



Building Resiliency At NOAA Fisheries

Navigating the Next Four Years

December 15, 2020

INTRODUCTION

The [Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee](#) (MAFAC) welcomes the incoming leadership of the Department of Commerce and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. MAFAC has prepared this report to share with you our consensus recommendations to assist your transition team and incoming leadership. We look forward to working with you.

MAFAC was established in 1970 to advise the Secretary of Commerce on all living marine resource matters under the purview of the Department of Commerce. MAFAC members evaluate and assess national programs and priorities to provide recommendations and direction. MAFAC members are experts in their fields, and cover commercial and recreational fishing, aquaculture, seafood processing, seafood marketing and sales, consumer interests, resilience of coastal communities, and protected resources. MAFAC excels at resolving difficult issues and potential resource user conflicts through open discussion and collaboration. The Committee complies fully with the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

We have identified marine resources issues that are pressing, particularly in light of the challenges posed by climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, to U.S. fisheries and fisheries science and management.

These recommendations focus on needs for science, management, and investment to address:

- Integrated ecosystem management and responses to climate change
- Increasing U.S. consumption of U.S. seafood
- Aquaculture: Growing healthy seafood, jobs, and preserving working waterfronts
- Improving recreational fishing opportunities
- Offshore ocean use including offshore energy and wind development
- Protecting critical protected resources

INTEGRATED ECOSYSTEM MANAGEMENT AND RESPONSES TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Changing climate and ocean conditions, COVID-19 impacts, and economic shutdowns affect fisheries, fishing communities, coastal and ocean habitats, and protected resources in diverse ways and create uncertainty and instability in existing management systems. Effective, sustainable management must have a well-informed understanding of how the systems are changing and access to tools and resources to manage for the economic and environmental resilience and sustainability of these systems. We recommend continued support of, and partnership with, the Regional Fisheries Management Council system and priority on safe

planning and execution of 2021 NOAA surveys, while expanding best practices for integrated ecosystem based fisheries management to facilitate wise responses to climate change:

1. Expand investment in climate and environmental data collection as well as science and technology innovation including electronic reporting and citizen science while incorporating information gathered from these activities into stock assessments, ecosystem modeling, and other analyses to support management.
2. Encourage innovative management approaches at the regional and community level to promote more resilient fisheries, fishing communities, and seafood industries. This includes using tools such as cooperative research, adaptive management, exempted fishing permits, and fishery-focused funding opportunities (e.g., Saltonstall-Kennedy, Fisheries Innovation Fund, others) to support innovation.
3. Prepare and prioritize methods that effectively help communities manage fishery disasters associated with a changing environment as climate change brings more fisheries disruptions in the future. This includes encouraging fishery disaster planning and mitigation, effective emergency response, and ensuring efficient management and processing of payments.

These activities will result in the following positive impacts:

1. Expanded investment in innovative science and technology will greatly enhance the net benefit to the nation through optimal resource use and reduction of risk.
2. Advances in fisheries management methods will promote engagement and trust in the system.
3. Marine resources and communities that rely on them will be prepared to adapt to change ensuring economic and environmental sustainability.

INCREASE U.S. CONSUMPTION OF U.S. SEAFOOD

In this time of recovery and building resiliency, we highly recommend attention and support for actions to boost the production and promotion of domestically caught and cultured seafood, using all the tools and authorities provided to NOAA Fisheries, including little used sections of the [Magnuson-Stevens Act \(MSA\)](#) and the underutilized [Fish and Seafood Promotion Act of 1986 \(FSPA\)](#). These actions will benefit the American fishing and aquaculture industry, coastal communities, and public health:

1. Act on MAFAC's [recommendation](#) to reestablish an industry-led '**National Seafood Council.**' This will elevate the narrative of the nutritional value of seafood, the sustainability of the management practices of U.S. wild capture and aquaculture seafood products, and increase U.S. consumption of U.S. seafood.
2. Support the competitiveness of the entire U.S. fishing industry, especially in a post-COVID-19 world. Companies need additional access to capital, debt relief, H2B worker visas, training, and support adding direct-to-consumer programs to their business models.
3. Remove barriers to sustainably produced domestic seafood. Where possible, reduce trade barriers for the export of U.S. caught seafood, and support the efforts of the Interagency Seafood Trade Task Force to promote 'fair market access for United States seafood products.'

