

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

Witness Testimony

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Gerald Gunnari's presentation to the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans on Thursday, April 30, 1998, at 11:00 a.m. in Room 1324 Longworth House Office Building.

I have been asked to give testimony on the science used by the Pacific Council to make management decisions and the adequacy of the data used to establish quota levels on the west coast groundfish. I thank each of you for this opportunity.

The Sustainable Fisheries Act calls for measures to reduce discards and not to manage a complex or multi-species fishery by lowering one species in that fishery. Doing so **creates** discards, not reduces it! This is exactly what NMFS **IS** doing. Currently the NMFS' interpretation of uncertainty and the precautionary approach is when you don't know enough about a specie it is to automatically reduce the landings of that specie no matter what condition the stock is in. This practice is destroying the ability of the west coast fleet to be good stewards of the ocean forcing discards we have never had in the past. Example: Lingcod from December 31, 1997 to January, 1998 our monthly quota went from 20,000 lbs. to 500 lbs. a 97.5% reduction in landings. The commercial sector went from harvesting 95% of all Lingcod to less than 50%. This shift made by NMFS and PFMC is undoubtably an illegal allocation. Shifting to sports from commercial fishers means that a seventy-five foot vessel can now only produce 150 pounds of filets per month creating discards we never had before and denying the public access to eat Lingcod.

On top of all this, we are not seeing the reported decline in fish out on the ocean. There are no surveys or actual accounting of Lingcod inside 30 Fm out here, now over 50% of the 1998 quota is being taken from an assessed area from an area **not** assessed. 98% of the Lingcod caught by sport fishers is from inside 30Fm and very little commercially caught ling is from inside 30 fm. We do not have a sport/commercial conflict on the ocean. However, we **now** have one in council's meeting rooms and it's not very pretty.

In the most recent PFMC meeting in Portland the desperation of not enough fish to pay the bills is becoming a dominant issue for many. The organized attitudes of one gear group throwing as much mud and dirt upon another gear group to sway the council to take fish from one group, who have traditionally caught those fish and give it to their groups. These are some tough issues to have to deal with. We all have to understand with financial pressures, fellow fishers have no other recourse than to turn on each other. It is the only way some of them can figure out how to increase their landings in order to survive.

We get our fish the same way they get their fish, we earn it by working hard, investing in our vessels, and putting in time over the years. The current situation is killing us too, but trying to steal someone else's fish and investment is not an acceptable solution.

The trawl fishery is the mainstay of supplying our nation's fish markets and restaurants with a steady source of fresh west coast fish in the past and hopefully in the future. Investments and our bills are many times greater than other gear types. It costs a lot to maintain a vessel and crew capable of fishing forty miles off shore in the dead of winter. These bills are real and we support many of the business in our coastal communities. These cutbacks are proportionately affecting our abilities to pay our bills too. It is destroying generations of hard work and the very infrastructure dependent on fishing communities. We're not attacking their business practices, they're attacking ours.

Over the past decade or more, we've been reducing catches and the number of vessels doing what NMFS has recommended and now another surprise cut by 40 to 60% and over 97.5% on Lingcod. It is now to the point that we have an East Coast style disaster here, not due to real stock abundance levels but due to poor science creating uncertainty in data causing regulation changes. If we are catching 60% of 2 months trip limits of Dover Sole in 35 minutes of fishing time or have problems with avoiding abundant Sablefish and can only produce 150 pounds of Lingcod filets per month, it is not a stock biomass problem.

Essential Fish Habitat seem's to be the new growing buzz word; refuges, deep sea ocean parks, NO TAKE FISHING RESERVES, and on and on. Sounds great but where will it end? My natural concern is: Who will it effect?; Are they needed?; Will it concentrate effort to smaller and smaller areas?

Important habitat must mean where the fish are. Who and how will this information be determined? Obviously fishermen's own log books are the easiest source to gather this information and HAS ALREADY BEEN COLLECTED BY THE GROUPS WHO ARE PUSHING THESE IDEAS. What concern's me is the only information being collected by officials is from the trawl fleet. NO OTHER GEAR TYPES or EVEN THE SPORT FISHERS ARE SCRUTINIZED FOR DATA COLLECTION. So their important fishing areas are potentially not effected. Area closures will concentrate effort into smaller and smaller areas creating conflicts with gear types and sport and commercial. If commercial fishermen can no longer fish where they have been fishing they'll have to find new spots. This is not beneficial to the resource or the users.

Trawlers' have been fishing off our west coast over sixty years and we go back to the same places over and over again. If we were destroying important fish habitat, we would NOT still be fishing there. Off shore marine sanctuaries, no fishing zones, potentially 20 square miles to me is a very serious concern being that our information is the only information. We have years of time and thousands of dollars invested in developing trails and areas we fish today. Will traditional users of a now closed area be compensated? It would be no different than closing off city blocks from people doing business after they have invested in their businesses there. At night, we drift sometime over twenty miles or if we're passing through one of these areas and are just accused of being in an area illegally the legal costs could be financially devastating. The people who come up with these ideas are not effected by the outcomes.

Solutions:

Better data is needed in order to reduce the uncertainty, assessment authors should have to be involved personally in the harvest of the species they assess.

Vessels involved in these fisheries already are capable and willing to be included in gathering data.

Coded wire tagging with tetracycline projects is the cheapest and, the fastest solution to the aging problem, migration patterns and percentages of removals from a given stock. Thorny heads and Sablefish need this now and it has been recommended to NMFS since 1993. Local vessels are capable of carrying out this project while fishing.

Larval studies-recruitment estimates are extremely important we found out from this last round of cuts on Sablefish in particular. NMFS made no observations of recruits so they assumed that there weren't any. This is valuable information not being done now, local vessels are capable of this work for the best value.

Annual trawl surveys from 10 fm to 1,000 fm using local vessels. This is the most reasonable costs for the return.

Long Line surveys should be conducted every year. These will pay for themselves, Alaska is doing this now.

Oceanic conditions should be monitored carefully as to migration patterns due to environment conditions such water temperature, etc..

Fish for research to help in funding cooperative projects.

Improve the lines of communications. Attempts by industry to provide NMFS with coastal meetings have been boycotted in the past by NMFS. Another attempt is underway at this time and has been put off by NMFS. Now NMFS says it is not needed. This is not cooperation in management and must be rectified. Deputy Secretary Garcia assured us February 19, 1998, what is happening now will not happen. It is now April 25, 1998 our attempts to help reduce uncertainty in the data through an industry based meeting is receiving negative support from NMFS.

We need true outside peer reviews, The NMFS, STAR, SAT reviews are NOT an outside peer review. The west coast seafood industry has been forced to organize a true outside international review panel, and are currently looking at Sablefish and Thornyheads. LET'S MAKE SURE THESE EFFORTS ARE NOT STOPPED AS WELL.

International exchange of ideas, methodologies and advise is desperately needed on the west coast to help rationally utilize our fishery resources. Work is now well underway to put together such a meeting. The date and location and international participants have already been arraigned and now Dr. Richard Methot's group is trying to stop this exchange. Why?

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