

**Fisheries Issues for the Ocean Policy Commission Hearings**  
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**American Fisheries Society Public Comment**

by  
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**Introduction**

The American Fisheries Society (AFS) is an international, professional, and scientific non-profit organization of more than 9,000 fisheries scientists and managers, which makes it the world's largest organization dedicated to the fisheries profession and stewardship of fishery resources. The mission of AFS is to improve conservation and sustainability of fishery resources and aquatic ecosystems by advancing fisheries and aquatic science and promoting the development of fisheries professionals. Throughout its 131-year history, AFS has advocated science-based policy, as its leaders and members have worked to bring important resource issues to the attention of the government and public. Toward that end, we welcome the opportunity to speak before this Commission to raise issues we feel are vital to the conservation and maintenance of our marine resources and provide suggestions for achieving these goals.

**Key Issues**

AFS has identified 3 key issues that should be addressed by the Commission during the course of its tenure:

1) Improve Fishery Management

Despite passage and implementation of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and its various re-authorizations, marine fish stocks continue to be over-exploited and additional fisheries have become imperiled. Single-species management must be abandoned in favor of multi-species and ecosystem-level approaches. These include the creation of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) as a complement rather than a substitute for new management strategies and recognizing the effects of various fishing gears on critical habitats and non-target species.

Implementation of Magnuson-Stevens has been problematic and it is not achieving its goals, as evidenced by the continued decline of our marine resources. Researchers, managers, and policy-makers must identify where the system is faltering and failing to achieve management and conservation goals and re-evaluate those goals and the methods used to achieve them. Toward that end, the relationship between the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the regional Fishery Management Councils needs to be reviewed and restructured. The Councils can be heavily influenced by industry and stakeholder groups and are chiefly concerned with economic utilization of specific fishery resources rather than the general health of marine resources. NMFS provides management recommendations but implementing management action is up to the Councils. NMFS needs the authority to supercede the Councils when ineffective or potentially harmful management decisions are adopted by the Councils.

Additionally, NMFS management objectives for various resource components may directly conflict. Congress has mandated that NMFS maximize fisheries output while also protecting endangered species (through the Endangered Species Act) and marine mammals (through the Marine Mammals Protection Act). These conflicts often result in litigation from both conservation and industry groups alike. Congress must provide NMFS with a clearer mandate as to how to resolve these conflicts before legal action is necessary.

#### 2) Develop a national coordinated research program for marine resources

Basic marine research is underfunded and funding opportunities are disappearing. The Food and Agriculture Organization ([www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)), in the 2000 State of World Fisheries and Agriculture report indicates that, "(t)here is a shortage of general information on the relationship between the state of marine ecosystems and fishing." National level funding opportunities are needed to enhance basic scientific understanding of how estuarine and marine ecosystems function and how fishing activities interact with these ecosystems. Most funded research is directed toward those species deemed *economically* valuable; recognizing the *ecological value* of a species is just as if not more important. Watershed-level research into the functioning of estuaries and the effects of coastal development on ecosystem health are also necessary. Integrating the biological component of estuaries and marine communities with the physical environment in which these ecosystems thrive should be a priority research area. There is a

need for long-term research into marine ecosystem functioning. Components of marine ecosystems may have recruitment cycles on the order of years or decades. Directed, long-term research is needed to identify and understand these cycles. NSF's Long Term Ecological Research (LTER) program may serve as a model for such research.

3)Develop a vision and common objectives for fisheries, and a plan for managing living marine resources to achieve those objectives

Researchers, managers, and policy makers must develop a coordinated vision for America's fisheries that integrates for the many and varied uses of our marine environment, from commercial and recreational fishing, oil and gas exploration, coastal development, to basic ecosystem functions that support our valued fisheries. This vision should be developed through a dialogue with an educated public. Realistic goals must be set for our fishery resources and undesirable changes in ecosystems that should not occur as a result of management decisions must be identified. Management decisions should be adaptive; monitoring of management results should allow updating of management decisions to better address the long-term objectives of fishery management plans. We must provide incentives for conservation and efficient use of marine resources. Again, we must understand the interconnectedness of marine ecosystems and not revert to single-species management. We need an integrated system of data collection, decision-making, enforcement and monitoring.

**Regional Issues**

Some issues identified in but not necessarily specific to the southeast include:

- identification and protection of Essential Fish Habitat
- landscape/basin level effects on estuarine function (e.g., freshwater inflow)
- effects of trawl gear on bottom habitat and non-target species (i.e., bycatch)
- coastal development effects on estuarine function, particularly water quality effects
- implementation of Marine Protected Areas
- protection of right whale calving areas
- effects of dredging and harbor development on estuarine and upland communities