4. 'Level the playing field' for U.S. fishermen and aquaculture producers. Ensure imported seafood products from fisheries and aquaculture outside the U.S. meet conservation, environmental, and bycatch-reduction measures equivalent to those required of U.S. fishermen and aquaculture producers. Section 610 of the MSA provides the tool to accomplish this. We encourage the incoming administration to seek methods to do the same for the aquaculture sector.
5. Restart the Fisheries Promotion Fund in the FSPA to allow for Congressional flow of deposits to support the National Seafood Council with a recommendation of no less than \$10M annually with a need of \geq \$25M annually for 5-year renewable cycles. Consider funding from Saltonstall-Kennedy tariff funds, without compromising the NOAA NMFS budget.

These initiatives will result in the following positive impacts:

1. Increased seafood consumption will increase the health of U.S. consumers.
2. Promoting consumption of U.S. seafood by U.S. consumers supports an environmentally sustainable seafood industry.
3. Increasing sustainable domestic fisheries and aquaculture production will help to reduce the needs for imports, which in turn will contribute to employment opportunities in the U.S. seafood industry and food security.

AQUACULTURE: GROWING HEALTHY SEAFOOD, JOBS, AND PRESERVING WORKING WATERFRONTS

U.S. aquaculture is a \$1.5 billion industry and ranks 16th in global production. NOAA Fisheries currently only invests \$13.1 million annually to manage this growth sector. The sustainable growth of domestic marine aquaculture supports economic growth and environmental resilience in coastal communities, as well as healthy oceans and a healthy population. We recommend prioritizing the growth of U.S. marine aquaculture by implementing the following priority initiatives and ensuring NOAA has adequate resources to carry them out:

1. Create and implement the [National Aquaculture Development Plan](#) and the establishment of [Aquaculture Opportunity Areas](#).
2. Advance Congressional action on a national legal framework for aquaculture expansion in federal waters.
3. Continue [The Subcommittee on Aquaculture](#) that supports interagency cooperation among all federal agencies that work in the arena of U.S. aquaculture and covers: Science and Technology, Economic Development, and Regulations.

These activities will result in the following positive impacts:

1. Economic Development, job creation, preservation of endangered working waterfronts, and reduction of the \$17 billion seafood trade deficit.
2. Improved human nutrition for a healthy U.S. population and reduced public health costs.
3. Improved food security for the Nation.
4. Reductions of greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation of climate change.

IMPROVE RECREATIONAL FISHING OPPORTUNITIES

[Outdoor recreation](#) accounted for more than 2% of the country's gross domestic product in 2019, with recreational fishing and boating as the largest contributor. Increased industry and license sales indicate that participation in boating and fishing have increased in 2020 because of COVID-19. The Agency should continue and expand its focus on improving recreational fisheries management by building on the 2018 [National Saltwater Recreational Fishing Summit](#) themes and outcomes and the Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act (Modern Fish Act) to take the following actions:

1. Aggressively pursue refining the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) as outlined in the [2017 National Academy of Sciences review of MRIP](#) and the forthcoming [Data and Management Strategies for Recreational Fisheries with Annual Catch Limits](#) report to:
 - a. Improve recreational data collection, a key component to recreational management, including implementing recommendations of the MAFAC [Defining the Universe of Offshore Anglers](#) report, where appropriate.
 - b. Expand recreational data collection partnerships with state and NGO partners.
 - c. Dedicate sufficient resources to the MRIP Fishing Effort Survey Regional Transition Teams to resolve concerns and coordinate with state fishery managers and regional stakeholders, including the Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils' [Joint Workgroup](#) to implement alternative recreational management approaches explicitly authorized in the Modern Fish Act.
2. Support Council implementation of the [GAO Allocation Report](#) recommendations to develop documented processes for allocation reviews to increase transparency.
3. Provide scientific and policy guidance and support as pilot programs are developed.
4. Generate robust socioeconomic estimates of recreational fisheries to support management decisions.

These activities will result in the following positive impacts:

1. Better fisheries management by improving the timeliness, accuracy, and precision of recreational catch data and socioeconomic information.
2. Advance coordination, build relationships, and improve trust between NOAA Fisheries, Councils, states, and stakeholders.

