Written Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries

Rick Bellavance
Chair, Council Coordination Committee
U.S. Regional Fishery Management Councils
Wednesday June 4, 2025
Hearing: *Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness*

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 generated $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:

- **New England:** 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, cancelling 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 cancelled. 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.