Congress must cast strong support to strong fishing bill
Fisheries legislation should be based on facts

Donald O. McIsaac, Ph. D. Executive Director of the Pacific Fishery Management Council

On September 3, the Vancouver Columbian published an opinion piece about federal marine fisheries management by Jennifer Bevan-Dangel, staff attorney for Environment Maryland. On behalf of the Pacific Fishery Management Council, which recommends management measures for the West Coast federal fisheries, I am compelled to respond to the misleading, broad generalities and outright errors contained in the article. We agree with Ms. Bevan-Dangel that Congress should pass a strong bill to protect the ocean and its fish resources; however, we believe the bill’s content should be based on facts.

The author claims that marine fisheries management by regional fishery management councils is akin to the fox guarding the henhouse. She writes, “...under current law, limits on overfishing are set by regional fisheries [sic] management councils that are made up not of independent experts using sound science, but representatives of the commercial fishing industry bound by conflicts of interest.”

As it applies to west coast fisheries, this statement contains several errors. The Pacific Council has 14 voting members, including four state fish and wildlife agency representatives, one federal, and one tribal representative. The remaining eight members are private citizens nominated by state governors and selected by the Secretary of Commerce. Four appointed members are from recreational fishing and sectors, three from commercial fishing sectors, and one is an independent biologist. Council members voting in defined conflict of interest situations are required to recuse themselves from voting. In addition, the Pacific Council, like the other seven regional fishery management councils, develops and recommends management measures to the Secretary of Commerce, who may or may not approve them, as a further check and balance. The Pacific Council is not composed solely of commercial fishing representatives, it does use sound science as the basis of decision-making. the appointed Pacific Council members do not show a record of voting their self-interest over conservation, and the ultimate setting of regulations into federal law is by the Secretary of Commerce, not the Councils.

The author writes, “Of eight regional fishery management councils across the country, Alaska’s is the only one that uniformly listens to the advice of its scientific advisors on what catch levels to set and enforces those limits.” This is inaccurate. The Pacific Council process includes input by a Scientific and Statistical Committee made up of government agency, academic, and private scientists, and several other advisory bodies composed of scientific experts in relevant fields. We are not aware of any examples of the Council voting for a total catch limit exceeding that recommended by these scientific advisors. On the contrary, the Council has consistently made tough decisions to follow the science stringently, to close areas and seasons when needed, and to be precautionary and conservative in order to ensure the long-term health of fish stocks and fisheries—even at the cost of significant economic and social impacts on fishing communities.

The author writes, “Off the Pacific Coast, rockfish populations are so depleted that they are essentially closed to fishing.” This is untrue. Altogether, the Pacific Council manages 64
rockfish species, of which seven are designated as overfished. For the upcoming year, scientists recommended, and the Pacific Council adopted, 29,800 metric tons of the different rockfish species as the sustainable level of catch for commercial and sport fisheries off the West Coast. The overfished rockfish species are all being rebuilt through application of strict catch limits and area closures. Recently, two species (Pacific whiting and lingcod) were successfully rebuilt and removed from the list of overfished species; the most recent stock assessments show that six of the seven overfished stocks are improving in abundance, and one has shown no change since the last assessment. In addition to rockfish, the Council manages dozens of salmon stocks, four coastal pelagic species (such as sardines), 13 highly migratory species (such as tunas), and 27 other species of groundfish. No species other than the seven rockfish species are designated as overfished.

The author claims that “huge ‘bottom-trawlers’ scrape the ocean floor clean, essentially clear-cutting everything from coral to essential marine vegetation.” This statement is scare rhetoric. In fact, on the West Coast there are a number of regulations ranging from gear restrictions to closed areas that protect sensitive habitat from being impacted by current bottom trawl operations. This year, the Council closed 250,000 square nautical miles, or about 75% of the area available to fishing, to bottom trawling in order to protect essential fish habitat. These closures were developed in close cooperation with both fishermen and environmental groups. Additionally, the Pacific Council has created large de facto marine reserves within the remaining area that are specifically designed to protect overfished rockfish species while rebuilding is underway—no trawling is allowed in these areas. Further, trawlers voluntarily avoid rocky areas (which are more likely to contain corals) because such areas can destroy their fishing gear.

It is easy to cause alarm with simplistic generalizations and unvalidated perceptions. Learning the specifics and developing a full understanding of complex environmental issues takes time and work. We trust Congress will sort out the truths in producing a strong reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. We encourage readers who wish to influence this legislation to take the time to learn the facts about marine fisheries management.

Dr. McIsaac is the Executive Director of the Pacific Fishery Management Council is one of eight regional fishery management councils created by the Magnuson Act in 1976. Headquartered in Portland, Oregon, the Council recommends management measures for fisheries in federal waters off Washington, Oregon, and California.

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