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U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

Opening Statement of
Chairman Doc Hastings
At the Oversight Field Hearing titled
“Fishing = Jobs: How Strengthening America’s Fisheries Strengthens Our Economy”
Panama City, Florida
Saturday, August 25, 2012

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Despite the fact that the Natural Resources Committee deals with a number of important coastal issues and all fisheries management issues in Congress, the last time the Committee had a Florida member was 2003 - almost 10 years ago - when Congressman Adam Putnam (now the Commissioner of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services) was on our Committee. I am pleased that Florida is now represented. That is not only good for the Committee but also good for the State of Florida.

This Committee has a number of issues under our jurisdiction that can and will affect Florida: the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act which governs all fishing activities in federal waters; the Endangered Species Act; the Coastal Zone Management Act; the National Marine Sanctuaries Act; the Coral Reef Conservation Act; the Marine Mammal Protection Act; and in addition, the Committee’s jurisdiction extends over almost all of the Department of the Interior. As you can tell, we have jurisdiction over a lot of federal agencies and federal statutes that can and do affect your activities.

We are here today to talk about fisheries. As we will hear from our witnesses, fishing plays a big part of the economy of the Gulf of Mexico and in particular, Florida. According to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service report, in 2006, 2.8 million residents and non-residents (16 years old and older) fished in Florida a total of 46.3 million days and contributed \$4.3 billion in fishing – related expenditures. And according to a Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission report, in 2008 the commercial seafood industry generated \$5.6 billion in sales in Florida. Those are impressive numbers and show that the health of the fishery resources off the coast of Florida can have a big impact on the overall economy of the State.

This Committee has held a series of hearings in Washington, D.C. and we have heard quite a bit of testimony that indicates that the different regions of the country have very different challenges and that the amount of scientific information available to fishery managers varies significantly. I am glad to be able to be here to hear from today’s witnesses directly about how the data collection and management policies that are written in Washington affect your activities.

While I know there are always tensions between the commercial and recreational fishing sectors and even more so when the harvesting opportunities are restricted, I hope we can look at ways to allow both sectors to grow by identifying the challenges and impediments that are affecting fisheries in this region.

Through our hearings on fisheries issues this Congress, we have identified a number of issues that are causing reduced harvest levels. In particular, funding for fisheries surveys and stock assessments by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are not keeping pace with the needs of the fisheries.

In addition, Congress passed amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act at the end of 2006 and the bill was signed in early 2007. The bill required Councils to establish a mechanism for specifying annual catch limits (ACLs) in each fishery management plan at a level that overfishing does not occur. In addition, the Councils are now required to include measures to ensure accountability.

In January 2009, NMFS published the guidelines to address these new requirements and aid the Councils in developing ACLs and accountability measures (AMs). Included in these guidelines were provisions regarding how Councils and their SSCs should deal with scientific uncertainty. The use of the "precautionary approach" requires buffers and the protection of weak stocks where the data is unreliable or old. The less reliable the information, the more precaution is to be used. This has been a problem for fishery managers particularly here in the Gulf where stock assessment are not done on an annual basis and some fisheries have not been surveyed for years.

While the goals of the bill were to make sure that management decisions were made based on science, our Committee has heard a lot of testimony that the new provisions required a level of scientific information that was not available in all regions of the country.

We have also heard testimony that the regulations which implement the new amendments were unreasonable for those regions with limited scientific information and the guidelines were creating situations where the multiple levels of "uncertainty buffers" were reducing harvest levels unnecessarily.

I look forward to hearing from you today on what the primary challenges to fisheries management are here in the Gulf and what Congress can do to make changes. In addition, I hope to hear from you about what other federal restrictions or initiatives are affecting your activities. In many regions of the country, the Endangered Species Act is being used by groups that do not like development to tie federal agencies up in knots so that they cannot issue permits for activities. To make matters worse, they often settle their lawsuits with the agencies which takes federal funds away from recovering species. Our Committee has begun looking into the Act to see if there are specific provisions in the Act that Congress can agree to review in a bipartisan manner.

The Natural Resources Committee has also held a number of hearings on the National Ocean Policy - an unauthorized, new bureaucratic layer of oversight that will almost certainly restrict your ability to fish. I look forward to hearing your views on how this Policy will affect the Gulf.

Again, I would like to thank Congressman Southerland for the invitation to hold a hearing here in Panama City and look forward to hearing from our witnesses.