

Talking Points

Deputy Secretary Sampson

Meeting of Regional Fishery Management Council Chairs, Executive Directors and

New Members

November 1, 2006

It's a pleasure to be here today. During my time with the Commerce Department I've come to appreciate the role that the members of the Regional Fishery Management Councils, the Executive Directors and staff, as well as Dr. Hogarth and his staff, play in the difficult task of managing our Nation's living marine resources. It is not an easy role, but being true stewards of the resource should be our goal no matter how difficult.

I'd like to begin by discussing the legacy of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, Department of Commerce officials, and current Council members. This October represented the 30th anniversary of Congress approving our landmark fisheries management legislation, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, and the 10th anniversary of the Sustainable Fisheries Act. When Congress passed the Sustainable Fisheries Act in 1996, they found, in part "A national program for the conservation and management of the fishery resources of the United States is necessary to prevent overfishing, to rebuild overfished stocks ... and to realize the full potential of the Nation's fishery resources."

The Councils and their staff as well as agency officials have spent long years working towards this goal. In the early years of the Magnuson Act, the council's role was to increase U.S.

participation in fisheries, and to increase productivity. The Councils and NOAA Fisheries Service were very successful in this regard. Decisions then were easier than they are today. As we entered into the late 1980s, and early 1990s, those decisions became more difficult, and the documents Councils sent to NOAA Fisheries Service for review far more complex. However, for all the complexity, when facing difficult decisions that affect people, it has seemed easier to err on the side of fishing for today, not tomorrow. So, in 2006, 10 years after passage of the Sustainable Fisheries Act, nearly 20% of the 230 most important managed stocks are still listed as subject to overfishing.

Overfishing is a legacy we cannot leave to future council members, agency officials, or to the Nation. Current council members must work closely with new members and the agency to meet Congress' mandate to prevent and end overfishing, and rebuild our Nation's valuable marine fish stocks to their full potential. The important questions are: How will the public view your legacy 10 or 30 years from now? What do you want your legacy to be? Your resolve to make tough decisions now will determine that legacy.

New and old Council members alike face a number of significant challenges to meet the goal of building and maintaining sustainable fisheries. We must change the "business as usual" attitude that many external to the fishery management process associate with the Councils.

Reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act will likely bring major new challenges to fisheries management, such as ending overfishing in a short timeframe, setting quotas where none existed in the past, developing and managing limited access privilege programs, and moving toward

ecosystem management. We can expect more, not less, concern to be expressed by Congress and the public on fisheries sustainability. Yes, some progress has been made. However, of the 230 most important managed stocks, only 33 percent of these can be considered sustainable. These sustainable stocks are only 15 percent of the 530 stocks identified in our annual Status of Stocks Report to Congress. We must work together to increase this percentage.

To this end, President Bush and his Administration have set specific goals relative to the Nation's marine fisheries. As the President has stated on several occasions, this Administration strongly supports ending overfishing. In a proclamation earlier this year declaring June 4th through the 10th as "National Oceans Week," President Bush emphasized the importance of the oceans and reiterated the Administration's commitment to end overfishing. He again stressed this as a National priority in his establishment of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Monument. Quoting President Bush, "Over-fishing is harmful. It's harmful to our country, and it's harmful to the world. To protect our marine ecosystem and the future fishing of all kinds, the Ocean Action Plan calls for Congress to reauthorize the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. They need to get that done." Never before has marine fisheries management received the attention placed on it by this Administration.

Furthermore, the Administration supports doubling the number of limited access privilege programs by the year 2010, a position consistent with its Magnuson-Stevens Act reauthorization proposal, its budget, and the President's Ocean Action Plan. I understand that a number of new such programs are currently being developed by the Councils. I commend you for your work to date and urge you to continue to develop these important programs where appropriate.

Your job on the Councils is especially difficult under “open access” fisheries, when anyone can go fishing. As you know, in an open access fishery, there is no strong incentive for individuals to fish in a conservative or sustainable manner, as they do not receive any individual benefits by doing so. However, limited access privilege programs, such as individual fishing quota programs, provide all participants a share of the fisheries. In this way, sustainable fishery practices are easily seen to translate into more steady and sustainable, if not greater catches.

Currently, individual fishermen are often more concerned about maximizing their income, and they typically do not adequately consider the future. Councils must make the difficult choice between catching fish now and forgoing future benefits, or conserving fish now and gaining the benefits of a larger and more sustainable fishery later. These fisheries stewardship issues become even more difficult when stocks are overfished and the fishing industry has already faced reductions in catch.

As you know, the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act faces an uncertain future in this session of Congress. However, it is the Administration’s position and our sense from Congress that overfishing must be ended, and quickly. As you know, the Manager’s Amendment to HR 5018, includes a two year deadline to end overfishing. If this provision was enacted today, could the Councils meet that deadline? While it may be difficult, both in terms of resources and outside pressure, we have to end overfishing and we have to end it quickly.

In closing, we look to the Councils to work in partnership with the Administration to design and take the hard steps necessary to ensure sustainable fish stocks in the future. Through the public/private partnership in which you operate, the Councils are uniquely poised to develop the fishery plans and amendments that will end overfishing and rebuild stocks in the most efficient, effective, and economically sensitive manner possible. Secretary Gutierrez and I have requested Dr. Hogarth to develop performance metrics that will enable us to measure your success in this endeavor. This information will provide us with the ability to assess where we are succeeding and where we still face challenges, and will be used to guide us in the appointment process.

We are prepared to work with you every step of the way to accomplish this mutual goal. While we believe the Councils are best positioned to do this work, the Secretary of Commerce can not wait if the Councils fail to act. If the Council's will not end overfishing, we will.

Thank you. I appreciate your attention, and answering the call of stewardship associated with being a Council member. The future of marine fisheries management is in your hands. You are the key to success.