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The MSA at 50

Successes and Challenges of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act

Fifty years ago, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, or MSA, was first enacted and became the primary law governing the management of fisheries in U.S. federal waters.

The law was originally focused on reducing competition from foreign fleets in American waters and finding a balance between conservation and fishery development. Through improvements made over time, the law has evolved to support a unique science-based approach that has become a model for sustainable fishery management around the world.

The MSA and the management system it established have led to significant successes for fish stocks and fisheries. At the same time, fisheries are facing many challenges—both new and old. There's more work to be done to secure gains made and enable continued progress so that the science and management of U.S. fisheries can deliver the most benefit for our nation and our ocean.

Successes

Preventing overfishing and constraining catch within limits. The requirement to prevent overfishing is a core element of sustainable management. The 2007 reauthorization of the MSA added requirements for science-based annual catch limits for managed stocks and accountability when those limits were exceeded. At the end of 2025, just 4% of stocks were experiencing overfishing, down from 20% two decades ago, and the majority of fishing was kept within the annual catch limit determined to be sustainable.

Leveraging a strong science-based approach. The MSA establishes requirements and processes that help ensure the best available science is used to make decisions about fisheries. NOAA Fisheries and its partners provide world-class data and information for managers, including on the health of fish stocks, the status of ecosystems and the well-being of fishing communities.

Rebuilding more than fifty overfished stocks. Bringing stocks that are overfished back to healthy levels is a key objective because rebuilt stocks provide greater benefit to fishermen and the ecosystem. Amendments to the MSA in 1996 required managers to make plans that rebuild overfished stocks as quickly as possible. Combined with catch limits and accountability measures that help achieve the necessary levels of fishing, these rebuilding plans have resulted in 52 stocks being rebuilt since 2000.

Enabling regionally tailored management guided by national standards. The Regional Fishery Management Council system offers flexibility for managers to address the unique needs of America's many different fisheries and fishing communities. This system brings federal and state managers, fishing interests, scientists, non-governmental organizations, and the public to the decision-making table.

Challenges

Ensuring all stocks are rebuilt. Nearly as many stocks still need rebuilding as have been rebuilt. Many stocks fail to rebuild within their target timeframe, enter repeated rebuilding plans, and are subject to overfishing while in rebuilding. Rebuilding failure limits the potential of our fishery resources.

Including many perspectives. The council system can favor specific fishing interests and exclude others entirely. Participants are often frustrated by a lack of transparent consideration of tradeoffs among sectors. Tribes and subsistence fisheries in particular are not well-represented in the law or in management.

Better supporting fishing communities. In the midst of challenging economic conditions for many American fishermen, the MSA could better support fishing communities whose livelihoods depend on a healthy ocean and fisheries. Key issues include preserving working waterfronts, enabling fishing community participation, and better handling of fishery disasters.

Modernizing fisheries data. Systems for delivering fishery data to managers and fishermen are often siloed and slow. Thoughtful updates could harness new technologies, integrate data from many sources, facilitate use of electronic technologies, and improve recreational data.

Improving recreational management. Management of recreational fisheries presents unique challenges that impact the health of certain fisheries, including improving data collection, ensuring accountability, and understanding cumulative impacts on fish stocks and ecosystems.

Reducing bycatch. The MSA has requirements to minimize the amount and impact of bycatch (fish and other animals that are caught or discarded that fishermen do not want, cannot sell or are not allowed to keep). While new innovations and approaches have successfully reduced bycatch, there are still many fisheries where bycatch has damaging impacts on the fishery and ecosystem and on Tribes and subsistence fisheries.

Handling changing ocean conditions. Climate change and other ecosystem shifts are already affecting fisheries, but managers have struggled to adapt their approaches. Without forecasting and responding to changing conditions, there is a risk increased fishery disasters and unexpected stock declines harm our fishing communities. Specific issues include reduced stock productivity, stocks shifting their ranges in response to changing conditions, new interactions among species, and increased likelihood of extreme weather events.

Sustaining ecosystems. Resilient fish stocks depend on healthy ecosystems. This means having healthy habitat, ensuring a thriving base of forage fish, minimizing bycatch, and limiting the impacts of fishing. Fishery management could do more to improve the conditions of essential habitats and adopt ecosystem-based fisheries management principles and approaches, including increasing ecosystem monitoring and forecasting and integrating ecosystem information into management decisions.

One last challenge? **Limited resources and funding for fisheries science and management,** which keeps fishery management system under the MSA from reaching its full potential.



Photo credit: Greg McFall/NOAA