

NORTH PACIFIC RESEARCH BOARD

*“Building a clear understanding of the North Pacific, Bering Sea, and Arctic Ocean ecosystems
that enables effective management and sustainable use of marine resources.”*

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Mr. Chairman, this morning I will comment on responsible fishery management and marine research. My perspectives are based on 21 years working for the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and my current position with the North Pacific Research Board.

1. The regional approach to fisheries management is robust

During the current reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, I have heard criticisms voiced of the regional council approach to fishery management. While I agree that fisheries management around the nation has not always been successful, I believe the basic foundations of regional management in the Act are robust and can provide for sustainable fisheries if diligently applied.

Senator Stevens commented this past May to the Senate Appropriations Committee that fisheries in various regions require different management approaches. I agree. Each region has unique and complex issues and tensions that collide in the management process. They must be addressed regionally.

Regional perspectives on how fisheries should be managed can differ sharply. Finding common ground for the details of management across the nation would not be easy and would have a high probability of being so watered down, as to be rendered ineffective in protecting stocks. The details of management must be constructed regionally. More progressive managers should not be hamstrung in their efforts to aggressively protect resources using innovative management approaches.

The regional council system also provides for enhanced access by the general public and users. Over the longer term, if we do not have buy-in to the regulatory process and resulting regime, there will be less chance of successful implementation.

2. Fishery management off Alaska had a strong foundation

In 1976, Senators Stevens and Magnuson gave us the legislative foundation needed for strong fishery management and conservation. Our early leaders then put those legislative precepts into action.

History has shown that fisheries management can only be as strong and protective as the people making the decisions. Many pressures are brought to bear on fishery managers, from local constituents up through the U.S. Congress. They impact the entire system and can seriously erode the ability and confidence of managers to make strong decisions in defense of the resource.

Alaska is very fortunate to have had strong leaders in its formative stages. The old adage about child rearing applies equally well to fishery management: “As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.” Many leaders helped shape the North Pacific Council and its fundamental approaches to fisheries management in the late 1970s.

I would single out one for special recognition, Elmer Rasmuson, Commissioner Ed Rasmuson’s father. He was our first chairman and on the Council for only 14 months, but his influence has helped guide our management for the past 25 years. He brought years of experience to the Council, gained through tough bilateral and multilateral negotiations chairing the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission. He was sharp as a tack and knew the right questions to ask. First and foremost, he had a healthy respect for science and research. Second, he was not afraid to curtail fishing when harvest quotas were reached. This combined principle of strict harvest quota management based on scientific understanding underpins our robust management today.

3. Responsible stewardship continues for Alaska fisheries

The Act provides national policy for fishery stewardship through the national standards and other provisions. We know, however, that the devil really is in the details of regional implementation. Here are the components of our continuing resource stewardship:

Good science and frequent stock assessments. The National Marine Fisheries Service provides us with frequent stock assessments. All scientific findings are reviewed by plan teams and the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), and there is confidence in them. The SSC meets during the Council week and the Council listens carefully to their recommendations.

Firm Catch limits. A basic tenet of our management is the total allowable catch (TAC) based on a scientifically-specified acceptable biological catch limit (ABC). When the TAC is reached, directed fishing ends. The Council never sets a TAC above the ABC.

Conservative management. The North Pacific Council maintains a 2 million metric ton cap on overall groundfish catch in the Bering Sea. This cap has withstood a General Accounting Office audit and is a primary reason for sustainable fisheries off Alaska. We also have strict overfishing definitions.

Monitoring and enforcement. Many good, responsible fishermen ply the waters off Alaska. But there also are the cowboys that work at or beyond the edge of the regulations. They value the current catch and dollar more than long term sustainability. The Council has implemented monitoring and enforcement provisions such as comprehensive observer coverage, vessel monitoring systems, full catch and bycatch reporting, and counting of discards against TAC attainment. There is effective enforcement by the Coast Guard and NMFS.

Capacity restrictions and community protection. Fishing capacity is limited through license systems, individual fishing quotas, and cooperatives. Though excess capacity remains, we no longer have the rampant influx of fishing power that plagues many of the world's fisheries and leads to a destructive race for fish. Community development quotas and other mechanisms help protect coastal communities.

Mitigation of fisheries impacts on other elements of ecosystem. Bycatch and discard limitations lessen the impact of target fisheries on other species. Full retention is required for several species as a disincentive to needless waste. Protective measures are in place for seabird and marine mammal populations. Habitat is protected through closed areas and gear restrictions.

4. We must move toward ecosystems-based management

Responsible stewardship over the longer term will require ecosystems-based management. Many factors affect fished species and other ecosystem components. We must know the causes of fluctuations in various species groups if we are to be successful in protecting the resources.

The North Pacific Council has taken steps in that direction by establishing an ecosystems committee and making ecosystems considerations part of its annual stock assessment reports. Several ecosystems indicators have been identified that will be used to inform management decisions and hopefully lessen the impact of fisheries on the ecosystem. The Council also has implemented many protective measures for other components of the ecosystem such as seabirds, marine mammals, and forage fish.

I encourage legislative changes that may prompt regional councils to move toward ecosystems-based management, but we must recognize that extensive information is needed to do it successfully. We must know more about ecosystems dynamics and responses to fishing pressure to do more than just pay lip service to ecosystems-based management.

5. Comprehensive marine research is needed

Senator Stevens once again has shown his commitment to long term resource stewardship in the North Pacific by providing the means for generating knowledge about ecosystems dynamics. He established the North Pacific Research Board in 1997 to identify and support research necessary to build a clear understanding of the North Pacific, Bering Sea, and Arctic Ocean ecosystems that will enable effective management and sustainable use of marine resources.

The Board has contracted the National Research Council to help develop a dynamic, comprehensive, long range science plan for the next 10-20 years. It will identify major research themes, with emphasis on marine resource management issues. We expect the plan to provide a durable foundation for research that will shed light on how the ecosystem works and how fisheries may be managed to lessen their impacts.

The Board anticipates funding about \$10-12 million in research each year and will seek collaboration and coordination with other agencies and entities to partner and leverage research. We will request proposals for research each fall, and will attempt to map out research being done off Alaska and fill critical needs. We hope to field a coherent program that leads to a comprehensive understanding of the ecosystem.

6. We must leave a legacy of better science and understanding to enable successful stewardship

Chairman Rasmuson believed that sound science and better understanding provided the best foundation for marine stewardship. Senator Stevens has provided the mechanism for building that knowledge base.

I cannot predict exactly where our new marine research program will take us over the next 30 years, but the twig is just now being bent and the eventual tree of knowledge shaped. I fervently hope that when the next generation of managers testifies before a future commission on ocean policy, they will be able to say that the fishery resource is still abundant and sustainable, and that one of the keys to that success was the foundation of knowledge being established today by the North Pacific Research Board.

That truly will be a legacy worth leaving.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.