Ensuring Sustainable U.S. Fisheries



The United States is a world leader in sustainable fisheries management. Implementation of strong, science-based management measures has helped to curb overfishing, protect habitat, and rebuild overfished fish populations. Healthy fisheries support thriving coastal communities, profitable fishing businesses, and a safe and sustainable seafood supply for our nation. While there is still work to be done – particularly in the face of changing ocean conditions – these successes can be traced back to our primary federal fisheries law: the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA).

WHAT IS THE MSA?

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) governs fisheries in U.S. federal waters. Facing declining fish stocks and intense fishing pressure from foreign fleets, Congress passed the bipartisan MSA in 1976, banning foreign fleets from waters within 200 nautical miles of our coasts and establishing a comprehensive federal fishery management system.

Reauthorizations in 1996 and 2007 strengthened the law by requiring conservation and management measures that end overfishing, promote rebuilding of overfished stocks, protect essential fish habitat, minimize unintentional catch, and improve fisheries science.

Under the MSA, eight regional fishery management councils develop science-based, regionally tailored fishery management measures under the oversight of NOAA Fisheries.

The councils comprise members intended to represent the broad communities invested in sustainable fisheries, such as commercial and recreational fishermen, tribal representatives, federal and state resource managers, scientists, and NGOs. Any management measures developed and adopted by the councils must be approved (or disapproved) by NOAA Fisheries based on consistency with the MSA and other applicable laws.

KEY DEFINITIONS

FISH STOCK
Species or geographical grouping of fish that are managed as one unit.

OVERFISHING
When the rate of catch is too high to be sustainable (i.e., fish are caught too quickly)

BYCATCH
Unintentionally caught fish.

CATCH LIMITS
The amount of fish (usually by stock) that can be caught in one year.

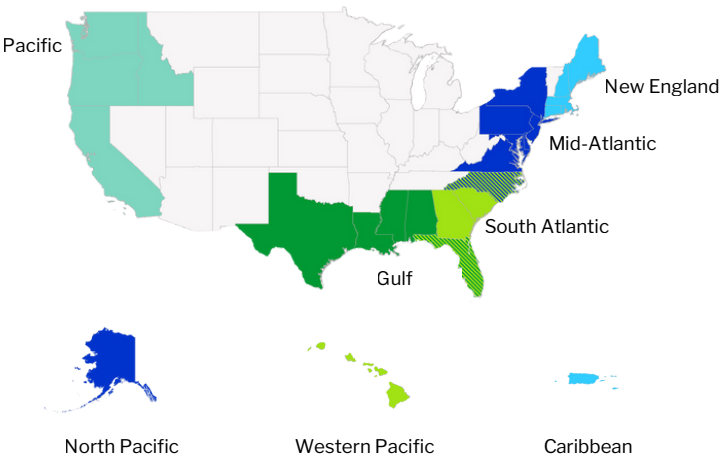
OVERFISHED
When the stock size is too small to ensure sustainable yields. Overfished stocks need to be rebuilt to ensure healthy ecosystems and economic access.

WHY IS THE MSA IMPORTANT?

Hard-earned successes under the MSA have produced substantial ecological, economic, and social benefits for the nation. Management under the MSA has helped to rebuild 50 stocks since 2000. In 2022, U.S. commercial fisheries landed 8.3 billion pounds of seafood valued at $5.9 billion.

Central to the MSA's success are its ten "National Standards." The National Standards are principles that federal fishery management measures must comply with to help ensure sustainable fishery management. For example, management measures must prevent overfishing while optimizing catch, use the best available science, and minimize economic impact on fishing communities.

MAP OF REGIONAL FISHERY COUNCILS



HOW CAN WE STRENGTHEN OUR FISHERIES?

Our ocean and fisheries are facing new and emerging management challenges due to changing ocean conditions. For example, fish on the Atlantic coast are shifting north to seek cooler and deeper waters, while marine heat waves have had drastic impacts on important Pacific coast fisheries.

The MSA has laid the groundwork for managers to support sustainable U.S. fisheries, but we can take additional steps to increase our fisheries' resilience. Key steps include:

- Monitoring, predicting, and responding to impacts of changing oceans in management
- Funding the science and data needed to understand our changing ocean environment
- Ensuring management remains science- and conservation-based
- Promoting community resilience, particularly in response to fishery disasters

REGIONAL CONTEXT - NORTH PACIFIC AND PACIFIC

Key priorities for sustainable fisheries and fishing communities in our regions:

- Support rural communities and access for subsistence use of resources for continuation of way of life
- Re-anchor access in rural communities and infrastructure necessary to support the fleet
- Facilitate access for new entrants
- Support adequate funding and staffing for NOAA and Councils
- Support working waterfronts and services coastal communities depend on
- Recognize cultural significance of fisheries resources and importance of domestic food supply