OFFSHORE OCEAN USE INCLUDING OFFSHORE ENERGY AND WIND DEVELOPMENT

As various interest groups explore development and conservation strategies for offshore ocean resources, the Department of Commerce, and NOAA Fisheries in particular, should consider an expanded role in monitoring and integrating planning activities to achieve national best use objectives. The rapid development of offshore wind energy facilities requires increasing NOAA Fisheries ability to evaluate all potential impacts to ocean uses, ecosystems, and species, including species classified as Protected Resources such as marine mammals, seabirds, and sea turtles. We recommend the following initiatives, outlined in part in our [July 2020 Report of](#)

[the Offshore Wind Ad Hoc Working Group](#), continue and expand to ensure best practices for offshore use:

1. Increase interagency communication, coordination and oversight between NOAA Fisheries, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Responsible Offshore Development Alliance (RODA), and other agencies for assessing, monitoring and managing marine resources.
2. Establish and maintain open lines of communication regarding marine resource use between fishermen and other stakeholders with all federal partners.
3. Ensure efficient and comprehensive monitoring and oversight of valuable national offshore marine assets and services.
4. Promote fair, equitable, and sustainable use of ecosystem services while considering the socio-economic benefits and losses associated with allocation of marine resources.
5. Expand funding and capacity for key NOAA Fisheries offices involved in environmental reviews needed to expand offshore renewable energy siting, beginning with the Fisheries Science Centers where offshore renewable energy is in development or contemplated.

These activities will result in the following positive impacts:

1. Improved joint responsibility for fair and equitable use and evaluation of impacts to fisheries and marine wildlife and risks associated with habitat loss.
2. Stakeholders (e.g., government, energy companies, fishermen, and the public) are represented in the development of new enterprises, establishing trust, ensuring consideration of multiple dimensions of value and fully informed decision making in the use of marine resources.
3. Expanded support of science and management for development and efficient use of offshore energy sources such as wind, access to minerals, and potentially as a source for clean water, while conserving and maintaining the existing benefits of ecosystem services such as sustainable seafood production, carbon sequestration, and conservation of marine biodiversity.
4. Avoid or mitigate for losses to current stakeholders and local communities resulting from development of new uses of offshore marine resources while increasing the net benefit to the nation.

PROTECTING CRITICAL ENDANGERED RESOURCES

One of the most salient Protected Resources concerns is large whale entanglements in fishing gear. North Atlantic right whales face a number of threats throughout their migration as they interact with multiple ocean uses. Currently, there are fewer than 100 breeding North Atlantic right whale females; this population's migratory range transits several nations' management jurisdictions. If the recent population decline continues, these animals may be functionally extinct by 2040. More than 80% of right whales have scars from entanglements in fishing gear, and these interactions affect their ability to feed and reproduce. The MAFAC recommends that NOAA Fisheries continue to allocate resources toward and support efforts to reduce large whale entanglements in fishing gear. This includes the following:

1. Strengthen, assist, and promote research on gear modifications (e.g., ropeless and on-call gear marking technologies) and changing whale distribution in response to climate change.
2. Support state, regional, national, and international multi-stakeholder groups currently working to address large whale-fisheries interactions (including Take Reduction and Implementation Teams, Interstate Marine Fisheries Commissions, State Working groups, workshops on implementing new gear technologies, etc.).
3. Allocate resources to implement protections, and invest in the development and dissemination of innovations to reduce interactions.

Endangered Southern Resident killer whales also require immediate attention. As of September 2020, only 74 whales remain. Multiple factors are believed to contribute to their population decline including environmental contaminants, noise, and decreased prey availability (quantity and quality). We strongly encourage NOAA Fisheries to do the following:

1. Strengthen, assist, and support existing and potentially new multi-stakeholder partnerships and task forces focused on addressing one or more of these threats including salmon recovery (including advancing the recommendations from the Columbia Basin Partnership Task Force), reduction of pollutants, and rerouting and reduction of vessel traffic.
2. Allocate resources to enforce existing and new protections, and to invest in habitat conservation and other direct conservation measures.
3. Support continued research into applied methods to address these primary threats.

These activities will result in the following positive impacts:

1. Prevent the population decline and functional extinction of two whale populations under the protection of both the MMPA and ESA.
2. Promote multi-stakeholder collaboration and problem solving to address two wicked problems.
3. Facilitate creative, applied methods to mitigate negative impacts that might be applied to other situations in the future.

CONCLUSION

MAFAC appreciates this opportunity to share our views with the incoming leadership of the Department of Commerce and NOAA and we stand ready to work with you to address these critical issues.