting nearly impossible. We are shut out during the most productive season, left chasing what has already gone.

We need a real solution. We need real solutions, solutions that protect whales and fishermen. One promising tool is non-invasive whale tagging, which has been successful in the southern hemisphere. With real-time location data, we could avoid conflict zones more accurately instead of relying on broad closures that don't reflect reality. Fortunately, Maine is developing a strong, congressionally-funded whale risk assessment model. But unless the current regulatory process is extended, these restrictions will return before the science is ready.

Lastly, I want to quickly mention the gray zone near Machias Seal Island, a territorial disputed area where U.S. fishermen face strict regulations, while in some cases Canadian vessels operate freely. It is not just unfair, it is unsustainable. Our fishermen are playing by strict U.S. rules while Canadian-caught seafood enters our markets unchecked. We need to move toward co-management at the very least, but ideally assert full U.S. sovereignty and resolve this dispute with Canada.

We are not asking for a free pass. We are asking for fairness. Because when regulation erases your ability to fish, to plan, to provide, you are not just losing your job, you are losing your identity, your future, and your community. And that is a loss this country cannot afford.

I am proud of my heritage, and I want future generations to have the chance to fish these waters, earn a living, and keep our coastal culture alive. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Delano follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF MR. DUSTIN DELANO, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER,
NEW ENGLAND FISHERMEN'S STEWARDSHIP ASSOCIATION

Chairwoman Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee—thank you for hosting this hearing. On behalf of the New England Fishermen's Stewardship Association ("NEFSA"), I appreciate the opportunity to supplement the record with written testimony.

My name is Dustin Delano, and I am the Chief Operating Officer of the New England Fishermen's Stewardship Association, or NEFSA, and a fourth-generation lobster fisherman from Friendship, Maine. I began going out on the water with my father from the time I could walk, and by the time I was old enough to fish commercially, I knew it was more than a job—it was a way of life passed down through generations. My father, relatives, and close friends still fish from the same harbor, and I've spent over 20 years working alongside them, learning not only the trade but the values and resilience that define Maine's fishing communities.

Over the past decade, I became deeply involved in the regulatory process and saw firsthand how disconnected many policies were from the realities we face on the water. Too often, the voices of working fishermen were absent from the conversations that shape our futures. That's why I made the difficult decision to step back from full-time fishing and take on a new role at the New England Fishermen's Stewardship Association (NEFSA). I believe this space needs more input from those of us who have lived the challenges, adapted through generations, and care deeply about both the sustainability of our fisheries and the communities that depend on them.

My goal now is to bring the practical needs and lived experiences of fishermen directly to policymakers in Washington, D.C. I want to ensure that the heritage I was born into—and the hope I have for future generations—remains strong, vibrant, and a cornerstone of our coastal economy and culture.

NEFSA is a fishing advocacy group that represents wild harvesters in fisheries across New England communities. Founded in Spring 2023, NEFSA boasts over 850 members across New England, which means that it represents the interests of thousands of fishermen and harvesters, many of whom work with, for, or alongside NEFSA's members. NEFSA is dedicated to educating the public about how best to manage our seafood resources through sound science and the best conservation practices used by fishermen, with a view toward economic well-being, ecosystem sustainability, and U.S. food security.

In April 2025, President Trump issued Executive Order 14276, which is titled "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness." This Executive Order, which was enthusiastically welcomed by fishermen and harvesters throughout the Nation, marks a long-needed National effort to prioritize U.S.-harvested seafood, reduce crippling regulatory burdens on the fishing industry, and advance cooperative science designed to take advantage of the knowledge base held by the fishermen who know the waters better than any other group. This Executive Order offers an extraordinary opportunity to make meaningful, lasting changes to federal fisheries management and science.

Given both my generations' long knowledge base and that of the fishermen and harvesters I represent, I respectfully offer the following for the Subcommittee's consideration.

The Overregulation-Driven New England Groundfish Fishery Crisis. As President Trump's Executive Order notes, "[m]ost American fish stocks are healthy and have viable markets," but "seafood is one of the most heavily regulated sectors in the United States."¹ Indeed, "[f]ederal overregulation has restricted fishermen from productively harvesting American seafood including through restrictive catch limits, selling our fishing grounds to foreign offshore wind companies, inaccurate and outdated fisheries data, and delayed adoption of modern technology."²

One of the largest—and most flawed—drivers of overregulation is the belief that quota systems will preserve the Country's seafood stock. Simply put, the federal government has, for decades, enforced caps on the amount of a particular catch that a person fishing or harvesting may bring in. The thought is that imposing quotas will leave enough stock of any particular aquatic species to allow that species to reproduce at levels that will replace the number harvested. While perhaps well intentioned, ever-aggravating quota reductions are driving American groundfishermen out of business.

The single biggest problem with the way in which the federal quota system currently operates is chronically dreadful stock assessments. At the risk of oversimplification, the quota system operates by assessing the stock of an aquatic species, determining the level of stock necessary to result in replacement-level species production, and then capping the amount of catch to keep the stock at that level. But the adage "garbage in, garbage out," applies with full force to this process.

The main culprit with this persistently shoddy data collection is the *Bigelow*, NOAA's only fisheries survey vessel. The *Bigelow* has never effectively surveyed aquatic-life data off the coast of New England, which means that it always under-reports the stock levels in those waters.

Underreporting stock levels, in turn, result in drastically reduced quotas. And drastically reduced quotas, naturally, result in out-of-work groundfishermen, who are no longer allowed to harvest at levels necessary to make ground fishing a lucrative (or even profitable) venture.

The solution is straightforward and easily implemented. Unlike in years past when NOAA was the only source of stock information, involving fishermen like

¹ Executive Order 14276, "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness," available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/restoring-american-seafood-competitiveness/>.

² *Id.*

NEFSA's members to provide industry-sourced data and incorporating cooperative research efforts into stock assessments will provide a more accurate picture of the health of fish stocks and support fairer quotas. To be certain, there is no group more dedicated to the longevity of aquatic life than the fishermen who earn their livelihoods through America's oceans. And there is no group with a greater—yet still untapped—knowledge base as to how best preserve it.

Right Whale Protections and the Regulatory Threat to the New England Lobster Industry. Another regulatory threat looms large on the horizon. This one is specific to the lobster industry. It is, unfortunately, another example of how a good intentioned, but poorly reasoned, preservation regulation can cause far more harm than the paltry good it accomplishes.

No one—especially no lobsterman—doubts the need to ensure the survival of the endangered North Atlantic Right Whale. But collateral damage must be mitigated, and the drastic over—reactionary mitigation efforts nearly shuttered the New England lobster industry two years ago. Thankfully, Congress provided a six-year pause in the implementation of those measures, but the day is soon coming when that reprieve will sunset and the severe restriction may resume. When that happens, the iconic American lobster industry may find itself flirting with extinction.

Simply put, the timeline set by the Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team ("ALWTRT") is overly aggressive. There is no reason to believe that it will increase Right Whale protection to any great extent, but there is every reason to believe that it will cripple the work of America's lobstermen. Most importantly, there are other options that, again, will benefit from industry participation in the decision-making process.

Most critically, better data is needed. And better data is coming. Specifically, the State of Maine is developing a robust, congressionally funded whale risk assessment model. It will not, however, be ready before the congressional reprieve expires and the draconian take-reductions regulations snap back. Extending the pause, in turn, would allow Maine to complete this model in enough time for it to be incorporated into federal Right Whale risk assessments. Thus, doing so ensures that Right Whale protection is maximized while collateral damage on America's lobster harvesters is minimized.

Also, NEFSA offers its unconditional support for the use of non-invasive tagging technology. This method has been successfully implemented to track Southern Right Whales, and there is no reason to believe that the same would not hold true for North Atlantic Right Whales. Employing this technology would pay tremendous dividends. It has not only proved effective in locating new calving grounds, but it can also help track whale movements with much greater precisions, which translates into a reduction in conflicts with fisheries.

Overregulation in the "Gray Zone." An express purpose of President Trump's Executive Order is to "level the unfair playing field that has benefited foreign fishing companies."³ There is likely no greater example of the current unlevel playing field than what has become known colloquially as the "Gray Zone." The issues arising from the Gray Zone are crying out for attention.

The Gray Zone is a maritime region surrounding Machias Seal Island. It is located between Maine and New Brunswick, Canada. Since 2002, Canadian fishing pressure in the area has grown significantly, placing strain on shared marine resources. From the American perspective, this has led to ecological and economic damage, particularly concerning lobster and ground fish stocks.

The reason is obvious. American fishermen remain bound by stringent U.S. conservation regulations. Canadian fishermen are not. Thus, American fishermen work the same waters as their Canadian counterparts at an unfair disadvantage while Canadian vessels exploit looser rules. The result is a one-sided depletion of resources that U.S. policy was designed to protect. In other words, American fishermen suffer all the collateral damage of overregulation, while the sustainability purpose of the regulation is entirely thwarted.

This is no small matter. The Gray Zone spans roughly 210 square nautical miles. And despite various diplomatic discussions and mapping efforts, the two countries have never submitted the dispute to international arbitration. It remains, and for the foreseeable future will remain, a flashpoint for enforcement, conservation, and sovereignty debates.

The regulatory disparities are, similarly, not inconsequential. For lobsters, American harvesters are not allowed to keep lobsters that are either too small or too large. Canadian harvesters, in contrast, labor under no similar limits. Canadian lobstermen harvest year-round; American lobstermen may not. And, most critically, Canadian lobstermen can—and do, enthusiastically—export these lobsters to U.S.

³*Id.*

markets. In other words, the Gray Zone regulations on American lobstermen net out all burden, and no benefit.

The same is true for halibut fishermen. Recently, U.S. halibut industry was saddled with drastic quota reductions, stricter size limits, shorter seasons, and limits on trips. Canadian halibut fishermen operating in the Gray Zone, by contrast, may keep more halibut, keep smaller halibut, and fish for halibut during more frequent and longer trips. Again, the burden is borne entirely by the American industry, and none of the conservation goals are coming close to being accomplished.

Cooperative Research is a must for accurate fisheries regulation. We can not emphasize enough, the critical need for cooperative research as a cornerstone of effective and accurate fisheries regulation. For too long, fisheries management has relied heavily on incomplete or outdated data, often collected without sufficient engagement from the very individuals who spend their lives on the water. My own experience participating in the Maine Ventless Trap

Survey—a collaborative effort that pairs lobstermen with scientists to collect data on juvenile lobster abundance—has demonstrated the immense value of leveraging fishermen’s firsthand knowledge and access. This partnership not only enhances the scientific understanding of stock health, but builds trust and transparency between regulators, scientists, and the fishing community.

We need to see this model extended to other fisheries, especially the groundfish sector, where assessments have often been contentious and disconnected from the daily observations of working fishermen. Groundfishermen must be integrated more directly into the data collection and research process to ensure stock assessments reflect reality and not just theoretical models.

Fishermen are out on the water every day—they observe trends, habitat changes, and species interactions that cannot be captured through infrequent surveys alone. Empowering fishermen to be stewards of data, not just subjects of regulation, will lead to more responsive management, more resilient fisheries, and a greater sense of shared responsibility for the long-term sustainability of our marine resources.

Recommendations for Future Fisheries Policy

For all these reasons, I offer the following recommendations:

- Include fishing-industry voices in all aspects of American fishery regulation, including (but not limited) with regard to stock assessment, research programs, and the rollout of President Trump’s “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness” Executive Order.
- Pursue deregulatory initiatives with input from regional fishery management councils and commercial fishermen.
- Promote USA-landed seafood in federal purchasing and national branding.
- Mandate a formal review of existing marine monuments and their impact on fisheries.
- Assert full sovereignty over the Gray Zone and move to formally settle the dispute between the United States and Canada.
- Expand Cooperative Research to better inform stock assessments and policy.

QUESTIONS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD TO DUSTIN DELANO, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, NEW ENGLAND FISHERMEN’S STEWARDSHIP ASSOCIATION

Questions Submitted by Representative Bruce Westerman

Question 1. Mr. Delano, the President’s Executive Order, “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness,” directs the Secretary of Commerce to work with the Secretary of Agriculture to “develop and implement an America First Seafood Strategy to promote production, marketing, sale, and export of United States fishery and aquaculture products and strengthen domestic processing capacity.” In your opinion, how could the Saltonstall-Kennedy Program help advance this effort?

Answer. Chairman Bruce Westerman and Members of the Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries,

The New England Fishermen’s Stewardship Association (NEFSA) appreciates the opportunity to provide input on the role of the Saltonstall-Kennedy (S-K) Grant Program in supporting the President’s Executive Order, “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness.” As directed, this order tasks the Secretary of Commerce,

in coordination with the Secretary of Agriculture, to develop and implement an America First Seafood Strategy to promote the production, marketing, sale, and export of United States fishery and aquaculture products, and to strengthen domestic processing capacity.

NEFSA believes the Saltonstall-Kennedy Program is uniquely positioned to advance these objectives, provided that certain strategic adjustments are made to more fully align the program with industry needs and the realities of the domestic seafood marketplace.

1. Enhanced Industry Engagement in Funding Prioritization

NEFSA strongly supports the inclusion of direct fishing industry representation in setting funding priorities for the S-K Program. Too often, funding decisions have been shaped without sufficient input from those actively engaged in harvesting, processing, and marketing U.S. seafood. By establishing structured, recurring opportunities for fishermen, processors, and seafood business leaders to participate in priority-setting, the S-K Program can ensure its investments address the most pressing challenges and opportunities confronting the industry.

2. Strategic Emphasis on Domestic Market Development

A core pillar of the America First Seafood Strategy must be the expansion of domestic consumption of U.S. seafood products. The S-K Program should allocate a significant portion of its resources to initiatives that:

- Promote consumer awareness of the nutritional, environmental, and economic benefits of domestic seafood;
- Develop innovative marketing campaigns to elevate demand for underutilized species and regionally distinctive seafood products;
- Support product development that responds to evolving consumer preferences for convenience, sustainability, and traceability; and
- Facilitate partnerships with food service, retail, and institutional buyers to expand domestic seafood offerings.

