



Committee on Natural Resources U.S. House of Representatives

Chairman Doc Hastings

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, April 24, 2014
[Permalink](#)

CONTACT: [Press Office](#)
202-226-9019

Chairman Hastings Delivers Speech on the Magnuson-Stevens Act

WASHINGTON, D.C. – House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings (WA-04) delivered the following speech today at the University of Washington, School of Aquatic & Fishery Sciences, Symposium on the Magnuson-Stevens Act:

“Thank you for having me here today to discuss the Magnuson-Stevens Act and our current efforts in Congress to update and modernize the law.

I have the privilege of serving as Chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, which has jurisdiction over all issues pertaining to fisheries, wildlife, and our oceans.

As you all well know, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, more popularly known as the Magnuson-Stevens Act, is the primary statute governing fishing activities in Federal waters and expired at the end of Fiscal Year 2013.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act is as much about managing fishermen, as it is about managing fish. Both are a challenge. It requires a balancing act in a number of areas: between a sustainable harvest level and the maximum economic value for the fisheries; between recreational and commercial users of the same resource; between different gear types in the same fisheries; and between the interests of different states.

In addition, not only are the fisheries different, but the challenges are different in each region of the country. Because of these differences, a one-size-fits-all management structure is not the most efficient structure.

While the Magnuson-Stevens Act is a national law, it delegates an amazing amount of decision-making to the regions and to the stakeholders through the Regional Fishery Management Councils. These Councils allow the states and the people who are affected by the fishery management plans to use their expertise and on-the-water knowledge of the fisheries to create management plans that are reasonable, effective, and enforceable. The Magnuson-Stevens Act provides the broad framework while allowing each region to react to its own challenges and conditions. This is the key to the Act and one that we must maintain while updating this important law.

Since 2011, nine Full Committee or Subcommittee hearings related either to the

reauthorization of the Act or to Federal fisheries management have been held. In addition to our hearings, the eight regional fishery management councils hosted the third Managing Our Nation's Fisheries Conference which was focused specifically on reauthorization issues. Each of the eight Councils submitted a list of what works in their region, what doesn't work, and what changes they would like to see in the Act. The conference resulted in 128 "findings" and many of these were recommendations on how to legislatively improve the Act. In addition to the conference, the National Academy of Sciences also released a report detailing additional recommendations on the rebuilding provisions of the Act.

All of those recommendations, in addition to meetings with representatives of the Councils, States, commercial and recreational fishermen, and non-governmental organizations, were reviewed and guided us in developing the draft legislation that was released last December.

This draft bill entitled, "Strengthening Fishing Communities and Increasing Flexibility in Fisheries Management Act" would renew and amend the Magnuson-Stevens Act and implement common sense reforms that will promote increased flexibility and transparency, improve data collection, create jobs, and give predictability and certainty to the coastal communities that depend on stable fishing activities.

In the hearings we've held, there was general agreement that the Act is working. I have said all along that I believe the Act is fundamentally sound. It has enabled the U.S. to have the best managed fisheries in the world and has been instrumental in providing a framework for allowing regions to address their own unique challenges.

But success does not mean the Act works perfectly or should not be modified or improved.

Many fishermen and coastal communities that depend on healthy fisheries are currently facing challenges – including sudden severe cuts to quotas, rising costs, and restrictive fishing seasons.

To give a few examples: The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council has just reduced the 2014 recreational fishing season for red snapper – an important species for recreational fishermen in the Gulf – to just 11 days.

This is especially frustrating for fishermen and fishery managers because at the same time that the seasons are getting shorter, fishery scientists are reporting large increases in the red snapper biomass. For red snapper fishermen in the South Atlantic, the red snapper fishery has been closed since 2010 with just a handful of days where fishing was allowed.

And in New England in 2013, fishermen faced a 61% reduction in George's Bank cod and a 78 percent reduction in the Gulf of Maine cod catch limits. These examples of restrictions would be hard for almost any business to survive, yet for regions where entire communities rely to a large extent on fishing activities, these can be devastating.

While we continue to hear that the Act is fundamentally sound, we have also heard at almost every hearing that the balance between preventing overfishing and optimizing the yield from our fisheries has become unbalanced and that additional flexibility for fisheries managers should be considered.

I believe there are updates to the law that should be considered that will address these concerns and ensure there is a proper balance between the biological needs of fish and the economic needs of fishermen.

