

October 19, 2005
Honorable Richard W. Pombo
Chairman
Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Washington, D.C. 20515

Honorable Chairman Pombo:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit our comments regarding the operation of the Regional Fishery Management Councils, and the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

My name is Miguel A. Rolón. I am the Executive Director of the Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC).

Our area of authority is the U.S. Caribbean waters that surround Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

To keep our deposition within the allocated time, we have summarized the relevant terms of reference expressed in the Chairman's Invitational letter to this hearing as follows:

1. Fisheries Under Area of Authority

The fisheries under the CFMC area of authority include: reef fish (over 170 species), spiny lobster, queen conch, corals and other reef associated species.

All our fisheries are open access at the present time. However, the Council will be working with local fishers and authorities in the development of a process to determine the feasibility for a limited entry program, and/or rationalization of fishing gear during 2006 and 2007.

2. Stock Assessment and Peer Review.

Historically, stock assessments for the U.S. Caribbean have been made by the NOAA Fisheries' Southeast Fisheries Science Center, private contractors, the Scientific and Statistical Committee and Habitat Advisory Panel. Presently, the CFMC has participated jointly with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, the Gulf and Atlantic States Commissions, and NOAA Fisheries in the Southeast Data Assessment and Review Program (SEDAR). This program provides for data review and analyses for stock assessment of important species in the Southeast Region.

3. Annual Harvest

There is no annual harvest limit set at this time due to the nature of the artisanal type of fisheries under the CFMC jurisdiction.

4. Source of Funding for Management and Scientific Activities

The funding for management and scientific activities is mainly from the basic grant received by the CFMC, from NOAA, every year. Recently, the CFMC also receives grants for coral reef associated activities that are being used for mapping coral reef areas and the processing of such maps to make them available to the general public via internet, CDs and other media.

5. Recommendations for the Reauthorization of MSA

Specific recommendations for the reauthorization have been discussed at the Chairs and ED's meetings. The CFMC has endorsed those recommendations, and we understand the Committee already has copies of the pertinent documents. We would like to highlight the need for adequate funding to undertake the new mandate and requirements for better data collection and analyses needed for fishery management. Another point we want to emphasize is the need to harmonize the MSA and NEPA requirements. The burden created by excessive paperwork and consideration of alternatives that do not make any sense in fisheries are creating a slowdown of the decision making process and are an obstacle for an efficient input from the fishers and interested public. As an example, it took our Council more than four years to amend our FMPs to comply with the SFA requirements because of NEPA. The original document containing fishery management measures to address our fishery issues was submitted in 1999. This document was around 200 pages long (including the FMP and

other required sections). After rewriting the draft, hiring contractors to work in the new document, and following several workshops and public hearings, the Council ended up submitting a document of over 700 hundred pages that confused the public and the fishers. Still, this resulted in more or less the same set of management measures as the proposed originals.

The new challenges include the integration of ecosystem-based management approach to the fishery management process, curtailing over capacity of our fisheries across the nation, and the need to reduce excessive beaurocracy and legal constraints faced by managers, scientists, fishers and all interested parties involved in our nation's fisheries. While the demand for seafood continues to grow, the ability to catch and provide that seafood in an orderly fashion is getting more complicated as we speak.

On the international front, we want to emphasize the importance of strengthening our efforts towards developing better instruments of communication with other countries responsible for fishery resources.

This is paramount in the Caribbean, given that our fisheries depend on spawning grounds outside our EEZ, and migration of species that occur or originate in other Caribbean nations. This has been recognized since the beginning of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, when all our fishery management plans were approved with one common objective: promoting pan-Caribbean management of all shared species.

As part of this objective, the CFMC, in coordination with the U.S. Department of State and NOAA Fisheries, launched the International Queen Conch Initiative. This initiative has been very successful; more than 20 countries with the common goal and objective of managing this resource on a sustainable basis are involved in this project.

A similar initiative is being discussed for the spiny lobster. Queen conch and spiny lobster are the most valuable invertebrate fishery commodities for the Caribbean nations.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present our comments. We remain at your service for any questions on this matter.

Miguel A. Rolón
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Caribbean Fishery Management Council