3. Investment in Domestic Processing Capacity and Infrastructure

To reduce reliance on foreign processing and strengthen domestic supply chain resilience, the S-K Program should prioritize projects that:

- Modernize domestic seafood processing facilities through technology adoption and capital investment;
- Support workforce development and training programs to build technical skills in seafood processing and value-added production;
- Assist small and medium enterprises in overcoming logistical, regulatory, and capital barriers to growth; and
- Encourage innovation in packaging, cold storage, and distribution that can extend product shelf-life and expand market reach.

4. Support for Export Expansion and Global Competitiveness

While enhancing domestic consumption is critical, international markets also offer significant growth potential for U.S. seafood products. The S-K Program should work in collaboration with trade agencies to:

- Assist businesses in navigating export certification and regulatory requirements;
- Develop market intelligence and branding initiatives to promote U.S. seafood abroad; and
- Support participation in international trade shows, trade missions, and partnership development.

5. Simplification of the Grant Process to Broaden Participation

Finally, NEFSA recommends that the S-K Program simplify its application and reporting requirements to facilitate broader participation, particularly from small businesses, individual harvesters, and community-based organizations. Technical assistance should be made readily available to help applicants navigate the federal grant process.

In conclusion, the Saltonstall-Kennedy Program has the potential to serve as a central tool in realizing the objectives of the America First Seafood Strategy. By incorporating industry leadership, focusing on domestic demand stimulation,

investing in processing infrastructure, supporting export growth, and improving program accessibility, the S-K Program can meaningfully advance the competitiveness, resilience, and sustainability of the U.S. seafood sector.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Very powerful testimony, thank you for that.

I now yield 30 seconds to Representative Begich to introduce his constituent, Mr. Hunter.

Mr. BEGICH. Thank you, Madam Chair. I am pleased to introduce fellow Alaskan and someone whose leadership is deeply rooted in one of the most fisheries-dependent regions in the country, Mr. Larson Hunter.

Mr. Hunter is the Chairman of the Coastal Villages Region Fund, the largest of Alaska's community development quota groups, representing more than 9,000 residents across 20 villages in western Alaska. He also serves as the City Manager of Scammon Bay, a remote community near the mouth of the Yukon River.

Mr. Hunter's personal journey from growing up in a subsistence household in Scammon Bay to leading one of the most important economic development institutions in our State is a powerful example of what fisheries-based opportunity can mean for rural Alaska. His testimony reflects the on-the-ground reality of our communities, that commercial fishing is not just an industry but a pathway to self-determination and stability. I am grateful that he is here today to share that perspective.

Thank you for making the long trip from Alaska.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you. I now recognize Mr. Hunter for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF LARSON HUNTER, CHAIRMAN, COASTAL
VILLAGES REGION FUND, SCAMMON BAY, ALASKA**

Mr. HUNTER. Congressman Begich, thank you for that.

Madam Chair, members of the subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to discuss the presidential executive order, Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness. I am the City Manager of Scammon Bay, Alaska, population 660. I am also the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Coastal Villages Region Fund. I am here today on behalf of CVRF.

CVRF is a non-profit that participates in Western Alaska Community Development Quota program, or CDQ, which is part of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. We serve more than 9,000 people in 20 communities. CVRF owns and operates vessels in the Bering Sea pollock, cod, and crab fisheries. Our annual revenue ranges from 70 to 90 million which funds jobs, benefits, and programs that we create in our communities.

CDQ creates opportunities that would not otherwise exist. My life story is a testament to that. I grew up poor in western Alaska. There aren't many jobs and there are times we didn't have a lot to eat. I have always looked forward to school in the fall because they served us breakfast and lunch. When I was 12 our toilet had broken and we could not afford a new one. I emptied the honey bucket for a few years until I got a job after high school, and the first thing I bought was a toilet. Soon after, I received a CVRF scholarship and went to college for an IT degree that turned into

a full-time job and several promotions at CVRF. I eventually became the quota manager. Then I moved back to Scammon Bay to start a family. My wife and I agreed that we would raise our kids in the village with subsistence hunting and gathering and living by the seasons. It is full of challenges, but very rewarding. I also wanted to help CDQ do more for others, so I ran for a CVRF board seat in 2016, and today I am grateful for the opportunity to serve as the chairman.

When CDQ first started in the early nineties we had one staffer renting space in the city of Scammon Bay. By 2004 my internship started there, and 13 CVRF employees were in our region helping residents access benefits and programs. Today we have more than 100 people working full-time jobs in our communities. We have paid them over \$4 million in wages last year. To put this into perspective, that is 100 families that are not on public assistance. Without CDQ, the alternative in our region is usually food stamps.

Many of our employees work at our mechanic welder shops, repairing outboards, ATVs, and snow machines that people use for subsistence. Before CVRF opened up these shops, you had to fix your broken machines by yourself or send it back to Anchorage, which few could afford. Some of our residents work out on the Bering Sea vessels, including some newer hires that have come through our maritime training program. Other CDQ groups have similar stories.

Together we create and support thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in wages that weren't there before and won't be there if we are gone. Commercial fishing in the Bering Sea, especially for Alaska pollock, funds all of this. Beyond CDQ there are over 140 coastal communities in Alaska alone that are seafood-dependent. This includes America's largest seafood ports like Dutch Harbor and Kodiak, and many smaller communities around the State. There are about 48,000 direct seafood jobs in Alaska, and the seafood sector is our state's largest employer.

Naturally, commercial fishing supports more than a million jobs, mostly in coastal and rural communities. Commercial fishing and processing is a major part of rural tax base in Alaska, too. Several boroughs in Alaska depend on fish taxes for a majority of their revenue. Alaska accounts for 60 percent of America's domestic harvest and 70 percent that is exported. We are unusually dependent on world markets, which is why trade provisions in the recent executive order are important.

A seafood executive order comes at a critical time. Alaska seafood is struggling to compete against non-market economies like China and Russia. The Russians are massively subsidizing new fishing fleets. They even require their fishing companies to buy these new vessels if they want quota. As a result, the Russian pollock harvest has increased from 1.75 million tons to 2.46 million tons since 2021, while the U.S. harvest level remains steady and sustainable.

Also, the United States remains the single most expensive place to build new large fishing vessels. It costs about three times more to build new vessels here than it does overseas. We compete in global markets against fishing companies with significantly lower capital costs. Hopefully, Congress and the President can address some of these issues through legislation and trade policies that

levels the playing field for U.S. producers. The economic, health, and the fisheries of our coastal communities depends on it.

Madam Chair, members of this Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak before you. I hope my story will offer a new and unique perspective on these issues, and I will answer any questions you have for me.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Hunter follows:]

PREPARED STATEMENT OF LARSON HUNTER, CHAIRMAN, COASTAL VILLAGES REGION
FUND SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER, WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES

Madam Chair, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to discuss the President's Executive Order "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness" and how Congress and the Administration can support this important American industry that so many communities rely on.

My name is Larson Hunter. I am the City Manager for the City of Scammon Bay, Alaska which is a village of 600 people in western Alaska, just below where the Yukon River drains into the Bering Sea. I am also Chairman of the Board of Directors of Coastal Villages Region Fund. I am here today representing Coastal Villages.

CDQ PROGRAM SUPPORTS RURAL COMMUNITIES

Coastal Villages Region Fund, or CVRF, is a non-profit that participates in the Western Alaska Community Development Quota Program, which is part of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. Congress added CDQ to the Magnuson-Stevens Act in 1996. Since then, the vision of the late Don Young and Ted Stevens has ensured that the economic bounty of the Bering Sea is enjoyed by all Bering Sea communities, not only America's largest seafood port at Dutch Harbor. CDQ sets aside 10 percent of the Bering Sea's federal fishery harvests for 65 western Alaska communities, which are organized into six non-profits commonly known as "CDQ groups." These groups monetize their quota and, at Congress's direction, use those revenues to invest in Bering Sea fisheries and deliver economic development programs for their residents.

CVRF is the largest CDQ group, serving more than 9000 people across 20 villages. CVRF is also the only CDQ group that wholly owns and operates vessels in the Bering Sea pollock, cod, and crab fisheries. Our vessels include the *Northern Hawk*, an Alaska pollock catcher-processor, two Pacific cod freezer-longliners, two crab boats, and several pollock catcher-vessels. We have also invested in a pollock mothership and 15 other pollock catcher-vessels, nine of which we manage. Before the current downturn in the seafood industry, these operations produced about \$90 million in annual revenue, two-thirds of which came from the pollock fishery. Today, with crab stocks recovering but still historically low, pollock represents an even higher percentage of our revenue. Depending on global markets and harvest levels, we usually spend \$8–15 million on our economic development programs.

America's seafood industry provides an important economic foundation for rural communities around the country. Western Alaska is one of America's poorest and most remote regions. Yet through investments in the seafood industry, the CDQ program creates opportunities for western Alaska residents to be economically independent. I'd like to share my story as an example.

I grew up poor in western Alaska. We often kept the lights turned off in the spring until commercial fishing began and we had some income to pay for electricity. I ate Pilot Bread crackers for breakfast in the summer. School was great because I got a free breakfast and lunch. We had a honeybucket for eight years after our toilet broke. The first thing I ever bought with my own money was a new toilet for the house.

By the time I graduated from high school, the CDQ program had come to Scammon Bay and I was able to attend college in Anchorage on a CVRF scholarship. I learned IT skills and got an internship at CVRF's main office in Anchorage. That internship soon became a full-time job. I went from IT Intern to Business Development Coordinator to Fisheries Coordinator to Quota Manager. I eventually moved back to Scammon Bay to raise my family. The skills I learned at CVRF have helped me succeed as City Manager there. In 2016, I won a community election to join CVRF's Board. Today, I am grateful for the opportunity to serve western Alaska as the President of CVRF's Board of Directors.

My journey, and so many others' in rural Alaska, was made possible through the CDQ program by a sustainable commercial fishing industry, fair market access for American seafood products, and a reliable regulatory environment at the Fishery

Management Councils. President Trump's seafood executive order reinforces the importance of this industry to American communities.

GROWTH OF CDQ FUELED BY THE BERING SEA

When CDQ first started in the early 1990's, CVRF helped local fishermen find halibut in Scammon Bay. Now halibut is a staple of our subsistence diet. CVRF had one staffer renting space in the city office back then. By 2004 there were 13 CVRF employees in our region, helping residents access benefits programs. Today, we have more than a hundred people working full time in our communities. We pay them \$4 million in wages. Many of them work at our mechanic/welder shops, repairing the outboards, ATVs, and snow machines that people use for subsistence. I believe we have the only non-dealership facilities in North America offering Honda warranty repairs and they are all the way out in western Alaska. I want to thank Honda Powersports for working with us to help a region that relies so heavily on their products. Some of our residents work on CVRF's Bering Sea vessels, too, including newer hires who came up through our maritime training program.

Other CDQ groups have similar stories of supporting their residents and delivering economic development programs in their regions of western Alaska. Together, we create and support thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in wages that weren't there before CDQ and won't be there if CDQ goes away. Commercial fishing in the Bering Sea, especially for Alaska pollock, funds all of these efforts.

COASTAL COMMUNITIES RELY ON SEAFOOD ECONOMY

CDQ is critically important to western Alaska villages, but there are over 140 coastal communities in Alaska alone that are seafood dependent. This includes some of America's largest seafood ports, like Dutch Harbor and Kodiak, and the 65 Alaska Native villages in the CDQ program, almost all of which have populations less than one thousand people.

There are about 48,000 direct seafood jobs in Alaska and the seafood sector is our state's largest employer. Nationally, fishing supports more than a million jobs, mostly in coastal, often rural communities. Commercial fishing and processing is a major part of the rural tax base in Alaska, too. Several boroughs in Alaska depend on fish taxes for a majority of their revenue. Alaska accounts for more than 60% of America's domestic seafood harvest, and 70% of that is exported. Alaska seafood is unusually dependent on world markets, which is why the trade provisions in the recent Executive Order are so important.

PRESIDENT TRUMP'S EXECUTIVE ORDER

The President's Seafood Executive Order comes at a critical time. CVRF welcomes the EO's focus on both unfair trade practices and the domestic regulatory environment. The Alaska seafood industry is struggling to compete against non-market economies like China and Russia. In 2020, as part of the Phase One Agreement on trade between the U.S. and China, China agreed to buy more U.S. seafood but never followed through on its commitment. Their imports of Alaska pollock actually dropped by more than 50%, while Russian pollock imports have grown.

Russia has provided massive subsidies to build out new fishing fleets. They even require their fishing companies to buy these new vessels in exchange for fishing quotas. As a result, the Russian pollock harvest has increased from 1.74 to 2.46 million tons since 2021. We believe this is an unsustainable harvest level and it has flooded global markets with cheaply produced and highly subsidized seafood. Alaska pollock from America is sustainably harvested and our employees earn a living wage, but consumers in Europe don't know if their pollock comes from Russia because of labeling rules that obscure the origin. Most European consumers think all their pollock comes from Alaska, but it's not the case.

While we understand the policy behind the Jones Act, the United States remains the single most expensive place to build a new large fishing vessel. It costs about 3 times more to build a fishing vessel here than overseas. That's a huge disadvantage when new catcher-processors cost hundreds of millions of dollars and the aging U.S. fleet needs to be re-capitalized. Unlike participants in the coastwise trade, we compete in global markets with international fishing companies who enjoy much lower capital costs. Unfortunately, the U.S. government cannot force these competitors to build their vessels in the U.S. and we cannot pass on our higher capital costs, resulting in unfair competition.

Attached to my testimony is a March 2025 comment from the At-Sea Processors Association and the Pacific Seafood Processors Association to USTR in regards to unfair trade practices. It goes into greater detail about the trade challenges facing the Alaska seafood industry and the issues we hope the Administration can address through bilateral trade negotiations, section 301 investigations, and other means.

America's coastal communities, including communities throughout Alaska and those in the CDQ program, need progress on these issues.

