

Opening Statement

The Honorable Ed Markey

Committee on Natural Resources

Thursday, December 1, 2011

Magnuson-Stevens Act Legislative Hearing

From Cape Cod to the Florida Keys to the Kenai Peninsula, fishing is an integral part of America's coastal communities. Healthy fisheries support healthy coastal economies.

Unfortunately, the fishing industry hit rough waters in the 1990s, battling a perfect storm of depleted fish stocks, pollution, and warming seas. However, amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1996 and in 2006 steered our fisheries toward more sustainable practices. In 2010, the United States brought 8.2 billion pounds of seafood ashore, valued at \$4.5 billion. Science-based management of the oceans' bounty by regional stakeholders supported this success.

Our nation has some of the most diverse and productive coastal waters in the world, including the most valuable port in the United States in New Bedford, Massachusetts, represented by Congressman Barney Frank. Since 1976, the Magnuson-Stevens Act has sought to preserve this abundance for American fishermen by requiring fishery managers to end overfishing. The Act also recognized the importance of regional decision-making by creating Regional Fishery Management Councils. These stakeholder-governed Councils are responsible for deciding how many fish can be caught and by whom. In 1996, with many of our fisheries depleted, Congress established a ten-year target to restore depleted populations to healthy levels. Chronic overfishing continued, so in 2006, Congress reauthorized the Act to ensure that fishing limits are in place for all stocks by the end of 2011.

Now we have reached a historical moment where NOAA scientists and Regional Fishery Management Councils have plotted a course to end overfishing. So far, twenty-three stocks have been rebuilt and most others are reaching healthy levels. Rebuilding all fish stocks could increase the value of commercial fisheries by over 50 percent, increasing their total value to over \$6 billion annually. By early next year, we will have in place the tools needed to end overfishing for all stocks. Sustainable fish stocks provide the certainty and stability that our fishing communities need.

I am concerned that some of the bills we will examine today will either legislate fisheries management decisions best left to the regional councils or legislate flexibility that already exists in the current law. For example, fifty-six percent of fish stocks already have extended rebuilding timelines due to existing flexibility in the law.

Just as technology brought us the ability to catch more fish, science-based decision-making will help ensure fish for future generations of fishermen. Unfortunately, just as we are asking NOAA to do more and better stock assessments, the Republican Majority wants to cut NOAA's funding, harming their ability to continue providing vital services.

The appropriation bill passed last month reduced the funding levels for NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service down to 2005 levels. We know improved data collection and stock assessments allow NOAA to make better and timelier fishery management decisions and we must supply them with the resources to do their job. My colleagues from Massachusetts, Congressmen Frank and Keating, have put forward two bills that would direct additional money to fishery assessments, and I support that effort. Mr. Pallone's Coastal Jobs Creation Act directs federal investment into coastal communities. These bills deserve the support of this committee and swift action on the House floor.

In evaluating the bills before us today, we should consider whether each bill supports strong science in fisheries management and respects the regional expertise that makes Councils the appropriate place for making decisions. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", an albatross leads the Ancient Mariner out of desolate seas. The Magnuson-Stevens Act has the same potential to guide us to the end of overfishing. We should not repeat the Mariner's mistake and harm what is leading America's fisheries into saf