

# Committee on Resources

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## TESTIMONY OF

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before the  
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans  
Committee on Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

I am John V. O'Shea, Executive Director of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. The Commission is comprised of the fifteen Atlantic coastal states, and carries out a diverse array of programs for its members in order to promote and protect Atlantic coastal fisheries through their wise and effective conservation and management. It is a pleasure to appear before the Committee today to review the tremendous success that the states and their federal partners have achieved in the restoration of one of the grandest marine fisheries anywhere, that of the Atlantic striped bass. The Commission testified before this Committee in 2000 during the last reauthorization of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act. My testimony today will reflect some of the same points we made back then, as those issues and concerns still apply. As the Committee considers the reauthorization of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act, it can do so in the confidence that its leadership has helped give the states and the federal agencies the determination to maintain and to build on this outstanding fishery resource conservation success.

## CONSERVATION WORKS

We need not remind ourselves again of the sad but important lesson learned the hard way – from years of a declining fishery due to over-fishing and habitat degradation - a situation that could only be solved by years of intense, painful and strict conservation. The coordinated actions of the states and our federal agency partners, and the dedication and sacrifice of commercial and recreational fishermen up and down the coast, have yielded stunning results. Under the coordinated management of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), the Atlantic striped bass has made a remarkable recovery from a disastrous stock collapse 25 years ago. The fishery management plan (FMP) implemented and enforced by the states has sought to protect and sustain spawning populations of this valuable resource throughout its migratory range from North Carolina to Maine.

The 20-year Atlantic striped bass recovery is now complete. The population was declared rebuilt in 1995, and has continued to expand in both numbers of fish and overall biomass (pounds) since then. The striper population is estimated to be 44.7 million fish, the second-highest overall population since implementation of the Commission's coast-wide management plan in 1981. This population continues to support the largest recreational fishery along the Atlantic coast, as well as a highly valued commercial fishery.

## PARTNERSHIPS WORK

The Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act has played a major role in fostering the state and federal partnerships that were needed to rebuild the striped bass population. The Atlantic coastal states came forward in a spirit of self-sacrifice for the common good. They operated with their federal partners from the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service pooling their limited resources towards science to support our actions and monitor progress. This partnership enabled us all to achieve far more collectively than we could have individually.

## THE ACT'S PROVISIONS WORK

The Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act has bestowed strength and enforceability on the states' management program, and forged a unique working relationship between the states and their federal conservation partners. Lessons learned from the Striped Bass Act about effective compliance mechanisms served as the foundation of the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act of 1993 (ACFCMA). The ACFCMA provides in a more universal and refined manner the authority and the resources the Commission and our member states need to successfully manage 21 other species of migratory fish in addition to striped bass.

## SUCCESS REQUIRES MAINTENANCE

Mr. Chairman the Committee has heard, and will continue to hear, about the enormous popularity of this important fish, which generates hundreds of millions of dollars in direct and indirect economic activity along the coast from Maine to North Carolina. You have also heard concerns about perceived threats from disease, lack of adequate forage fish, and continued stress on the health of the estuarine spawning and nursery areas. We also know that each year at least 3.8 million fish are taken by recreational and commercial fishing activities, the single largest known cause of mortality on adult striped bass.

In a continued commitment to ensuring the long-term health of the striped bass resource and the fisheries it supports, the Commission enacted Amendment 6 to address key management, science and policy issues. This Amendment establishes biological reference points appropriate for a rebuilt stock, provides a suite of triggers to respond to over-fishing and requirements for the states to monitor the health of the stock. The Amendment also included a recommendation to the Secretary of Commerce to lift the moratorium on the possession and harvest of striped bass in the Exclusive Economic Zone, now that the stock has fully recovered. Such action would convert dead discards into landings, potentially reducing overall fishing mortality. One of the keys to effective management is accurate data on both commercial and recreational catch and discards.

The Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act currently authorizes \$1.25 million. The Commission feels it is important these resources be provided to enable the states to pursue activities needed to properly monitor and manage Atlantic Striped Bass. A modest investment to ensure the stock stays healthy is wiser than allowing a backslide, generating a far greater need for dollars to correct a crisis. Should the Committee decide to incorporate the provisions of the Act into the ACFCMA we would urge you to incorporate the authorized resources at a similar level into ACFCMA as well.

Mr. Chairman, the Committee's letter of invitation indicated your interest in learning what could be done to enhance the management of striped bass. There can be little doubt that information supporting the conservation and management of this very valuable resource rank among the best that we have. States carefully monitor commercial quotas and close those fisheries when the quotas are reached. Recreational harvest is monitored through the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey. As good as these data are, we all know they can be better.

Significant portions of the recreational fishery, for example, remain unsampled. Fortunately, there is an answer. Over the past few years the states and the federal government have come together in a historic partnership to create a new, unified effort to acquire and manage fisheries data. This is called the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP). This is not a Commission program, although the Commission is certainly a strong participant and supporter. It is a true cooperative, mutual effort by the 23 state and federal agencies that are partners in this unique endeavor. Over the past few years the ACCSP has developed a premier data collection and data management program. What we need now is funding, real funding, if these efforts are to result in changes that we would all like to see – in fact, have to see if fisheries conservation and management is going to do its job. Once again, the Committee is in a position where it has the opportunity to provide leadership to help the states and the federal agencies meet their responsibilities.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman, the Atlantic coastal states remain firmly committed to maintaining the recovered Atlantic striped bass stock; and to the diligent pursuit of the effective conservation and management of all of the valuable fishery resources of the Atlantic coast that they share.

The Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act provided the foundation for the states and federal fishery

management agencies to work together to achieve one of the great fishery management success stories. Also, the Act provided a blueprint for the development of the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act. This is perhaps the most successful marine fishery conservation and management statute that Congress ever passed. It is an outstanding example for all environmental and natural resource issues of how much can be accomplished when the states and the federal government, with the leadership of the Congress, come together to work on problems to the benefit of their mutual interest.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and all the members of your Committee for your continued support and encouragement to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and our states as we work with our federal partners towards our vision of healthy, self-sustaining populations for all Atlantic coast fish species, or successful restoration well in progress, by 2015.

I would be pleased to try to answer any questions.