In my discussions with fishermen and managers from the West Coast, I am told that there is not a need for major changes to the Act, but that there are some areas where the Act could be improved to make the management process work better. That is certainly NOT the view in other regions and some are calling for significant changes – such as exempting entire fisheries from the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

As I mentioned earlier, the management of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico has become increasingly difficult and in order to get this reauthorization passed, we must find some solutions to the science and management problems in that fishery. We must also find a way to help fishermen and fishing communities in New England.

However, we cannot fix their problems by enacting provisions that will cause new problems for other regions.

I am hoping that we can maintain what works well for the West Coast while finding solutions to the problems facing the East Coast and the Gulf of Mexico. In the Gulf, I believe the lack of sound science may be the main problem facing that fishery. While better science may be the eventual answer, it will not be a quick fix.

This represents an additional balancing act we are trying to address in this reauthorization - how to get better information in the regions where the data is poor while maintaining the level of surveys and stock assessments that allows the West Coast to be one of the most productive fishery regions in the world.

The trick, in a time when federal funding is stagnant at best, is to maintain the financial resources in the regions where fisheries are healthy and productive while finding new sources of funding for other regions. It is important that we continue to fund the current level of data collection on the West Coast and not “rob Peter to pay Paul” or our West Coast fisheries will suffer.

One promising tool for collecting additional data from fishermen is through the use of new technologies. Vessel monitoring systems (VMS) are already in use in many fisheries and the use of camera technology is being tested in a number of regions of the country. In addition, an “app” for iPhones has been developed to gather better real-time information from recreational fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico.

While these technologies all show promise for gathering more and better data, some managers have been slow to embrace new technologies. The draft legislation we circulated attempted to legislatively encourage the use of electronic monitoring and we have received a significant number of comments on this provision. All the input received on that provision in the draft bill has helped us make substantial progress in making it better.

In addition to data collection, the draft legislation provides the Councils with more

flexibility in how they rebuild fisheries, and it provides Councils with flexibility in how they set the Annual Catch Limits. But it does not eliminate those requirements. This discussion draft maintains the requirement to stop overfishing, the requirement to rebuild overfished fisheries, and the requirement to set annual catch limits - but it provides more flexibility for better, local decisions to achieve these goals.

But frankly, there are some things we cannot change with this legislation. There are some groups that do not support any economic activities that involve the harvest and human use of natural resources – and that includes fishing.

Unfortunately, the Magnuson-Stevens Act does not exist in a vacuum – a number of other statutes affect how fisheries are managed. The Endangered Species Act, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), the National Marine Sanctuaries Act, the Antiquities Act - as well as Executive Orders like the National Ocean Policy - can all be used to make fisheries management much more difficult. These groups have become very adept at using all of these laws to restrict fishing activities in the U.S.

While the United States has the most rigid fishery management measures in the world – and that is primarily as a result of the Magnuson-Stevens Act – that does not seem to be good enough for some of these groups.

I find it ironic that when these groups attack U.S. fisheries in an attempt to impose even stricter management regimes, the result is that we import more of our seafood from foreign countries which do not have the same rigid management measures as the U.S.

We are now importing more than 90 percent of the seafood consumed in the U.S. and we have little control over how that seafood is harvested. Wouldn't it make more sense to allow U.S. fishermen to sustainably harvest our fish to supply the Nation's seafood needs rather than hurt U.S. fishermen and fishing communities and, in doing so, encourage seafood imports?

While it may be difficult to make other nations implement sound fishery management principles, we can attempt to make U.S. law work better. The discussion draft we released in December attempts to clarify the roles of the Magnuson-Stevens Act in relation to those other U.S. statutes to minimize conflicts for fishermen and fishery managers.

As most of you know, 2014 is an election year so our window for moving complex legislation like this reauthorization may be short. Having said that, it is my goal to reauthorize the Act this Congress.

And while it added time to the reauthorization process, the purpose of releasing this proposed reauthorization as a discussion draft was to allow for public discussion, review, and comment. As a result, we have received a lot of very helpful comments and constructive criticism. For those of you who took the time to comment, I thank you.

I have also been working with the Committee's Ranking Member, Congressman Peter DeFazio from Oregon, to further refine the proposed legislation. I think we have made positive progress and my goal is to continue those conversations with Congressman

DeFazio. It is my goal for the bill to be considered by the Committee in May, which begins the process of moving the bill to the full House.

I understand Senators Begich and Rubio have also just released a draft bill for public comment. This is good news and I hope that means both sides of the Capitol and both sides of the aisle are interested in getting this reauthorization done during this Congress and I look forward to working with them and with all of you.

Thank you again for the invitation to speak to all of you and I look forward to continuing the conversation.”

###

NaturalResources.house.gov

