

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

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### Witness Testimony

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**Senator Ron Wyden**

**Testimony for Hearing on Management of West Coast Groundfish**

**April 30, 1998**

House Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Mr. Chairman, if ever there was an issue which called for innovation and new ideas, fishery management is it. Everyone agrees that something needs to be done to keep fish stocks from disappearing and keep our fishing communities vital, but nothing has ever seemed to work.

All along my state's magnificent coastline, from Newport to Astoria, fishing communities are at a moment of serious peril. The groundfish stocks on which they depend may have shrunk to dangerously low levels. And the government, in trying to protect that resource, has placed limits on allowable groundfish catch which jeopardize livelihoods and threaten entire communities. At the end of last year the Pacific Fishery Management Council approved harvest guidelines which called for a huge cut in the 1998 allowable catch of many groundfish species. The cuts were made based on scientific stock assessments, but the data underlying those assessments are extremely limited. The Council said it had no choice under the law but to reduce fishing.

Oregonians want to manage the groundfish resource wisely. The fishing industry is an integral part of the culture of Oregon's coastal communities as well as a major contributor to the economy. In Lincoln County, for example, the fishing industry provides around \$61 million each year to the local economy and 20% of the total wages earned.

Unfortunately, the measures being taken to protect fish stocks have had a devastating effect on Oregon's seafood community. The reduction in allowable catch, which for some species is as high as 65%, will result in a 23% decrease in all groundfish-derived contributions to Oregon's economy. This translates into a \$14 million loss of personal income or the equivalent of about 678 jobs in Oregon. The cuts will have a disastrous economic ripple effect in coastal communities - from boat crew members and processing plant workers, to boat and plant owners, to marine hardware suppliers, to port businesses.

Most disturbing to me is the fact that the severely reduced harvest guidelines are based on inadequate data. As you know, harvest guidelines are determined by stock assessments, which, in turn, are dependent on the data collected in surveys. Data used to make stock assessments on the West Coast are considered to be inadequate by scientists, fishermen, fishery managers, and environmentalists. Without better data and analysis, stock assessments and harvest guidelines will be subject to skepticism - especially during these times of low harvest levels.

Some of your witnesses may suggest ways to improve the collection and analysis of data. I would like to highlight two ideas: chartered surveys and retention of overages.

It is crucial that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) perform **annual** surveys of groundfish stocks so that fishery management decisions are based on the best data. The Northwest does not have a dedicated research vessel to perform this important work, so surveys have traditionally been performed only every three years. In place of a dedicated research vessel, NMFS is starting to follow the industry's suggestion to charter private vessels to collect data. NMFS should expand the use of these collaborative surveys - the more experience the agency has in conducting these surveys, the more effective the resulting data.

Chartered surveys can be paid for by "fish for research" - a concept that allows fishermen to keep the fish caught during chartered surveys as a means of partial payment for the survey. I am encouraged by NMFS's indication that they will be trying out "fish for research" this year. This program can potentially create a mechanism to finance the collection of data giving NMFS more data at less cost to the taxpayer.

The other program I would like to highlight is a "retention of overages" plan, which would utilize some of the fish that fishermen are forced by regulations to discard. This idea has been raised by the industry several times in the past. The objectives of a retention of overages plan are to reduce the waste of fish and to increase and improve groundfish data.

Overages are marketable fish caught in excess of trip limits. Fishermen are fined if they bring overages to port, so they throw the fish overboard. Most of these fish die. This is a terrible waste, especially considering the current crisis. Fishermen have told me that they are angry they are forced to throw "beautiful" fish overboard to die. I suggest that we utilize these fish and work towards increasing our understanding of the fishery so that we can better manage it.

A retention plan would allow fishermen to keep their overages without being fined. A fisherman would bring his catch to port and sell the amount of his trip limit. The overages would be surrendered to a public entity. The entity would sell the fish to the local processor, take the funds and grant them for specific purposes, such as scientific research or community assistance.

I suggest this idea be implemented as pilot project for the remainder of this year. A working group made up of NMFS and industry folks could meet to discuss implementation procedures as well as come up with innovative ideas for using the funds. If this group is established quickly, it could report to the Pacific Fishery Management Council at the Council's next meeting this summer.

At the end of the year, the working group could reconvene to evaluate the effects and make recommendations on the possibility of a year-long plan for 1999. The objective of a more extensive plan should be to provide the data needed to eventually reduce overages and discards in general. Currently, fishery managers estimate the level of discards and these estimates play a role in determining harvest guidelines. A more extensive retention plan could even help fund an observer program to provide accurate data regarding total catch thereby reducing the level of uncertainty involved in setting harvest levels.

I'd like to be clear in saying that I don't think a retention of overages plan should be permanent. I don't want a plan to legitimize or institutionalize overages and discards. Rather, I'd like the plan to provide the scientific basis from which fishery managers can work to effectively reduce discards. What I'm advocating here today is implementation of a pilot plan for only this year, so that we can get an idea of how well this

idea will work. Afterwards, if appropriate, we can discuss a longer term plan.

I realize that many people have strong feelings regarding the management of groundfish. But we are in a crisis situation. We need to get past the finger pointing stage and start working on solutions. I have been working closely with Terry Garcia, the Deputy Administrator of NOAA, on West Coast fisheries issues. Terry is a breath of fresh air. Recently, he traveled with me to the Oregon Coast to attend two public meetings to discuss groundfish issues. We both left those meetings deeply impressed by the urgent needs of the fishing community. There are critical needs which must be addressed on the West Coast and I think Terry understands them. My suggestions are the result of our meetings on the Oregon Coast.

In closing, I would like to say that as we discuss groundfish management practices, we should remember that the livelihoods of people are directly linked to management decisions. Let's not forget the fishermen, the processors, and all the other people linked to the seafood industry.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for calling attention to an issue of such importance to Oregonians and to all citizens of the West Coast. I would ask that my prepared statement be printed in the hearing record.

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