On the regulatory front, the North Pacific Council does a good job managing the Bering Sea fisheries. CVRF urges Congress to maintain budgetary support for the Councils and the NOAA functions that support their work, including surveys and stock assessments, and especially including the personnel necessary to perform these functions. Reducing the financial and human resources available to NOAA's core fisheries management functions puts America's seafood economy and coastal communities at risk.

That said, there are some issues in the North Pacific region where NOAA could be more transparent, efficient and fair, such as cost recovery in limited access programs, including the CDQ program. Industry has approached NOAA through the North Pacific Council and we are hopeful our concerns will be addressed.

Hopefully, Congress and the President can address the important trade and regulatory issues through legislation, trade policy, and efficient regulation that levels the playing field for U.S. seafood producers and maintains core fishery management functions. The economic health of America's coastal communities depends on it.

[The letter submitted for the record by Mr. Hunter follows:]



March 11, 2025

Ms. Catherine Gibson
Deputy Assistant U.S. Trade Representative for Monitoring and Enforcement
Office of the United States Trade Representative
600 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20508
Filed electronically at <https://comments.ustr.gov/sl>

RE: Comments To Assist in Reviewing and Identifying Unfair Trade Practices and Initiating All Necessary Actions To Investigate Harm From Non-Reciprocal Trade Arrangements – Seafood Exports to Japan, the European Union, China, the United Kingdom, Taiwan, and Brazil – Public Comment on Docket Number USTR-2025-0001, FR Doc. 2025-03047, February 25, 2025

Dear Ms. Gibson,

Thank you for the opportunity to highlight unfair and non-reciprocal trade practices that hurt our American seafood companies, undercut good-paying American jobs, and threaten to bring about an end to the economic lifeblood we provide to rural communities across Alaska and elsewhere in our Nation.

The fishing and seafood companies that our associations represent are proud to sustainably harvest and process fish taken within state and federal waters off Alaska and the U.S. West Coast. Their operations create family-supporting jobs and help fuel the export economies of Alaska and the Pacific Northwest. Our Nation's commercial fishing and seafood industry supports 1.6 million jobs,¹ and in Alaska it is the largest private sector employer, directly employing 48,000 people.² The harvesting and processing of U.S. North Pacific seafood provides economic security to families throughout our country – in states like Alaska, Oregon, Washington, Minnesota, and Georgia – often in rural and remote communities where few alternative employment opportunities exist. The Eastern Bering Sea Alaska pollock fishery is the

¹ The United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, *Fisheries Economics of the United States 2022*, November 2024, available at <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.fisheries.noaa.gov/2024-11/FEUS-2022-SPO248B.pdf>, p.3.

² The Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute, *Economic Impact*, available at <https://www.alaskaseafood.org/industry/economic-impact/>

The full document is available for viewing at:

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250604/118330/HHRG-119-II13-Wstate-HunterL-20250604-SD004.pdf>

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you very much. I want to thank each of the witnesses for your testimony, and I am now going to recognize the members for 5 minutes each for questions. I am going to begin with myself.

Mr. Hunter, very interesting information that you have provided. In your testimony you state that, given the challenges that the

seafood industry in Alaska is facing, President Trump's executive order comes at a critical time. Broadly, can you share your perspective on how the executive order can help the seafood industry in Alaska?

Mr. HUNTER. Madam Chair, I believe the term equalizing fair trade will open the door to making things fairer for us. We have got a large concern with what the Russians are doing. My understanding is they are increasing their fleet. They play by different rules than we do. We are heavily regulated, we have got rules we need to follow. If we could level the playing field, I think being competitive with Russia down the road in the future is in our best interest.

Ms. HAGEMAN. What other factors should Congress be looking at to further encourage fishing and seafood in the United States?

Mr. HUNTER. Could you repeat the question, please?

Ms. HAGEMAN. Sure. Are there other factors or ideas that Congress should be looking to to help your industry?

Mr. HUNTER. Well, we have got many challenges, and one of the biggest challenges we have is bycatch in our region. It is an ongoing issue. We struggle locally with the salmon issue. And I think Congress, if they were able to fund more into research, into what the causes are, I think that would be a great impact to our region.

Ms. HAGEMAN. OK. Mr. Delano, I agree with you about over-regulation in this country. And not only does it affect your industry, it affects many industries across the board, but I do know that the fishing and lobstering industry have been hit especially hard. The lack of adequate data is directly linked to how many fish or how much seafood, how many lobster you can catch. And this executive order from Mr. Trump makes it clear that no one needs to reprioritize the critical work such as stock assessments.

What can NOAA do differently under this Administration to ensure that, first of all, the data is in fact collected and that it is accurate and reliable?

Mr. DELANO. Thank you for the question.

I believe some of this has been mentioned that it is important that we continue the work that needs to be done to assure that fisheries are permitted, and that is through surveys that are existing and continuing those time series. It is important to have the funding to do that.

But I think that the root of a majority of our problems comes from the way that the data is collected, and that could be very much improved by involving industry in the data collection methods. Fishermen know how to catch fish very well. Scientists know how to handle the information and to develop conclusions about what is going on. They need to work together. That is how we move forward. Until we do that, our fishing industry is going to continue to be crippled.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Well, I don't think that you can actually discuss the future of the right whale without discussing the impact of the offshore wind farms, yet our Federal regulatory agencies have turned a blind eye, and refuse to address that issue. But this is one area that I believe that we need to collect additional data. Mr. Delano, would you agree with that?

Mr. DELANO. I agree 100 percent.

Ms. HAGEMAN. OK. What would you recommend in terms of what we can do to actually assess the right whale situation and make sure that we can protect it?

Mr. DELANO. I think it is important to look into non-invasive tagging, as I mentioned in my testimony. There have been examples with southern right whales, where they have actually discovered calving grounds as a result, and they have discovered areas where they didn't know they were. We have had observations of right whales in Europe, and we have had right whales that have disappeared for a number of years that we thought may have died that have actually just this year shown up that hadn't been seen in a long time. And the last time they were seen they were injured.

And so there is a disconnect. There is something going on. If we are going to come up with draconian measures, we need the hard facts of where these whales are.

Ms. HAGEMAN. I agree with you. I think we need additional data.

Mr. Bellavance, the Magnuson-Stevens Act requires each regional Fishery Management Council to submit multi-year research priorities to NOAA. The Act also directs the Secretary of Commerce to publish multi-year research priorities that reflect the Council's input. Given your experience with the Council's system, how important is this process, and are there areas of improvement?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Thank you, Madam Chair, for the question.

Well, first, I think our research priorities are very important. I think the Council has put a lot of time into developing them and offering them to NOAA as guidance for what would help us do our job as managers. So any time there is a compromise to the level of research that can be accomplished throughout any given year, it is going to impact our decision-making process. So I think it is extremely important.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you. I yield back. I am out of time. And so the Chair recognizes Mr. Huffman for 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Thank you, Madam Chair. I want to talk about the Magnuson-Stevens Act. I think most of our witnesses would agree that the Magnuson-Stevens Act remains the bedrock of sustainable fisheries management, that it has been a success by almost any analysis, and that it is critically important. But I want to talk about how the promise of this law and this framework is actually holding up in practice, where it is being stretched thin, where some critical gaps jeopardize the viability of fishing communities.

And so, Ms. O'Connor, you come from a family with deep roots in Bristol Bay. Your voice represents a sector that has certainly been the backbone of coastal communities, small fishing families, and businesses. But a sector that too often gets drowned out sometimes in Washington by big lobbyists and imported seafood interests, but I know that your family probably and the folks you fish with do not depend on foreign fish processors. You don't commingle your catch with fish caught from bad actors in Asia. You are not part of this opaque seafood supply chain that is really the heart of the problem and IUU fishing. So I definitely want to ask you a little about that.

But I want to start with National Standard 2 of the MSA, which simply states that conservation and management measures should

be based on best available science. Why is that so important? Why does it matter for the long-term health and productivity of fisheries?

Ms. O'CONNOR. Thank you for the question, and I appreciate your leadership on this bill and on this issue. I think the legislation and the opportunity to revisit it is an important opportunity to strengthen the backbone of our coastal economies, and we strongly support provisions that prioritize healthy habitat, foster participation for place-based harvesters, and advance climate-ready fisheries, reduce bycatch, and require tribal representation in the North Pacific Management Council.

We prioritize in our work the well-being of coastal communities and marine ecosystems. And to your question, we must have the best available science. But not only that, we must be consistently improving it and improving the science that we are relying on for our decision-making. So I appreciate the work that you are doing to integrate that ability to adapt and grow our capacity for that in your bill.

Mr. HUFFMAN. And to level the playing field between our great American fishers and some of the bad actors overseas that are engaged in slave labor and all kinds of terrible environmental practices and other things. Why is it important that we have transparency in the seafood supply chain, even if it is inconvenient for some big, powerful interests who might kind of be commingled into that less-than-transparent supply chain? They might save money by maybe mixing their catch with the catch from some of these Russian oligarchs.

I agree with the Chair when she talked about how we have got to confront the Russian oligarchs that are in the fishing industry, what they are doing to pollock and other species; the Chinese Communist Party, which is a big, bad actor in this IUU fishing space. But sometimes the transparency of our supply chain can be inconvenient for some big American interests. Why is that important to tackle, from your perspective?

Ms. O'CONNOR. I think, as most of us have spoken to here, transparency is key due to the fact that uncertainty is our number-one barrier to doing our work.

And so in the case of Russia, for instance, not only are they, you know, flooding global markets with hatchery-produced salmon, it is also often mislabeled.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Yes.

Ms. O'CONNOR. And so we are operating in the best faith that we can as small businesses to compete in a vast global market. And we need your help to do that.

Mr. HUFFMAN. All right. I appreciate that.

Captain Bellavance, I really appreciated your testimony because you are a fisherman and you are a policymaker and a regulator. And there is this interesting kind of love-hate relationship, I think, between folks who make their living on the water. You heard a little bit of that coming through from Mr. Delano, this strong libertarian thread, but also a need for good regulation, good science-based regulation to prevent us from going back to the Wild West, where we were crashing fisheries and closing fisheries, and to make sure we have learned from those days.

How do you go about making regulation and considering regional circumstances and science and stakeholder input to get it right?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Thank you. Thank you for the question. It is a good one.

So it is a complicated process, right? I think when we go about making regulations, we have a lot of meetings similar to this, where we have stakeholder engagement. We rely on a lot of science from NOAA fisheries to help us kind of characterize the resources and then try to do our best to afford fishermen the biggest opportunities they can get while also trying to preserve fish for the future. It is a delicate balance. It doesn't always go the way managers want it or the fishermen want it, but it is the best system in the world, in my opinion.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Thanks for your indulgence, Mr. Chair, I yield back.

Dr. WITTMAN [presiding]. I thank the gentleman. I will recognize myself for 5 minutes. I would like to thank our panelists for joining us today.

Ms. Guyas, I want to start with you. You spoke about shark depredation. It has become a massive problem for anybody that pursues fish, whether it is commercial or recreational. We know a lot of their catch is lost, unfortunately, to sharks that are uninvited guests. They are being conditioned, I think, to boats and fishermen. You talk about the massive impact that it has on those fisheries, you spoke about 77 percent of folks in the fisheries have been affected in one way or another by shark depredation. I hear it on a daily basis from our commercial and recreational fishermen. It does have an impact.

The scary thing about shark depredation is this. As we manage fisheries, and there has been a lot of talk about managing fisheries on good science. I am 100 percent in agreement. My minor was fisheries science. I worked as a commercial fisherman and recreational fisherman growing up. My son is a commercial fisherman. Science is key, but what we are missing in the science is when a shark eats a fish that a fisherman tries to catch, and it doesn't get it but the shark gets it, does that get counted in how we manage fisheries, Ms. Guyas?

Ms. GUYAS. I don't think it is getting counted in very many, although this is a discussion that is coming up more and more. People are concerned about this because, as you have said, it is a growing issue. You hear about it almost every day. I hear about it almost every day. It seems like it is affecting everyone, whether you are fishing inshore, offshore, recreational, or commercial.

Dr. WITTMAN. Sure. It is interesting because when we talk about managing fisheries, we talk about mortality, and mortality either happens naturally—a fish grows to an old age and dies; something else in the ocean eats it, that prey-predator relationship; or human catches it; whatever. That measure of mortality is how we manage fisheries. But when we have an imbalanced view of mortality, when sharks are eating fish that are easily targeted, I would argue that shark is not going to eat that fish if it gets its own fair chance to swim away, but when a fisherman has it either in a net or on a fishing rod it is easy prey for the shark.

And then, as we are calculating how much mortality happens from fishermen, and you say, oh, the fishermen caught one tuna fish today, but the fishermen had to hook 20 tuna in order to bring 1 tuna to the boat because the other 19 were eaten by sharks, I would argue we are creating a great imbalance in the system that is not reflected in good science. It is not reflecting really what needs to happen as far as how we manage the fisheries.

So I just want to get a little more of your perspective on how do we get to the root of that problem and make sure that there is that balance between sharks and the environment? I have nothing against sharks, but I want to make sure too that somebody that goes out there to fish, that we get to get a few of the fish to the boat and the sharks can get one or two, but there is an imbalance there.

Ms. GUYAS. Yes, thank you for the question. And thank you for your leadership on the SHARKED Act, because I think that gets to this very issue.

What that would do would bring together all the people that need to get together to collaborate on this. Managers, scientists, stakeholders, fishermen potentially can inform the process. We need to tell fishermen how to handle the situation. We need to understand exactly what is happening and if there are circumstances where we can avoid it. We need to look at technology.

It is a complicated issue that probably is a complicated solution.

Dr. WITTMAN. Yes.

Ms. GUYAS. So the SHARKED Act helps get the right people together to put their heads together on this.

Dr. WITTMAN. Yes, get some experts together. We talk about science. Let's base it on science. How do we properly manage all the different interests there?

Mr. Delano, I appreciate your efforts in the commercial fisheries side. As I said, my son is a commercial fisherman. I grew up commercial fishing, worked in seafood safety for two decades. So to me, it is a family issue, it is a family business. But it is also an issue that is important not only for the district that I represent, but it is an important issue for our Nation, an important issue for local coastal economies.

