

## UNITED STATES FISHERY MANAGEMENT

# A Helpful Guide



Photo: © 2013 Barbara Kinney/Ocean Conservancy. All Rights Reserved

### What Makes Ocean Fisheries so Important to the U.S.?

We are an ocean nation. Fisheries impact nearly every American, and fish are some of our most valuable natural resources. Fishing puts seafood on menus and dinner tables nationwide, provides millions of people with recreational opportunities, and connects us to our cultural practices and traditions.

Vibrant fisheries rely on maintaining thriving fish populations and healthy coastal and ocean ecosystems. This means that effective fishery management is essential to maintain our fisheries and our fish resources.

### How Are American Fisheries Actually Managed?

#### The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA)

The United States is considered a leader in fishery management thanks to one law that every ocean and seafood lover should know about: the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). This law, which was enacted in 1976, governs fishing in U.S. federal ocean waters (from 3-200 nautical miles offshore). Over time, the MSA has reshaped management of our nation's fisheries and reduced harmful practices that were having drastic impacts on our fish populations and fisheries. Many challenges remain; for example, nearly a fifth of stocks remain overfished. There is still work to be done to secure the sustainability of our fisheries and respond to growing challenges like climate change so that fishermen have plentiful fish to catch now and in the future.

The MSA created eight regional fishery management councils that are each able to tailor how their fisheries are managed to meet regional needs. The councils are made up of individuals representing different communities and sectors that are nominated by state governors. Each council is responsible for planning and recommending fishery management measures to the U.S. secretary of commerce, who implements management.

### FISHERIES FORM AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR ECONOMY

In 2023, there were:

- 8.4 billion pounds of fish landed by commercial fishermen;
- 204 million trips taken by salt-water anglers throughout the country;
- \$319 billion in sales impacts generated by commercial and recreational fishing;
- and 2.1 million jobs supported through fishing activities.



Photo: NOAA ONMS

## 10 Facts About The MSA

1. It was enacted in 1976 with bipartisan support and is the landmark law that governs fishing in federal ocean waters. It has made U.S. fishery management a model for the rest of the world.
2. It lays out 10 “national standards” as guiding principles for management actions. The first standard requires fisheries to be managed to give “the greatest overall benefit to the nation.”
3. It prevents overfishing by using science to determine the limit on the amount of fish that fishermen can catch each year—and accountability for when that limit is exceeded.
4. It provides the chance for different regions of the country to address their own unique issues through 8 regional fishery management councils. Council members are experts and stakeholders that work together to develop management solutions.
5. It requires detailed plans of action to rebuild fish stocks that have been overfished. Since 2000, 51 fish stocks have been rebuilt using plans that set timelines for recovery.
6. It holds everyone catching fish accountable, including commercial and recreational fishing sectors. It also mandates that the total allowed fish catch is allocated fairly and equitably among sectors and states.
7. It manages 506 diverse fish stocks, many of which are in relatively good shape. Since 2000, the percentage of stocks undergoing overfishing has decreased by 76% and the percentage of stocks that are overfished has decreased by 58%, but signs of progress in these trends have recently stalled.
8. It does not prescribe any management specific decisions, but it does lay down the guiding principles for the process of achieving and managing sustainable fishing.
9. It has been strengthened over time through reauthorizations, most notably in 1996 and 2006. These changes have created more accountability and ensured that science is the foundation of management.
10. It took four decades and lots of sacrifice to become what it is today. Many people played an important role in instituting the sustainable catch limits that put an end to overfishing and make stock rebuilding possible.



Photo © Thinkstock/Mark Don

## SOME FISHERIES TERMS TO KNOW

**Annual Catch Limit (ACL):** the amount of fish that can be caught sustainably by fishermen each year. Set using the best available science and data.

**Fish stock:** A group of fish based on species, area, or other category that are capable of being managed as a unit. A fish stock may be one or several species.

**Overfishing:** When more fish are caught in a year than is sustainable. Think of it like spending more money than you are earning.

**Overfished:** When the population size is too small to ensure sustainable yields in the future. Think of it like declaring bankruptcy.

**Rebuilt:** A previously overfished stock that has been brought back to the target population size that supports sustainable catch. The MSA mandates that overfished fish stocks be rebuilt in “as short as possible,” but in not more than 10 years, with some exceptions. In practice, over half of stocks in rebuilding plans have timelines over 10 years.