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Opening Remarks of U.S. Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr. Ranking Democrat

Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans Subcommittee
Fisheries Data Collection Oversight Hearing
June 16, 2004

Thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing on an issue that has been of concern both to me and to my constituents for many years. I would especially like to thank Jim Donofrio, Executive Director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance and Tom Fote, of the Jersey Coast Anglers Association for their hard work in communicating to Congress the importance of the recreational angler community to the economy. I think you will all see that the recreational fishing sector is in dire need of more accurate and precise estimates in order to effectively manage fisheries.

I think we all know that there are certain truths about fisheries data collection. First of all, we know that fisheries data collection is difficult. I think the introduction to the National Research Council's 2000 report on Improving the Collection, Management and Use of Marine Fisheries Data put it best: "a common problem in understanding and managing marine fisheries is that the fish populations are not directly observable."

Secondly, we know that fisheries data collection is expensive. It is apparent from the U. S. Commission on Ocean Policy that there is a severe shortage of funds that is inhibiting us from getting the data that we need to manage our fisheries. The US Commission on Ocean Policy's Preliminary Report references the \$20 billion spent by saltwater recreational fishermen in 2002 and notes that "despite the economic and ecological importance of recreational fishing, much less data are collected in this area than for commercial fisheries."

This leads me to my last point -- the way we collect recreational fisheries data is broken. Lapses in data, the months-long lags between collection of data and availability for management, and inadequate funding levels only maintain the status quo and frustrate both fishermen and managers. These shortfalls must be addressed if management is going to keep pace with the increasing demand to manage our fisheries based with the best available science.

You will see from our panelists that the programs we are using were not designed to designate quota, yet they are being used to do so. For instance, the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistical Survey, otherwise known as the "MRFSS," was only meant to show trends in the recreational fishery, NOT to provide data for management.

I see in the Ocean Commission's report that they recommend saltwater fishing licenses. I've said this before and I'll say it again: until the government can show that they are using the already generated revenue to more fully fund marine fisheries activities, our recreational anglers will continue to oppose any new license. I will not go into this issue now, because Mr. Fote and Mr. Donofrio can shed more light as to why this is such an important issue to them.

On a more positive note, I would like to mention some of improvements towards collecting better data.

I am very excited about the prospect of four new NOAA fisheries survey vessels coming on-line in the next few years. The modernization of the new fleet would allow NOAA to update their gear in order to collect better data that is needed to manage commercial fisheries.

I am also pleased to see more cooperative efforts underway to improve our broken systems of collecting recreational angler data. At the beginning of this month, NOAA held a public workshop on the draft version of the Recreational Fisheries Strategic Plan for 2004-2009 in Tuckerton, NJ. Although I have some concerns with the report, my constituents have told me that the new draft plan is a drastic improvement over the last

draft plan they were presented with. My hope is that we can increase the quality of the scientific data collected, and also improve the fishermen's trust in the data, which could build a better understanding of the fishery.

With improvements in data collection, and a commitment from NMFS to investigate alternative ways to improve the current Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS), I am certain that, for species such as summer flounder and striped bass, it would be possible to manage certain recreational fisheries in-season in a fair and cost-effective way.

Mr. Chairman, I look forward to hearing from our distinguished witnesses about the results of this data review and the progress made in general in the past few years regarding fisheries data collection. Thank you.