Let me ask you, as we look at cooperative fisheries research, a great example is Virginia Institute of Marine Science. They do cooperative research in the sea scallop industry. They put observers on boats. They watch what fishermen do. They gather the data about what is happening there. They gather the data too about what is happening in the environment that supports scallops. And as a result of that, we have had an incredibly successful management of the scallop industry because the scientists are actually working shoulder to shoulder with the fishermen. They are gathering the data, they are using observational data from fishermen to validate the decisions that they make.

Give us your perspective on how you see the benefit of these cooperative research efforts to make sure that scientists are there shoulder to shoulder with fishermen there on the water, observing what is going on?

Mr. DELANO. Yes, thank you. I can't preach enough the need for better data collection and collaboration between scientists and fish-

ermen. I think that is extremely important. And I certainly in my testimony was not trying to take a shot at regulators because, you know, they are held to a standard, and they only have what they have for information. But we can always do better, and we need to do better before it is too late.

Dr. WITTMAN. Very good. Thank you, Mr. Delano. Now we will go to Mr. Magaziner.

Mr. MAGAZINER. Thank you to the Chair and again to our witnesses.

In Rhode Island the fishing industry creates thousands of jobs, generates hundreds of millions of dollars of economic value. And it is good to see with Rick Bellavance, leading the Council Coordinating Committee, that Rhode Island has a rightful leadership role nationally on fisheries issues.

But make no mistake, we are in a moment of crisis right now when it comes to fisheries management because of the Trump administration's gutting of NOAA over the last 4 months. And to be clear, Elon Musk doesn't know anything about the fishing industry. The 20-year-olds that he hired to go through and fire thousands of Federal workers don't come from a fishing industry background. They have no idea what they are doing. And they fired 2,000 out of the 12,000 employees at NOAA. Nearly 20 percent of the staff gutted, a third of the positions at NOAA fisheries are vacant right now because of those cuts.

And so when I hear Chairwoman Hageman and her opening statement and my Republican colleagues talking about the importance of data, if you don't have people collecting the data, where is the data coming from? You need people at NOAA who can actually process the data that is coming in, collect it in partnership with the fishing industry, process it, and make good, informed decisions. Because if you don't have good data, it is the fishing industry itself, the men and women who make their livelihood from the fishing industry, who are hurt. If you don't have accurate data, you could have an under-count, and so the quotas are lower than they should be, and people are not allowed to fish as much as they should be allowed to, so they don't make the money they should be able to make. If you have poor data, maybe you could have an over-count, and that hurts the long-term sustainability of the fishing industry. If you want good data, you need the staff at NOAA to help collect and analyze and process the data.

And it is not just NOAA, by the way. The University of Rhode Island in my district has a tremendous research arm devoted specifically to this, and they have had to lay people off because of grants being canceled for, again, no good reason.

So, when I sent the CCC, the Council Coordinating Committee, a letter earlier this month, I asked for feedback on what the impact of these NOAA cuts would be. And they responded in no uncertain terms that these assessments that study the health of fish populations are the foundation of how NOAA and the councils manage fisheries. And without good scientific data, the councils are forced to proceed with caution, which means lower catch limits. It hurts the industry to have a gutted NOAA workforce. That means less money for fishermen. It means higher prices for consumers, as

well, if you are under-fishing because there isn't adequate stock data.

So I would like to ask Rick to weigh in on this. I mean, what are the consequences of NOAA staff being decimated and the impact on stock assessments and ultimately on the industry as a whole?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Thank you, Congressman Magaziner. I appreciate the question. So, I think you touched on it pretty eloquently in your opening statement there.

Our job as managers is to try to use the information that we have to craft regulations in accordance with all the different laws that impact fishing regulations. Any time there is a compromise to the quality of the data that we use to make those decisions or the personnel that we need to promulgate those regulations, publish them in the Federal Register and so on, it is just more difficult for us to do our job.

I think you mentioned that we typically try to put an uncertainty buffer in the quotas to compensate for some of that uncertainty that we have, and that directly impacts the fishing community by allowing less fish to be taken out of the water. So it is super important.

Mr. MAGAZINER. And just to highlight this once again. The President's proposed budget cuts NOAA by 30 percent for NOAA fisheries and a 74 percent cut to NOAA research. And where is the Administration? They have not produced anyone from NOAA, despite an invitation from the majority. They have not produced anyone for this hearing. They have not produced anyone from our previous hearing on this topic. Why won't they come and defend what they are doing and the impact that it is having on fishermen in Rhode Island and across the country?

And I yield back.

Dr. WITTMAN. I thank the gentleman. We will now go to Mr. Ezell.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you all for being here today and giving us this information.

I grew up on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and that has been a big part of my life. And I see the food industry has been plagued by dominating imports, burdensome rules and regulations. Imported shrimp accounts for 90 percent of the shrimp that are consumed in the United States, a lot which comes from a lot of these bad actors, as we all well know, which don't go by the rules that we go by. And so we got to get a hold of that.

Our seafood industry cannot compete with the low pricing and transportation costs of some of these foreign competitors. When I go back home to the Gulf and I order seafood, that is the last thing that I want to eat is something imported from China. I want to eat locally-caught seafood from small business owners that I know and trust, and enjoy the whole environment.

I have introduced the Safer Shrimp Imports Act alongside Senator Hyde-Smith to require the FDA to significantly increase testing of imported shrimp and publicly report inspection results, giving consumers more confidence in the safety of what is on their plates. Our local Gulf Coast shrimpers are playing by the rules

while foreign producers are flooding the market with unsafe, low-quality products.

Building off that concept, I was pleased to see the President's EO that restores the American seafood industry finally lifting some of these burdens that has been placed on the fishermen by giving some real meaning to locally caught. I am proud to be working on the bill text to codify parts of the EO as we speak. Putting American seafood first means restoring jobs, national food security, and increased health of all Americans.

Part of President Trump's EO directs agencies to immediately consider suspending, revising, or rescinding regulations that overly burden America's commercial fishermen, aquaculture, and fish processing industries, and the fishery-specific level. I fished the Gulf Coast my entire life, and as so many of my friends, and I am glad to see some of these issues are being addressed.

Ms. GUYAS, I understand that the EO is focused more on commercial fishing, but there are aspects to apply to recreational fishing as well, as you mentioned in your testimony. How important is it that we continue this discussion and codify President Trump's EO?

Ms. GUYAS. Well, thank you for the question. Yes, as I mentioned, I think there are a lot of things in that EO that apply to the recreational fishery: improving data decreasing unnecessary regulations, improving access. And then the provision in the executive order about exempted fishing permits, as I mentioned, I think could be critical for improving the situation for Atlantic red snapper, similar to what we had in the Gulf, gosh, it has been several years ago now, under the first Trump administration.

Mr. EZELL. The Mississippi Gulf Coast is home to, if not the best, some of the best recreational fishing in the country. Sportsmen in Gulfport have access to incredible stock of tuna, snapper, mackerel, and grouper. In previous years our recreational fishermen have had their ability, to responsibly and sustainably harvested fish challenged by Federal management, National Marine Fisheries Service. Can you detail some of the challenges that your recreational fishermen have faced in the Gulf, along with the Gulf Coast?

Ms. GUYAS. Sure. I will talk about Gulf red snapper for a minute, because that was a really big challenge for us. But we have managed to turn that around.

So we were in a situation where we had a season that was just a handful of days.

Mr. EZELL. Right.

Ms. GUYAS. And we got to a breaking point where it was just too difficult. And really, the Gulf States stepped up. They put their heads together. They came up with data collection systems to help improve the information that was feeding into management, and then ultimately were able to use that information to inform State-led management, where they are setting seasons that fit the needs of their state. And so that has been a really big deal for us, for our community.

Mr. EZELL. Very good. You mentioned in your testimony that State management for the red snapper recreational fishery has been a game changer, just like you were just saying. Can you talk

about that work that took place and was assumed by the State management?

Ms. GUYAS. Yes, in the Gulf, as I said, the States developed their own data collection systems. And then, after that, actually, there were some Senate language in one of the budgets that directed NOAA to create an opportunity for States to get exempted fishing permits to test State management. And so they did that, and then we went through the process and it was codified through the Gulf Council.

Mr. EZELL. Has this really improved the fishing?

Ms. GUYAS. Absolutely. There is more access, more days open, and those seasons are based on more reliable information. So I definitely consider that a success.

Mr. EZELL. Thank you very much. And I would like to say, back to those sharks, I have caught plenty of red snapper that were 20 pounds that ended up being only 2 pounds when I got him in, so thank you very much.

[Laughter.]

Ms. MALOY [presiding]. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Mrs. Dingell for 5 minutes.

Mrs. DINGELL. Thank you, Madam Chair. I have a lot of those stories, too. I want to thank you for holding today's important hearing on America's seafood competitiveness.

And this hearing is being held on the same day that myself and Representative Mast have reintroduced the bipartisan bill titled the Forage Fish Conservation Act, which is a vital step forward in ensuring the health and sustainability of our marine ecosystems. This legislation builds on the proud legacy of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, which has guided our Nation in the responsible management of fisheries for decades by improving protections for forage fish action.

Forage fish like sardines, herrings, and anchovies are the backbone of the ocean food web, providing essential prey for larger fish such as tuna, salmon, and cod, as well as marine mammals and seabirds. These small fish play a major role in supporting fisheries vital to coastal communities. However, these populations have experienced substantial decline because of human activity which threatens the viability of marine ecosystems as well as opportunities for recreational fishermen. Currently, there are few management measures in place to address this decline, and that is why this bill is so important.

The Forage Fish Conservation Act makes certain that we take a science-based, ecosystem-wide approach. It ensures that before new forage fisheries are authorized, we understand the full impact on existing fisheries, on local economies, and on the broader marine environment. It also makes sure that the needs of these essential predator fish and the voices of fishing communities are considered every step of the way. Importantly, this bill respects the role of States in managing the waters closest to home, while strengthening national efforts to protect forage species offshore.

And this legislation has received support from conservationists and sportsmen alike. It is endorsed by the American Sports Fishing Association, the National Audubon Society, the Theodore Roosevelt

Conservation Partnership. I could go on, and I welcome all my colleagues to support it.

But now let me turn to you, Ms. Guyas. Why is conserving forage fish so important for the health of fisheries?

And what actions is National Marine Fisheries Service currently taking to safeguard forage fish?

Ms. GUYAS. Thank you for the question. I will take your second question first, actually, and I think the answer is not much, to be succinct.

So forage fish are, from a sport fishing perspective, food for a lot of our sport fish. And so that is really important, certainly part of a healthy marine environment, and we need all of those things to support recreational fishing and recreational fishing businesses all around the country, including your State of Michigan.

Mrs. DINGELL. Thank you. It is important to note that the Magnuson-Stevens Act is not currently designed to account for the unique role of forage fish in the marine ecosystem. The bipartisan Forage Fish Conservation Act would address this need while maintaining MSA's State-based management flexibilities.

Ms. Guyas, how much of a role do forage fish play in the greater food web, and how does their importance play in ensuring a healthy sport fish population?

Ms. GUYAS. I mean, forage fish are really the base of the food web in a lot of marine ecosystems, so, as you said, very, very important. And those fish provide food for sport fish and, as I mentioned, up the chain supporting recreational fisheries and a lot of commercial fisheries, as well. Then on and on, the economic impacts from there, the businesses, the anglers, manufacturers throughout the country. So very important.

Mrs. DINGELL. Thank you. That is why we all need to work on it.

My Ranking Member asked for some time, so I am not going to ask another question, and I will yield the remainder of my time to him.

Mr. HUFFMAN. I could have listened to you talk about forage fish all day long, because I am with you completely on that. And thanks to the witnesses.

But in the limited time I have, Mr. Bellavance, I want to pick up where we left off. There is a big push right now to deregulate, to have more flexibility in fisheries management. At the same time we are already falling behind on stock assessments and on the basic bedrock science we need to do regulation.

I am wondering what happens if you do all the relaxing of conservation standards, you do all the flexibility stuff that some are calling for, and you lose that science. Is that a good thing for those who make their living on the water?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Thank you, Congressman Huffman. So I think the science is the integral part of the equation, right? In order to make decisions, the science has to be the best possible quality that it can be. So any time there is a compromise of that, it is going to impact not only the managers that are managing the fish, but the fishing community at large.

Mr. HUFFMAN. Would you agree that that is a recipe for crashing fisheries and ultimately closing fisheries when you open up

flexibility and take away the science needed to thoughtfully and carefully manage them?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. I mean, it could be, right? Like, it can go the other way, too, I guess. But yes, definitely there is an opportunity for lax regulations to cause over-harvest. And in the long term that would be bad.

Mr. BELLAVANCE. But at the same time there are unnecessary restrictions, as well.

Ms. HAGEMAN [presiding]. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Chairman Westerman for 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Thank you, Chair Hageman, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today to talk about a very important issue.

And Mr. Bellavance, you have been involved in Federal fisheries for decades. And in your testimony you highlight the progress made under the Magnuson-Stevens Act. And some people think that MSA needs sweeping, dramatic changes, yet a lot of stakeholders that I have talked to have expressed trust and confidence in the Federal fisheries management system as it exists. I am not saying we don't need to change some things about it, but can you share from your perspective how successful the Act has been, and its existing management system, and the results we have seen over the past several decades?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Yes. I apologize, could you repeat the question? I am sorry.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Some people think we should change the Magnuson-Stevens Act dramatically, but can you explain the benefits you have seen from the Act and the changes that we have seen over the decades?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. I think the record of rebuilding fish stocks kind of speaks for itself, right? We have a lot less over-fished stocks than we have in the past. And 82 percent of our stocks are not subject to over-fishing. So the cooperative process that lays out in the Magnuson-Stevens Act works, right? It is rebuilding stocks.

