

Written Testimony for the Record

**Submitted to the House Committee on Natural Resources,
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries**

For the hearing “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness”

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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 over-simplification, 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 underreports 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.

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

² *Id.*

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

³ *Id.*

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.