

**MANAGING OUR NATIONS'S FISHERIES II: FOCUS ON THE FUTURE**  
**NOAA NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE PROGRESS REPORT**

**William T. Hogarth, Ph.D.**  
**Assistant Administrator for Fisheries**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

It is with great pleasure that I welcome everyone to *Managing Our Nation's Fisheries II: Focus on the Future*. This conference provides another opportunity to meet, share ideas and concerns, and look ahead to improving the management of our valuable marine fisheries resources.

Much has happened since the first *Managing Our Nation's Fisheries* conference in November 2003. The Regional Fishery Management Councils continue to take steps to ensure the stocks under their jurisdiction are well managed. I congratulate all the councils on their hard work.

New management programs have been developed and implemented, and we continue our progress in using an ecosystem approach to fisheries management. A crab rationalization program is in the final stages of being implemented in the North Pacific. A comprehensive program to manage the sea scallop fishery in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast through an area rotation program will maximize the scallop yield. A new fishery management plan for West Coast highly migratory species has established conservation measures. Four councils (New England, Mid-Atlantic, South Atlantic, and Gulf of Mexico) have received funds to advance ecosystem approaches to management in their areas by exploring goals and objectives and laying the groundwork for fisheries ecosystem plans.

Measures to end overfishing and rebuild stocks continue to be implemented to ensure sustainable fisheries. A red grouper rebuilding plan is in place in the Gulf of Mexico. New measures to rebuild the groundfish resource in New England have been implemented. Important yellowfin grouper spawning areas are protected in the Caribbean to reduce overfishing.

We've implemented a new National Bycatch Strategy. Collaborative industry partnerships have resulted in new methods and gear. The pelagic longline fishery for swordfish is once again open in the western Pacific and the Northeast distant waters of the Atlantic due to innovative methods to reduce interactions with sea turtles.

We are working to make the regulatory process more efficient and effective for the agency and our constituents. We are revising the Operational Guidelines for fisheries management; instituting advanced technology for e-rulemaking of notices, constituent comments and Federal Register filings; and delegating authority to our regional managers. Improving our processes and implementation of the National Environmental

Policy Act has helped improve the agency's litigation record from past years while reducing vulnerabilities. While the rate of lawsuits filed against us has remained fairly consistent, the number of cases defended successfully has increased markedly.

All of this hard work is showing results for the resource. The approximately 1,000 fish stocks managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act support a \$60 billion contribution to the U.S. economy through recreational and commercial fisheries and provide employment for more than 520,000 individuals. And I see an even more productive future for our fisheries. In our 2003 *Status of the Stocks Report*, four previously overfished fish stocks were declared fully rebuilt: Georges Bank winter flounder, Atlantic blacktip shark, and South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico stocks of yellowtail snapper. This is the most stocks declared rebuilt in a single year. At the same time, the number of stocks overfished or subject to overfishing continues to decline. Since 1997, 30 stocks have increased in population size to a level above their overfished thresholds, while 17 stocks were newly declared as overfished. We have already implemented rebuilding plans for well over 90 percent of overfished stocks to bring them back to their long-term sustainable levels.

September 2004 saw the release of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy's final report *An Ocean Blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. This report outlined numerous challenges for our community and provided an equal number of recommendations regarding fisheries governance and science for us to consider. The Administration's *U.S. Ocean Action Plan* released in December 2004 responds to the Commission report. The *Action Plan* identifies immediate and long-term actions for the future relative to over-arching ocean policy – establishment of a new Cabinet-Level Committee on Ocean Policy and passage of a NOAA Organic Act – as well as fisheries management – promoting greater use of market-based systems and expanding the NOAA fisheries survey fleet.

In October 2004, we held the first meeting of all regional council members since 1976. This workshop was attended by over 200 participants and facilitated a continuing dialog on several key issues – such as ecosystem approaches to fisheries management and best available science - that will continue during this conference. More importantly, the workshop offered an unique opportunity for council members from each corner of the Nation to hear, discuss, and yes, debate the best way to meet our goal of sustainable fisheries.

It is clear: the attention to the oceans in general, and fisheries management and research specifically, over the past year and a half has set the stage for this conference. I look forward to our discussions, both formal and informal. The agenda addresses the major issues facing us today – development of ecosystem approaches to fisheries management, stronger science, better management, improved individual fishing quota programs, reducing overfishing, rebuilding overfished stocks, and fisheries governance. As we move toward reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act as well as implementation of the U.S. Oceans Action Plan, this conference truly provides a needed focus on the future.

Let me close by posing some questions about where will fisheries be a decade from now:

- Will we have eliminated overfishing and ensured sustainability of the public’s living marine resources?
- Will dedicated access privileges have eliminated the “race to fish?”
- Will fishing capacity be managed to economically efficient levels?
- Will protected resource, habitat, climate and environmental interactions with fisheries be routinely modeled and resolved?
- Will coastal fishing communities be stabilized, and will fishing as a way of life be a viable career opportunity?
- Will we have maintained economic, social and cultural access to our living marine resources for other consumptive and non-consumptive uses?
- Will we have adequately conserved biodiversity of our ecosystems?
- Will we have adequately derived policies that evaluate and capture the greatest value to the nation from all sectors, not just fisheries, competing for some use or non-use of our oceans?

Since I can’t predict the future, I don’t have the answers. But, what happens in this conference over the next three days will strongly influence the answers to these questions, and I’m both excited and ready to be a part of it. I hope you are too. Thank you all for coming to help shape the future of fisheries.