Now, it could be made a little better, but in general I believe strongly in the Magnuson and our whole council process.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Yes, several of us on the committee just got back from a CODEL last week to Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. And the IUU fishing is a huge issue in those countries. We had a chance to visit the fish market in Tokyo, which was quite amazing.

But other countries are dealing with issues of just enforcing the laws. They don't have the Coast Guard and the ability that we have to enforce our fisheries laws, even though the South Koreans are making a big effort to try to change things where they are fishing. But they still have a lot of foreign vessels that come into their waters and do damage to their fisheries.

How well are we able to enforce the laws that we have in our fisheries?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Thanks for the question. So I think we have rules in place that would do a decent job of enforcing the policies that we have, but it is a huge ocean, and there is a lot involved in international enforcement, right?

So I know that the folks that are involved in enforcement at NOAA fisheries and local regions and so on are super dedicated to

their job and they try hard. But it is a complicated thing to try to get at all these different attempts to try to circumvent our system and disadvantage our fishermen here in the United States.

So I think it is on the council's mind, for sure, of how we can craft regulations that protect our fishermen, and I think maybe the executive orders will help us do that, as well.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Yes, and Mr. Hunter, in your testimony you talk about how the Community Development Quota program has encouraged investments in the seafood industry, which in turn has provided a great level of economic independence for the people that your organization serves. And thank you for telling your personal story, and I would consider that a great American success story. But can you expand on the ways that CDQ program has improved the lives and livelihoods in Alaska?

Mr. HUNTER. Absolutely. Thank you for the question. I want to preface that with the reality of what it is like to live in the village. It is tough. Growing up poor, I didn't realize I was poor until I got a little older. But I see the struggles that a lot of families go through.

And the one example I like to give like in my testimony, every person that we give a job is somebody you pull off of welfare, off of public assistance. And we had a crisis recently. We had a change in management at a local store, and they couldn't take food stamp. And all the people that were on public assistance couldn't go and shop from the store. So they are begging and pleading with neighbors and the people that are better off. Many of them are our employees that we hire there. I believe we have about a dozen or so in Scammon Bay alone that we hire through the CDQ program. And my hope is in the future is to expand on that.

We have maxed out on the benefits and programs that we provide with the resources that we have. And our goal and dream is to expand on CDQ, and maybe Congress could help with that.

Mr. WESTERMAN. Well, thank you. Thank you very much. That reminds me of something Ronald Reagan said, that the best social welfare program ever invented is a job. We need to do more of those.

I have got questions for the other witnesses, but I am way out of time, so we will submit those.

Mr. WESTERMAN. But thank you all for being here today.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And the Chair now recognizes Mr. Golden for 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. GOLDEN. Thank you, Madam Chair.

All right, Dustin, the moratorium on right whale regulations that Congress passed back in 2022, that was for 6 years, so we got until 2028 there, but the new TRT process begins in 2026. Can you talk a little bit about why that doesn't make sense, just the timing of that, and what will be lost if we don't consider a slight delay in the TRT process?

Mr. DELANO. Absolutely, thank you for the question.

So basically, we had a 6-year reprieve, and we were very grateful for Congress passing that. However, the TRT process has draft regulations that are supposed to come out in January 2026. And we just started a significant right whale monitoring program in the State of Maine, where Congress generated tens of millions of

dollars to start this program. And we have just started collecting data there, but the timeline and the TRT process is not going to allow for all of the millions of dollars' worth of data that we have started collecting to be applied in the process. We need more time to be able to include that in the process so that we can be better informed.

But also, the State of Maine separately is working on its own assessment tool, and that also will not be ready in time with this strict timeline.

Mr. GOLDEN. Is 6 years long enough for the moratorium? Will you be able to get all that data in and use it in an informed process by, let's say, 2028?

Mr. DELANO. I do not think that 6 years is enough time. I think what was asked in the first place was 10 to 12, and that is because here we are, 2 1/2 years after that legislation, and we are finally able to get the funding and able to get started on collecting the data. And it takes a significant amount of time to get through the TRT process, and so that is why they are already starting in that direction.

Mr. GOLDEN. Great. You have talked a little bit about the gray zone, not necessarily in the purview of this committee, but I think it would be good for anyone that watched the testimony of Secretary Lutnick to U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer or just generally Members of Congress to be aware. What are some of the Canadian fishing practices in the gray zone that Maine fishermen actually believe is harming the long-term health of the lobster fishery?

Mr. DELANO. Being a lobster fisherman myself, and believing in the strong conservation measures that we have put in place mostly ourselves, I think one of the largest issues is the fact that the Canadian vessels do not have a maximum size on lobsters. Our broodstock is very dependent on those large female lobsters. And when the Canadian vessels come in, they can harvest those lobsters and they can send them to market. And I believe that our American fishermen are starting to see the results of that behavior in their catches now, and I think it is really important that we start looking at this issue before it is too late.

Mr. GOLDEN. Great. I am running out of time here, so I will try and squeeze this one in.

So you talked about fish stock assessments, the pilot program that you hope gets funded. Congress could do that. Or maybe the Administration could find some of that funding. I think it is fair to say that NEFSA feels confident that the fish stock assessments are under-counting the health of many fish populations out in the Atlantic. Correct?

Mr. DELANO. Yes, we typically do feel that way.

Mr. GOLDEN. Right. So part of the President's goal with his trade agenda is to see less foreign imports, less reliance on foreign goods, particularly core ones like food. But what would you say to them about the importance of the pilot program like yours to making sure that we don't just stop our reliance on foreign food imports, but also unleash the domestic resource so that you can put healthy food on the plates of American families?

Mr. DELANO. Yes, so, we can't stress enough how important it is to have more data, better data collection, but to work with industry partners, to work with fishermen at collecting that. Eighty-two percent of our seafood in the United States is imported. That is not acceptable. We have the means here. We just need to improve the data. We need fishermen to be involved in these processes.

Mr. GOLDEN. All right. Thanks for your time and your testimony today.

Mr. DELANO. Thank you.

Ms. HAGEMAN. The Chair now recognizes Ms. Maloy for 5 minutes of questioning.

Ms. MALOY. Thank you, Madam Chair. Thank you all for being here and testifying.

I represent Utah, which is the second driest State in the country. And in case you haven't looked at a map of the United States recently, it is a long way from the ocean. I don't even eat fish if I can avoid it, but I am really excited about the idea of good resource management, so I am thrilled to be here today for pure policy reasons. I don't even have a dog in the fight.

To that point, Mr. Delano, I am probably going to call you Delano because we have a peak in my district that is spelled the same way and pronounced differently, but you are a fantastic witness. And when you started talking about picture what really matters to you, and if layer after layer of regulations placed on it and you lose that, how would you feel, that really resonated with me. I think it would resonate with my constituents in a dry State far from the ocean, because we have similar problems when it comes to timber and livestock and mining.

And so I have been sitting here listening to all these questions and thinking about you talking about how much you love fishing and how it is in your blood, but you left being on the water to do policy. And I hope being here today helps you realize that that is worth it. Getting this policy right can save that way of life for the rest of your family that is still out there. And if your family is watching and they think you are a slacker because you are here and not out fishing, I hope they see how important this is too.

So I don't have a question, I just wanted to recognize that. I do have questions for some of the rest of you.

Ms. Guyas, you talked about how recreational fishing is rooted in conservation, and I agree. We don't have a lot of fishing in Utah. We have much more recreational fishing than commercial, but I watch how much people who fish care about conservation and want to make sure we get this right. But you also talked about how the MREP data is unreliable, and even used an example of a red snapper fishery being closed based on flawed data.

And I have got some of the main points from the executive order on seafood competitiveness sitting here in front of me. It tells the agencies to identify fisheries with high regulatory burden and collaborate with regional councils to revise or remove barriers, improve data collection through cooperative research and new technologies, and increase stakeholder input in management decisions. What regulatory changes would you recommend to reduce restrictions and help recreational fishing grow economically and socially.

Ms. GUYAS. That is such a good question. I think there is a lot of things that we could do.

The fishery that I focused on a lot in my testimony was red snapper, and I think we have a model for where we could go from the Gulf into the Atlantic. If we are able to use the exempted fishing permits that were proposed in the EO in the South Atlantic to help increase access for red snapper in the South Atlantic, that would be a really big deal. And similar in the Gulf, that might be one of the few ways that we get out of this management trap, where we have a whole lot of fish out there and anglers that are catching them, but very little access. We don't even know if we are going to have a season this year. We will find out potentially in a couple of days. But it is a tough situation. And so that might be the way to at least try and get us out here.

Ms. MALOY. Thank you.

Mr. Bellavance, same thing. We have got these three standards: identify fisheries with high regulatory burden, and collaborate with regional councils to revise or remove barriers; improve data collection through cooperative research and new technologies; and increase stakeholder input in management decisions.

You are part of the regional councils. How are the regional fishery management councils implementing this EO to reduce the regulatory burdens on commercial and regulatory fishing?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Thank you for the question.

So currently, all of the eight regional fishery management councils are working through their advisory panels, their technical staff, and their stakeholders to come up with a list of regulatory actions that they feel would be something we could look at to remove some burdens. I think we have until the end of September to put those together.

And then, once we deliver them, we will work with NOAA fisheries to decide which ones can be acted upon.

Ms. MALOY. Thank you. I am almost out of time, so I am not going to ask any more questions, but I just want to go back to what I started with, of what Mr. Delano said about protecting a lifestyle. And all of you testified about that. And even though I live in a dry State and represent not a commercial fishing area, we owe it to you to make sure that policy doesn't destroy your lifestyles. And thank you for being here and being willing to talk about it.

I yield back.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Ms. Rivas for 5 minutes of questions.

Ms. RIVAS. Thank you, Madam Chair, for recognizing me.

Ms. O'Connor, you have over a decade of experience understanding the needs and economics of the fishing industry, especially in Alaska where fishing powers the livelihoods of many communities across the State. The small businesses that you advocate for depend on reliable data from NOAA and the National Marine Fisheries services to navigate the most rugged and dangerous seas along the Alaskan coast to help fulfill orders across the country.

Ms. O'Connor, how would the DOGE cuts to NOAA and the National Marine Fisheries Service impacts small businesses?

Specifically, how the lack of data that were impacted by these cuts will impact their day-to-day operations.

Ms. O'CONNOR. Thank you for the question. The impacts of the DOGE cuts have been immediate and concerning things. Alaska has lost 30 percent of its NOAA and NMFS staff, and for us that has manifested in canceled surveys. The travel freeze resulted in us being unable to provide airplane tickets to the volunteers that participate in the survey, so that is about half of the survey effort. We have seen season start delays and also early closures of our seasons, Gulf of Alaska Pacific cod being one.

I have also heard examples of that on the East Coast. And we have also seen uncertainty in our weather forecasts, which for us represents danger on the daily. So we are making big decisions on whether we want to go out in 10-foot seas in a 22-foot skiff or not, and we need to know what the weather is going to do, and we need that to be accurate.

We also have seen decommissioning of critical navigational buoys and some of the safety programs provided by NIOSH. And it may not be well known that in certain fisheries receiving a certificate that you have done that training is a requirement to be able to go out and fish. So not only are we requiring that training, we are also no longer able to receive it. So it puts us in a really difficult position.

So in the last several months we have seen immediate and very concerning—

Ms. RIVAS. Thank you for your answer. Like you mentioned, we have seen that the Trump administration is proposing these budget cuts that will decimate key departments overseeing this work, including \$1.33 billion in budget cuts to NOAA's operation, research, and facilities, a 50 percent cut to the National Ocean Service, a 29 percent cut to the National Marine Fisheries Service, and a 74 percent cut to the Office of Ocean and Atmospheric Research and a zeroing out of science-based programs, including the Integrated Ocean Observing System and the National Centers for Coastal Ocean Science.

So these reckless cuts coupled with this big, ugly bill that House Republicans passed will have dire consequences for the environment, our public health, and for all of our constituents. We are already seeing how these actions are resulting in increasing costs and limiting what needs to be done like what Ms. O'Connor mentioned.

Thank you, and I yield back.

Ms. HAGEMAN. The Chair now recognizes Mr. Crank for 5 minutes of questions.

[Laughter.]

Ms. HAGEMAN. He almost got away.

Mr. CRANK. I tried to, Madam Chair. I am sorry about that. I just have to run to another committee here, but I just did want to talk very quickly about illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, a serious global issue. And I know lots have talked about that. It depletes our fish stocks, it weakens our local fishing economies, and it is often linked to organized crime, forced labor, human trafficking, smuggling, and it poses a pretty significant national security threat.

Unsurprisingly, China and Russia are among the worst offenders. Of the 152 countries scored by the IUU Fishing Index, China ranks number 1 and Russia number 2. In 2022 a European Parliament report found that half of all vessels engaged in IUU fishing flew Chinese flags. China's role in IUU fishing is driven by two key factors: rising domestic demand for seafood; the second and more concerning reason is China's desire to be a maritime power.

China has invested over \$1 trillion in its Belt and Road Initiative, and the Chinese Communist Party has explicitly outlined the key role maritime trade and access play in expanding its soft power and geopolitical influence. Experts estimate China commands over 17,000 vessels in its distant water fleet. China secured fishing agreements with over 42 countries, granting access not just to seafood resources, but to ports, logistics hubs, and surveillance opportunities. And many of these vessels are equipped with advanced communication and surveillance equipment, enabling them to monitor foreign naval activities and collect maritime intelligence.

China is not alone. Russia also uses fishing fleets for dual purposes. Norway and Denmark have raised alarms about Russian trawlers operating in the Arctic being used for espionage. These ships often loiter near undersea cables, which we have discussed in this committee before; wind farms; and military installations.

Madam Chair, I would like to submit for the record a 2024 New Yorker article detailing Russia's use of fishing trawlers for military intelligence purposes.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Without objection, so ordered.

[The article submitted for the record by Mr. Crank follows:]

6/3/25, 7:00 PM

Russia's Espionage War in the Arctic | The New Yorker

A REPORTER AT LARGE

RUSSIA'S ESPIONAGE WAR IN THE ARCTIC

For years, Russia has been using the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, which borders its nuclear stronghold, as a laboratory, testing intelligence operations there before replicating them across Europe.

By Ben Taub

September 9, 2024



"The whole Russian plan is that, if things really heat up with NATO, they need to create a buffer" to preserve the capability to carry out nuclear strikes, a regional counterintelligence chief said. That buffer starts in Kirkenes. Photographs by Paolo Pellegrin / Magnum for The New Yorker

The full document is available for viewing at:

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250604/118330/HHRG-119-II13-20250604-SD001-U1.pdf>

Mr. CRANK. And then finally, the dual purpose nature of foreign fishing fleets underscores the urgent need for the U.S. to protect its maritime boundaries not just to preserve fish stocks, but to prevent adversaries from spying on U.S. military and infrastructure assets.

And with that, Madam Chair, I do need to run back to the Armed Services Committee. I had several questions, but I think I will forego those for sake of time. But thank you.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you, Mr. Crank. And the Chair now recognizes Representative Min for 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. MIN. Thank you, Chair Hageman, I appreciate you holding this hearing today. It is a very important topic.

I have the privilege of representing California's 47th congressional district, home to some of the world's most beautiful coastlines, including off the coast of Seal Beach, Huntington Beach, Newport Beach, and Laguna Beach. And my district is home to hundreds of great seafood restaurants I encourage you all to visit, fish markets, and other businesses that rely on fish supply to meet demand.

Now, our commercial fisheries in Orange County are vital to our culinary identity, an important driver of our coastal economy. And so, for example, the local spiny lobster fishery not only provides a popular delicacy but also supports and has supported generations of fishing families promoting responsible marine stewardship. Like so many other parts of the country, Southern California's seafood industry is struggling in recent years and even weeks due to a number of factors. In recent years the availability and pricing of seafood have become increasingly challenging for restaurant operators to manage. Changes in import costs, supply disruptions, and labor shortages have all impacted the stability and operating margins of our regional seafood industries, including forcing restaurants to either adjust their offerings or absorb higher costs.

At the same time, with roughly 90 percent of U.S. seafood being imported from other countries, it is clear that the status quo is not sustainable. Now, in this environment I know it is tempting to resort to simplistic policies like tariffs and massive deregulation of the industry. But we know from a lot of experience that those policies will be counter-productive. Right now I am hearing a deluge of complaints about President Trump's tariffs, which seemingly go up or down, on or off based on what Trump had for breakfast that morning. And presumably it is not seafood. But those tariffs not only increase the price of imported fish, but also the price of fish exported for processing and then brought back into the U.S. market.

Businesses in Orange County and throughout the country are seeing the impacts through the higher prices, reduced foot traffic, and dwindling profit margins which put jobs and livelihoods at risk. Meanwhile, while some regulatory changes are probably appropriate, including ones I want to mention, simply slashing regulations runs the risk of over-fishing and depleting our fish stocks.

Of course, fishing regulations are some of the oldest regulations in this country's history because fishing creates what we in economics call a tragedy of the commons problem. There are incentives to try to fish as much as possible for any individual or company, but not necessarily to think about sustainability, leading to depleted fish stocks over time. Sustainability is a crucial aspect of fishing not just as a buzzword, but as a set of practices.

And I want to reinforce the point made by Ms. O'Connor in her testimony: fully funding the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency, or NOAA, is critical for this goal of sustainability. Elon Musk, of course, illegally slashed NOAA's budget, and now President Trump's skinny budget seeks to codify a lot of that by shrinking NOAA's budget by more than \$1.5 billion, about 25 percent below current levels. This would accelerate the negative impacts that local fisheries are already seeing from NOAA cuts, including delayed stock assessments that hinder science-based management and undermine food security.

The American seafood industry is one of the best in the world. It is the safest, aided by environmental and labor standards matched by very few foreign producers. But again, having 90 percent of our seafood come in from other countries is not sustainable. Clearly, we need to think about smart changes. And so I guess my first question is, are any of you familiar with the Norway model of aquaculture? You can just raise your hands.

I guess not. In Norway they have developed a massively successful aquaculture system of facilitating and growing domestic sources of seafood through a model based on sustainability, including through circularity of inputs and outputs thinking about things like sustainable feeds and recycling in a virtuous circle where academic research, industry, and the government work together, including through regulatory adaptations to try to promote aquaculture and sustainable fishing. And so, actually, Norway has become a big exporter of fishing, and so I think they create an example where we could follow here in the United States.

Now, today, aquaculture contributes only 7.3 percent of our total domestic seafood supply. But it is something that I think could be very promising. So we would just encourage you all to think about this in this committee, as well as what regulatory barriers might be inhibiting us from thinking about sustainability in a model of aquaculture or anything else.

With that I want to yield back.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you, Mr. Min. The Chair now recognizes Mr. Begich for 5 minutes of questions.

Mr. BEGICH. Thank you, Madam Chair. My first question is for Ms. O'Connor.

Ms. O'Connor, you spoke about the generational nature of Alaska's fisheries and the critical role they play in sustaining communities. What do you see as the biggest obstacles to keeping young Alaskans in the fisheries economy?

And how might Congress help lower those barriers, whether through loan programs, apprenticeships, or permitting reforms?

Ms. O'CONNOR. Thank you for that question. Our young people are experiencing the number-one barrier for all of us, which includes uncertainty. We are getting hit with uncertainty in the markets, uncertainty in regulation, trade, the climate. And also, as you are well aware through your work, it is increasingly more and more expensive to enter our fisheries.

So the work of this committee in previous Congresses—the Young Fishermen's Development Act, was a great step. It was the first workforce training initiative at the Federal level for young fishermen. It is up for reauthorization in 2026, so I want to put a

plug in for that there. And I think treating us as what we are, which is small businesses, so loan programs through the SBA, improving our working waterfronts so that we can have more control over our fish, there is a lot that you can do, and I am happy to brainstorm.

Mr. BEGICH. Thank you. You will be pleased to know that today we are actually introducing a bill to reauthorize the Young Fishermen Development Act in a bipartisan fashion. I will be a co-lead on that. So I don't think we talked about that, but that is interesting you bring that up just while you were here.

The second question is for Mr. Hunter. Mr. Hunter, as you rightly pointed out, Alaska's seafood industry is under siege from foreign competition countries that subsidize fleets and bypass environmental standards. Now, this is a direct threat to western Alaska's economy. What new trade tools or labeling requirements should Congress pursue to ensure that Alaskan seafood competes on a level playing field both here at home and in export markets?

Mr. HUNTER. Thank you for the question. I think that is a challenging front to tackle. We have influence over our local domestic product. We have no influence over what Russia does, what China does, what the EU does. I would hope that there is something that we could do through either Congress or this Administration to make requirements that allow us to be up front on what kind of product we have and identify that it is sustainable.

And the other actors, the other competitors we have with Russia, China, that the world is aware of what they are buying. And I think Alaska is prime seafood that we need to advocate and advertise for.

Mr. BEGICH. Thank you. We saw some really interesting proposals from Korea in our discussion on IUU fishing. And one of the things that they are pursuing, and I know this is happening here domestically, as well, within the industry, is complete supply chain visibility, where we can see at the retail level where a fish was actually caught, and confirm with the consumer that it was caught in a sustainable fashion. And I think that we need to continue to invest in programs that provide that kind of supply chain visibility so that people do have confidence that when it says it is an Alaskan wild caught salmon, it is an Alaskan wild caught salmon. And I think that is important that Congress create regulations and a structure to provide for that.

I think it is interesting, as we are talking about the issue of tariffs and some of the executive actions that have that have come forward in the last few months, you mentioned that there is not a whole lot we can do about Europe and Russia and China. There are things we can do about Europe, Russia, and China, but a lot of that happens at the executive level. And I think the Trump administration has signaled that they are more than willing to engage in some very maybe uncomfortable and challenging discussions, but hopefully part of that discussion with these nations will be illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, as well as a number of the subsidies that, as we have heard today, have been provided by countries like Russia that really damage our ability to be competitive in Alaska.

So it is my view that we need an international harmonization of regulations and international framework for enforcing those regulations and, as I mentioned earlier, supply chain visibility that gives confidence to the consumer and all those in the supply chain that what they are receiving is actually what is being advertised.

And with that I yield back.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you, Mr. Begich. The Chair now recognizes Mr. Soto for 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. SOTO. Thank you, Madam Chair.

Recreational fishing is a way of life in Florida, a driver also of our top industry of tourism, and it is key for commercial fishing which brings popular fish like red snapper, grouper, and mahi mahi to the plates of both Florida residents and folks from around the country and the world.

I am honored to represent bass country, so if you are watching major tournaments in the wintertime you will hear about a great place called Big Lake Tohopekaliga, one of the only warm places in the middle of January and February that you could see pro bass fishing.

I am also proud to be a co-lead with my dear friend, Representative Rutherford, who has joined us today, on the bipartisan Red Snapper Act. The red snapper season for the Gulf, 126 days. But the South Atlantic a puzzling 1 day. This discrepancy is concerning. And I have heard from so many constituents, especially those who prefer the East Coast fishing versus the West Coast fishing, which we won't get into that right now, it is really stopping a lot of them who really enjoy recreational fishing on the Atlantic. The bill stops closures in the South Atlantic until the Great Red Snapper Count. This is, of course, a two-way street, though. The relief will only work if Congress also funds NOAA enough to do the count.

Ms. Guyas, thank you for being here today. I appreciate all the work you have done on these issues in Florida. Why is the Red Snapper Act so important?

Ms. GUYAS. The Red Snapper Act is important is because it helps us make sure that we are using the best data to drive decisions, especially a decision where we are threatened potentially with a large area closure off the east coast of Florida for 55 species to protect red snapper, which are very abundant. That would be devastating economically for coastal communities and, really, the whole State. As you mentioned, anglers are from all over Florida, are fishing on both coasts and coming from all over the country to fish in Florida. Florida is the fishing capital of the world. It is people's dream. And so before we do anything drastic, let's make sure we have got the right information in front of us.

Mr. SOTO. And how important is NOAA funding to make sure we get this count right, even as we are working on this bill to give relief to Floridians and others?

Ms. GUYAS. Congress has invested a lot of money in this count, and so certainly would like to see it through. Absolutely.

Mr. SOTO. Ms. O'Connor, what can be the consequence of fisheries if NOAA can't conduct accurate counts?

Ms. O'CONNOR. Thank you for the question, and I think it is an important one. It adds uncertainty in a way that can both lead us

into a fisheries disaster we don't see coming or leave fish in the water that we could have otherwise safely harvested.

Ms. O'CONNOR. So either way, we are in a tough spot.

Mr. SOTO. Sure. So very important. I wanted to talk a little bit about both grouper and lionfish.

First, Ms. Guyas, how is the grouper population going right now? I know a lot of people love fishing for grouper.

Ms. GUYAS. It depends on where you are at. We are hearing some really good things in the Gulf right now. They are meeting and talking about this this week.

The Atlantic, it depends on what species you are talking about unfortunately.

Mr. SOTO. What are the ones that are doing well and the ones that are concerned right now?

Ms. GUYAS. We have got good news in the Gulf with red grouper and gag grouper. We are seeing more of those, so that is promising because both of those were not looking great just a couple of years ago.

Mr. SOTO. And where are the areas of concern for the grouper population?

Ms. GUYAS. On the Atlantic side we have got some issues with gag. It is a little bit different situation over there. The habitat is different and the stock is different. But the South Atlantic Council is working on a plan to deal with that.

Mr. SOTO. Great. And then last question, lionfish, right? Invasive species. It is like a tank. It could be in shallow water or in the deep. It eats a lot of the eggs of a lot of these sports fish. So how do you think the progress is going on addressing the invasive fish that is the lionfish?

Ms. GUYAS. I think word is getting out that lionfish are, even though they look kind of weird, are really delicious.

Mr. SOTO. Sure.

Ms. GUYAS. We have got derbies across the State of Florida where spear fishermen, both commercial and recreational, are fishing them. There are some commercial markets now for them, as well. Just a few weeks ago there was a lionfish festival in Destin, where the whole point of it is to raise awareness about lionfish and its harm to the environment and delicious meat.

Mr. SOTO. Let's fight it by putting them on the menu, right?

Well, and we know lionfish, they don't really have natural predators. The spine is poisonous, so a lot of fish back away from it. But if you remove it correctly, you have a tasty dish that a lot of us certainly will enjoy.

With that I yield back.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Mrs. Kiggans for 5 minutes of questioning.

Mrs. KIGGANS. Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to our panelists for being here today.

I represent Virginia's 2nd congressional district, so Hampton Roads area. A large portion of that just encompasses the Chesapeake Bay. So, as many of you know, our home is some of the most diverse and abundant fisheries on the planet. Our unique access to both the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean provides our recreational fishermen with access to prized trophy fish, and

our commercial fishermen with the largest fishery on the East Coast.

In 2023 commercial fishermen in Virginia harvested over 150,000 metric tons of seafood, behind only our friends in Louisiana and Alaska. We must continue to find ways to improve the competitiveness of American seafood and foreign and domestic markets while improving local health and recreational benefits for our communities. I thank the Chairwoman for holding this hearing as an opportunity for dialog in how we can accomplish these goals.

Conversations surrounding the North Atlantic right whale have been ongoing in this committee. The Chairwoman asked earlier in this hearing how we can protect this critical endangered species and mentioned potential impacts of offshore wind. Virginia's 2nd district is home to the largest offshore wind project in the country, and we are very proud of the work being done to promote an all-of-the-above energy strategy. This project also benefits the Naval Air Station, which is in need of a power grid upgrade, and we have a fabulous public-private partnership where Dominion Energy will be providing about a \$500 million power grid upgrade to that base, which I am thankful for.

I look forward to working with you all in ways to protect marine life, using a data-driven and science-based approach like tagging and geomonitoring. Our goal is to protect this threatened species without implementing burdensome speed restrictions on commercial and recreational fishermen.

So Ms. Guyas and Mr. Delano, can you both expand on the concerns and experiences you had with these proposed speed rules?

And how should Congress think about these issues in the context of protecting commercial fishing industry and American seafood competitiveness?

Mr. DELANO. I appreciate the question, but we actually haven't been subjected to speed restrictions in the Northeast yet with the commercial fishing, other than, like, mandatory slow-down zones when whales are present.

Ms. GUYAS. With the proposal that was out for North Atlantic right whale, one of our major concerns right from the get-go was, you know, our community was not really part of the process in coming up with that solution and we felt like there are other ways to come at this problem, notably technology. Mr. Delano mentioned some of that. But there are also technologies on vessels nowadays can be quite sophisticated. And I think there is an opportunity there to use some of the technologies that are on vessels to help fishermen and other mariners out there from avoiding whales. So there could have been other ways to come at this.

Mrs. KIGGANS. Yes, has the issue been kind of tabled for now? Is it in a place where people are happy just to sit with it? Or is there a concern that they will be back? Because we hear from our local fishing industry, who are opposed to these new restrictions, that the issue will be back.

Ms. GUYAS. My understanding is that it has been put aside for now. But there is always the question that it could come back. But I can tell you that our community, we are thinking about technology and how to be proactive in dealing with this issue.

Mrs. KIGGANS. I think that is the right place to be. Thank you for that.

And Ms. Guyas, you live in Florida, but I understand you grew up in the Chesapeake Bay, and one of my top priorities here in Congress is supporting efforts to protect and restore the Bay. An important component of these efforts is supporting oyster reef restoration and commercial aquaculture, as oysters filter water, improve water quality, and provide essential habitat for other species. So could you please just talk about what role do oysters play in supporting our recreational fisheries, and in turn promote our domestic seafood industry?

And are we seeing stability in the number of oysters that America is able to harvest?

Ms. GUYAS. Yes, thanks for the question. Not only are oysters cleaning the water, which is very important, but they provide habitat for a lot of fisheries, particularly juvenile fisheries, sport fish and commercial fisheries.

And so, similar to my remarks with Mrs. Dingell about forage fish, it is the base that we need to have healthy fisheries, to have healthy recreational fisheries, and to support recreational businesses. So very, very important to us.

And remind me of your other question. I am sorry.

Mrs. KIGGANS. If the numbers of oysters that we are seeing being harvested in America, if there is stability in that number, I just want to make sure there is not a decrease or maybe at times there is an increase, but just it has been a pretty stable market?

Ms. GUYAS. I can't speak to the exact number, but I can tell you that a lot of oyster farming operations certainly are taking off in my region. And so I think there are a lot of good opportunities there, and oyster growing and harvesting opportunities.

Mrs. KIGGANS. Our region too, we are seeing a lot of that.

And I think my time has expired, so I will yield back. But thank you.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Ranking Member Hoyle for 5 minutes of questions.

Ms. HOYLE. Thank you, Madam Chair. My mother's family are commercial fishermen, were commercial fishermen off the west coast of Ireland. The fishing industry in Ireland has decreased, has been devastated over quite a period of time because of over-fishing by other countries, because of over-regulation that happened without the input of the commercial fishing industry, and inherently bad trade policy. So I think this hearing is really important, and I appreciate everything that you are saying and your input.

Given that I represent the central and south coast of Oregon, the commercial fishing and sports fishing industries are absolutely critical to our economy, especially since the crash of the timber industry. We lost a lot of jobs there.

One of the things that our fishermen are most concerned about is the gutting of staff at NOAA and what that has done to the National Weather Service. I was listening to projections about wildfire preparedness last week, and we learned about the firing of a number of the staff that impacted the amount of weather balloons that are being sent up in Alaska, in Maine, across the United States. And that impacts the ability for us to get weather

information specifically for our fishermen before they go out. That kind of information saves lives.

We also have had threats by anti-government groups specifically to NOAA because there is disinformation about what these weather balloons do. Apparently, some people think they create weather, as opposed to telling us the weather. So this kind of disinformation can cost people their lives. The thing about weather balloons is that they give you information you can't get any other way.

Ms. O'Connor, can you, and actually, anybody else, really, but first you, could you talk about maybe some of the impacts that these NOAA cuts have had, and specifically how you rely on the National Weather Service and what impacts those cuts will have?

Ms. O'CONNOR. Thank you for the question. Absolutely. So one of the first impacts that I was made aware of from the DOGE cuts was turning off the webcams at Alaska's rural airports. And those not only allow our pilots to understand what they are flying into but allow all of us to make travel decisions from small skiffs to tiny, two-person airplanes. So it has extended from there, unfortunately, to more systematic cuts to the Weather Service which have impacted our ability to project snow in seasons that we might not have been expecting it, also high seas, and we are seeing the long-ranging impacts of that which include our understanding of our changing climate.

So the impacts, I think, have already been felt and will continue to be felt, and I would very much encourage fully funding and fully staffing the Weather Service.

Ms. HOYLE. Thank you.

Mr. Bellavance, how do you expect staff cuts at NOAA to affect your council's work?

And have you been forced to take on unfunded mandates due to the chaos at NOAA? Basically, how has that affected you?

Mr. BELLAVANCE. Thank you for the question.

So at the council level we rely on NOAA fisheries to provide us with scientific information, to help us make management decisions. We also rely on the regional offices to guide us through the regulatory process. And ultimately, NOAA will have to publish proposed rules and final actions on quotas and specifications to allow fishermen to fish.

We have noticed recently that there seems to be less people available to do stock assessments. We have had to look at our stock assessment schedule into the future and readjust that. And we have also had delays in publication of regulations that we have promulgated at the council. So hopefully, we can come up with ways to streamline that and recover, but it has been a challenge.

Ms. HOYLE. Thank you. I yield back.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Thank you. The Chair now recognizes Mr. Rutherford for 5 minutes of questioning.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to address the Subcommittee and the witnesses here this afternoon. And I really do appreciate all of you, and I know you all know probably more than anyone else that good fisheries management requires good, reliable scientific fisheries data.

What we just saw in these Gulf States, they have shown us that State-led management can work and work well. The Gulf States

data collection programs have produced more accurate numbers than NOAA and allowed for more responsive management that has resulted in greater fishing opportunities for anglers. That is thanks to that improved State data.

This year, my State, the State of Florida, was even able to announce a record-breaking 126-day season in the Gulf. Now, compare that to the Southeast Atlantic. That is 125 days more than we had. We had 1 day. One day. The State-led management in the Gulf, compared to what NOAA gave us in the Southeast Atlantic. And we know they are wrong. In fact, they know they are wrong. Even NOAA has admitted that their data is flawed, saying in 2003 that recreational harvest estimates could be off as much as 40 percent. That is unacceptable, especially when anglers in my district are constantly telling me the red snapper is so abundant down there.

You have been out there, Ms. GUYAS. There is more red snapper than you can shake a stick at.

So the good news has come for the States of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. Just this morning, Madam Chair, this letter was sent by Governor DeSantis to Secretary Lutnick asking that they be allowed, the States of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, to State-manage our fisheries. That is a strong signal that the States are ready to step up.

So Ms. GUYAS, let me ask you because you have been heavily involved in the Gulf, as well. What are some of the next steps that we could do to help push this along as Members of Congress?

Ms. GUYAS. Yes, that is very encouraging that that letter came through, and perfect timing, considering we are having this discussion.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Absolutely.

Ms. GUYAS. I think what the Congress can do, certainly, and you all have done this, is help get better information to inform fisheries management and supporting State management.

One thing that could be helpful is making sure the States have the resources that they need to do this. Florida has a lot of experience doing it in the Gulf. South Carolina and Georgia and other South Atlantic States like North Carolina, this would be a new thing for them. And so really just providing that support, I think, is going to be critical, especially if the executive order paves the way for this.

In the Gulf there was support from Congress, as well, and there was directive language in the budget bill that year to direct NOAA to create these EFP programs. So that is another option, as well.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Thank you very much. And I will tell you, I really feel like this whole amendment 59 has kind of shot NOAA in the foot, so to speak, because, and this was under the previous Administration, as they were going out the door, 6 days before they went out the door they announced this amendment 59, rule 59. And now we are seeing a response to that concept, that they want to close the bottom for 90 days every year in the Southeast Atlantic, not just the red snapper, but all 55 bottom species.

And so I think they have really overstepped their boundaries, and that is why I think you are seeing the States step up and

respond and say, hey, whoa, wait a minute. Let us do this. We can do this much better. They have proven it in the Gulf.

And Madam Chair, I am hoping that we can certainly do that from Congress and allow the Southeast Atlantic fisheries to be managed by the States of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina. And with that I see my time is up. I yield back, Madam Chair, but thank you for this opportunity.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Mr. Rutherford, would you like to submit that letter for the record?

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Actually, I would.

Ms. HAGEMAN. OK.

Mr. RUTHERFORD. Thank you.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Without objection, it is so ordered.

[The letter submitted for the record by Mr. Rutherford follows:]



June 4, 2025

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
 Secretary
 U.S. Department of Commerce
 1401 Constitution Ave NW
 Washington, DC 20230

Secretary Lutnick,

We write today to jointly request state management of red snapper and other reef fishes in the South Atlantic. Federal management is driven by flawed data and regulations that threaten the economies of our coastal communities. Our states are committed to helping our recreational fishing communities, while also conserving our fisheries resources for future generations. The first step to correcting course on federal mismanagement is to stop the harmful impacts of Amendment 59 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region.

As Governors of coastal states, we are fortunate to boast over 8,500 miles of shoreline along our combined Atlantic coastlines. This geographic position supports each of our state's economic competitiveness and quality of life, and that includes abundant natural resources within the South Atlantic Fishery. Unfortunately, decades of inaction by career bureaucrats within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), combined with actions in the waning hours of the Biden Administration to cut-off public access to the fishery, have hampered access for our recreational angling communities from exercising their God-given right to fish and support their local economies and way of life.

We are thankful to you and President Trump for your willingness to empower states to assume management of their own natural resources, including red snapper, in the South Atlantic. Look no further than to Florida's own success in proving just how effective state management is. Since assuming management in the Gulf of America, Florida's recreational Red Snapper season has increased from just 3 to 127 days.

For too long, management of Atlantic red snapper has failed to keep track with the successful growth of the stock. Although fishermen have seen explosive growth in the number of red snapper, harvest opportunities have dwindled, and NOAA Fisheries has threatened to prohibit all snapper-grouper fishing along a portion of our coastline as part of Amendment 59.

The current situation in the South Atlantic is clear: 1) there is an unprecedented abundance of red snapper; 2) red snapper is no longer overfished or undergoing overfishing, and 3) a large quota increase is warranted. While prior leadership at the Department has struggled with accepting these facts, our states are equipped to effectively manage the stock to balance public access to the resource while maintaining a healthy stock for the long-term health of our fishery.

The full document is available for viewing at:

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250604/118330/HHRG-119-II13-20250604-SD007.pdf>

Ms. HAGEMAN. I also ask unanimous consent to enter into the hearing record a letter from the National Fisheries Institute on the importance of strengthening and supporting a thriving domestic U.S. seafood economy.

Without objection, so ordered.
 [The letter submitted for the record by Ms. Hageman follows:]



June 4, 2025

The Honorable Harriet Hageman
 Chair
 Subcommittee of Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
 Committee on Natural Resources
 United States House of Representatives
 Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair Hageman:

On behalf of the approximately 300 member companies of the National Fisheries Institute (NFI), I write to share our views on several topics impacting the seafood industry in connection with your Subcommittee's June 4, 2025 "*Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness*" oversight hearing. NFI offers these comments not only to highlight current successes, but also to offer recommendations for strengthening and supporting a thriving domestic U.S. seafood economy.

For almost 80 years NFI has been the leading voice for the fish and seafood industry and America's largest seafood trade association. Our members span the entire seafood value chain—from East Coast lobster, clam and scallop harvesters, Alaska vessel owners, Pacific processors, Midwest importers, and Southern shellfish producers, to aquaculture providers, distributors, cold storage providers, retailers, and seafood restaurants. Collectively, these companies supply American families with tens of millions of delicious, healthy, sustainable seafood meals every year, and directly support almost 1.6 million American jobs and more than \$183 billion in economic value to the U.S. economy.

First and foremost, seafood is widely regarded as one of the healthiest proteins available. At a time when Americans are told to limit the consumption of many foods, Americans are encouraged to enjoy seafood more frequently to improve their health. It is not difficult to see why. Seafood is low in total fat, high in protein, and rich in vitamins and minerals, such as selenium, vitamin D, omega-3 fatty acids, and B vitamins. However, seafood is one of the most under-consumed foods in American diets. The 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) recommends that all individuals eat 2-3 seafood servings per week, but, according to USDA, over 90% of Americans fall short of this recommendation.

Although increasing seafood consumption is not the focus of this hearing, seafood's unique nutritional profile should not be forgotten when discussing the sustainability, regulatory, and competitiveness issues that are.

Federal Fisheries Management System

The full document is available for viewing at:

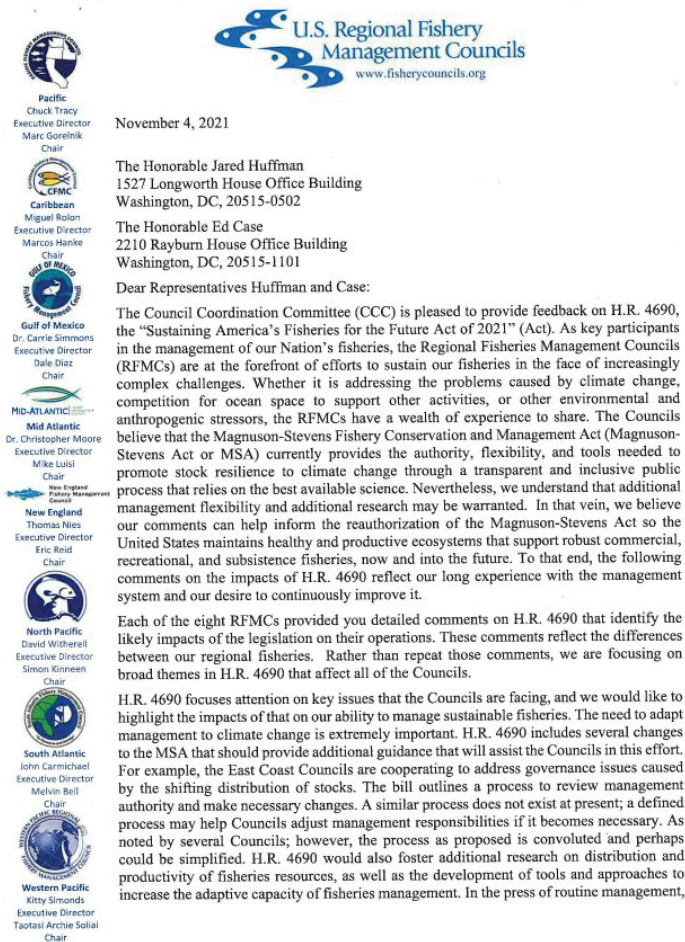
<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250604/118330/HHRG-119-II13-20250604-SD005-U1.pdf>

Ms. HAGEMAN. And I also seek to introduce the November 4, 2021 letter to The Honorable Jared Huffman and The Honorable Ed Case from the U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils

addressing the bill that Representative Huffman talked about earlier today that he has introduced.

Without objection, so ordered.

[The letter submitted for the record by Ms. Hageman follows:]



The full document is available for viewing at:

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250604/118330/HHRG-119-II13-20250604-SD004.pdf>

Ms. HAGEMAN. I see that we might have some other unanimous consent requests.

Ms. HOYLE. Thank you, Madam Chair. I ask unanimous consent to include the following news article relating to the impact of the deep cuts in NOAA for the record, and also ask unanimous consent to enter into the record the 2025 article entitled, “Uncertain United States Seafood Sustainability and a Manufactured Crisis” by Dr. Halley Froehlich and Dr. Jessica Gephart.

Ms. HAGEMAN. Without objection, so ordered.

The Honorable Val Hoyle did not submit articles to the Committee by the appropriate deadline for inclusion in the printed record.

Ms. HAGEMAN. I want to thank the witnesses for your valuable testimony and the members for attending and your questions today.

The members of the Committee may have some additional questions for the witnesses, and we will ask you to respond to those in writing. Under Committee rule 3, members of the Committee must submit such questions to the Subcommittee clerk by 5 p.m. Eastern on Monday, June 9. The hearing record will be held open for 10 business days for these responses.

And without objection, the subcommittee stands adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:36 p.m., the Subcommittee was adjourned.]

[ADDITIONAL MATERIALS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD]

Statement for the Record

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce

June 4, 2025

Introduction

NOAA appreciates the ongoing work with this Subcommittee to spotlight the importance of our fisheries to our economy, food security, recreation, and tourism.

Magnuson-Stevens Act, Science, and Management

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) has been instrumental for successful fisheries management. U.S. fisheries are among the world’s largest and most sustainable. The MSA, the keystone of U.S. fisheries management legislation, turns 50 next year, and in that time has demonstrated that a dynamic science-based management process is fundamental for sustainably managing fisheries. The goal of fisheries management is to achieve fisheries that are recreationally, economically and environmentally sustainable. In partnership with regional fishery management councils (councils), interstate fishery commissions, coastal states, and our stakeholders, and driven by the MSA, NOAA Fisheries has ended overfishing in most cases and is rebuilding domestic fish stocks. Currently, 90 percent of stocks for which we have assessments are not subject to overfishing and 88 percent are not overfished.¹ U.S. commercial and recreational fishing supported 2.3 million jobs and generated \$321 billion in sales across the broader economy in 2022. By preventing overfishing and rebuilding stocks, we are strengthening the value of fisheries to the economy and communities that depend on them, and also ensuring a sustainable supply of seafood for the nation in the future.

The MSA created broad goals for U.S. fisheries management, including ten national standards to promote sustainable fisheries, and a unique, highly

¹NOAA Fisheries Fishery Stock Status Updates, 2024 Quarter 4 Update through December 31, 2024. <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/population-assessments/fishery-stock-status-updates#2024-quarterly-updates>.

participatory management structure centered on the councils. This structure encourages a collaborative, “bottom up” process where fishermen, other fishery stakeholders, affected states, tribal governments, and the Federal Government all provide input and influence decisions about how to manage U.S. fisheries.

Flexibility to determine what management approach will be most effective for each council’s fisheries is a fundamental element in the success of the council system. In making their recommendations, each council can choose from a variety of approaches and tools to manage fish stocks and meet the mandates of the MSA—specifying how to establish required catch limits, determine allocation mechanisms for who receives what amount of fish, and develop a structure for rebuilding overfished stocks when such actions are necessary.

Councils make management recommendations through a transparent, collaborative process that includes extensive public input, scientific research, and consideration of economic and social impacts. These recommended measures are submitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and, if approved, are then implemented by NOAA Fisheries. The MSA also established a Council Coordination Committee (CCC), which is made up of the chairs, vice chairs, and executive directors from each regional council. NOAA Fisheries meets with the CCC twice a year to discuss issues relevant to all councils and to work collaboratively to develop national solutions to those issues.

Management decisions that provide for thriving and sustainable fisheries need sound science. For instance, scientific analyses and assessments that incorporate data collected on fish stocks, fisheries, and the surrounding marine ecosystems are used to implement policies including the catch limits required by the MSA. NOAA Fisheries has established a first-rate scientific enterprise built upon our internal resources, such as our fleet of research vessels, advanced technology assets, and the scientific expertise of our staff, as well as our strong collaborations with the fishing industry. As we continue to advance our scientific enterprise to address emerging priorities, we remain eager to work with the committee to modernize data collection efforts and analytical capabilities, such as through expanded use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), to improve the underlying science necessary to increase the responsiveness of fisheries management to real-time ocean conditions, as called for in the President’s 2025 Executive Order 14276 on Restoring America’s Seafood Competitiveness (E.O. 14276). An important pillar for effectively managing U.S. fisheries is the timeliness and quality of fishery-dependent data collected from the fishery, in some cases during fishing operations. NOAA Fisheries continues to improve the efficiency of our data collection programs by implementing electronic logbooks for fishermen and observers, continuing to shift data systems to the Cloud, and developing camera-based electronic monitoring programs. As an example, the entire Greater Atlantic Region (North Carolina to Maine which covers thousands of vessels) implemented an electronic logbook program for every commercial and for-hire fishery, and we are working to extend those capabilities for the entire Atlantic coast, in an effort to streamline logbook reporting especially for fishermen that operate in multiple regions.

In addition, NOAA Fisheries has implemented 14 camera-based electronic monitoring programs across U.S. fisheries, either to supplement data collected by observers in some cases or to replace observers in others. We are in the process of implementing an electronic monitoring program in the Pacific Islands longline fishery, which is expected to reduce costs while improving monitoring coverage to support long-term management decisions. The adoption of an electronic monitoring program in this fishery will provide NOAA Fisheries an opportunity to address data sharing challenges that can limit the potential of using AI in monitoring programs, especially in international fisheries.

Further, we have identified additional opportunities to develop cross-regional or national standards to support technology integration and greater efficiency for fishermen. Expanding electronic logbook programs requires improvements to coast-wide vessel permitting systems and shared tools for software development. There are a number of opportunities to leverage AI to save the agency and fishermen costs in these programs, such as creating video interoperability standards and building a cloud-based image library for internal and public access to improve the efficiency of analyzing video collected from camera-based systems.

Seafood Competitiveness

While the United States is a global leader in sustainable fisheries management due to our participatory, science-based system, the U.S. seafood sector faces growing pressures from global competition, evolving market demands, and changing ocean conditions. Domestic fishery landings decreased by approximately 1 billion pounds between 2019 and 2023, landings revenue decreased 16% and average price (rev-

enue-per-pound) decreased 18% in inflation-adjusted terms between 2022 and 2023. The United States imports nearly 80 percent of its seafood. It is essential to ensure that our high demand for imported seafood does not create incentives for illegal, unreported, or unregulated (IUU) fishing activity. NOAA must also work to ensure fair global market access for U.S. seafood producers. That is why, in response to E.O. 14276, the Department of Commerce, through NOAA Fisheries, is launching a coordinated effort to help revitalize the U.S. seafood sector. This effort builds on the work begun in response to President Trump's 2020 Executive Order 13921 on Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth (E.O. 13921).

Through the implementation of E.O. 14276, NOAA aims to address the recent decline in domestic fisheries landings and revenue, boost sustainable aquaculture, reduce the seafood trade deficit, and strengthen supply chain resilience. NOAA Fisheries has identified three strategic objectives for meeting the directives outlined in E.O. 14276: 1) Promote the productive harvest of U.S. seafood resources by streamlining regulatory burdens while maintaining sustainability standards; 2) Modernize fisheries science and data systems to enable real-time business and management decisions, and 3) Strengthen domestic and global market access and domestic processing capacity to reduce the seafood trade deficit and remove barriers to fair competition for American seafood producers. The United States had a \$20.4 billion seafood trade deficit in 2023—nearly unchanged relative to 2020 after spiking to around \$26 billion in 2021 and 2022.

As one of the first steps in this effort, NOAA plans to seek public comment on suggestions to improve fisheries management and science, as outlined in E.O. 14276. Further, we have already initiated efforts to engage our council partners to identify recommendations to reduce burdens on domestic fishing and to increase production.

NOAA is working with the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and other Seafood Trade Task Force agencies to develop a comprehensive seafood trade strategy. Through the implementation of E.O. 14276, NOAA aims to improve and ensure fair market conditions for U.S. seafood producers. The strategy aims to improve access to foreign markets and address unfair trade practices of foreign nations, including IUU fishing and unjustified non-tariff trade barriers, while ensuring parity for U.S. seafood producers. The strategy will build upon NOAA Fisheries' existing efforts to prevent IUU fish and fish products from entering our markets, advance U.S. seafood competitiveness and conservation objectives through bilateral and multilateral trade agreements and organizations, and engage partners to address harmful fisheries subsidies that undermine effective fisheries conservation and management.

Conclusion

We all share a collective goal of healthy fisheries that provide food for Americans, promote economic benefits to the Nation, and can be sustained for future generations. Without clear, science-based rules, fair enforcement, and a shared commitment to sustainable management, short-term pressures can easily undermine progress toward restoring the social, economic, and environmental benefits of a healthy fishery. Opportunities exist to modernize aspects of our data collection efforts, increase America's seafood competitiveness, and level the playing field for American fishers. NOAA looks forward to work with Congress on fisheries science and management issues that builds on our successes and considers the needs of fish, fishermen, ecosystems, and communities.

Submissions for the Record by Rep. Ezell

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June 4, 2025

Representative Harriet Hageman
Chair
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Representative Val Hoyle
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chair Hageman and Ranking Member Hoyle:

Thank you for holding a hearing on President Trump's recent Executive Order 13921, Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth. We appreciate the opportunity to provide the committee information on both the opportunities to strengthen U.S. seafood competitiveness through expanding aquaculture in U.S. federal waters, and the challenges that currently hinder U.S. growth in this sector. Aquaculture is a sustainable complement to America's wild capture fisheries and its expansion is vital to U.S. seafood competitiveness. We urge the committee to support legislation that would create a regulatory pathway to responsibly advance this essential industry.

Stronger America Through Seafood (SATS), a coalition of industry partners representing businesses across America's seafood supply chain, works in support of increased U.S. production of healthful, sustainable, and affordable seafood. In particular, SATS has been working to educate federal policymakers on the need for legislation to support the expansion of aquaculture in U.S. federal waters. More aquaculture in U.S. waters presents a unique opportunity to build an American seafood industry that is a global leader in sustainable seafood production.

Expanding aquaculture in federal waters would strengthen our economy, reduce our nation's sizeable seafood trade deficit, ensure a more secure and resilient seafood supply chain, and help increase access to affordable, American-grown seafood.

Aquaculture has become the fastest growing food production sector in the world, responsible for nearly all global seafood supply growth since the 1990s. Yet, it remains an untapped industry in the U.S. due to the lack of a clear and efficient federal permitting process. The U.S. currently ranks only 18th in global aquaculture production, behind countries like China and Indonesia. As a result, we import up to 85% of the seafood we consume – half of which is estimated to come from fish farms in other countries.

The full document is available for viewing at:

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250604/118330/HHRG-119-II13-20250604-SD002-U1.pdf>

Submissions for the Record by Rep. Fry

Congress of the United States Washington, DC 20515

May 28, 2025

The Honorable Howard Lutnick
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Lutnick:

We write today regarding the management of snapper-grouper species in the South Atlantic and to express our strong support for a new state-led framework to ensure more effective, science-based stewardship of this critical fishery.

Prior proposals pushed by the Biden Administration on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), including expansive bottomfishing area closures and extremely brief recreational red snapper seasons (just one day in 2024), reflect a concerning dependence on deeply flawed data. NOAA's continued use of highly questionable Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) estimates has led to disastrous, economically harmful policies that unnecessarily restrict angler access and harm our coastal communities.

South Carolina's recreational fishing and boating economy contributes more than \$6.5 billion annually and supports over 27,000 jobs. From Murrells Inlet to Hilton Head, the snapper-grouper fishery is essential to our way of life and a foundational part of our marine economy. But instead of aligning management with the clear evidence of stock recovery, federal action continues to limit opportunity and erode public confidence.

Red snapper abundance in the South Atlantic has increased substantially. NOAA's own 2021 stock assessment confirms record levels of recruitment, improving age structure, and a population that is rebuilding ahead of schedule. However, instead of expanding fishing opportunities, NOAA has opted for blanket closures and overly restrictive seasons. This disconnect between science and regulation has fostered widespread distrust among recreational anglers and business owners across our districts.

This is not a new story. The Gulf of America faced a similar crisis in red snapper access and found a solution. Under the first Trump administration, Gulf states took the lead in data collection and management. That effort restored reasonable access, improved accountability, and

The full document is available for viewing at:

<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/II/II13/20250604/118330/HHRG-119-II13-20250604-SD003.pdf>

