

PUBLIC COMMENT DRAFT

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**National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy**

**of the**

**National Marine Fisheries Service**

**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

INTRODUCTION

Saltwater recreational fishing is a traditional, important, and expanding thread in the social, cultural, and economic fabric of coastal communities in the United States.

With growing coastal populations, an increasing number of people are pursuing recreational opportunities afforded by this nation's expansive coastal and ocean resources. These and other shifts are changing the traditional economics and demographics of U.S. fisheries. Saltwater recreational fishing drives billions of dollars in economic activity each year providing substantial benefits to the economy at the local, regional, and national scales.

Beginning with its roots as the Commission of Fish and Fisheries in 1871, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has played a continuous leadership role in science-based stewardship of our nation's living marine resources, seeking to balance the needs of the resource, industry, people and communities. The Agency's foremost responsibility is to achieve and maintain healthy marine and coastal ecosystems capable of supporting sustainable and productive fishery resources for the benefit of the American people. In pursuit of this goal, NMFS highlights the direct links between healthy habitats, sustainable fishery resources, and enduring, high quality fishing experiences. The Agency recognizes the important social, cultural, and economic benefits to the nation associated with saltwater recreational fishing, and is committed to pursuing a collaborative stewardship approach promoting public access, fishery accountability, and regulatory enforcement.

POLICY GOAL

Consistent with, and in furtherance of, the purposes of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), the goals of this policy are to promote recreational fishing for the cultural, social, and economic benefit of the nation through science-based conservation and management, and to provide for wide-ranging participation in and enjoyment of recreational fishing for present and future generations.

NMFS recognizes that fully achieving these goals will require thoughtful examination and integration of saltwater recreational fisheries considerations throughout the programs and activities of the Agency and the federal fisheries management system in combination with strong management partner and constituent relationships. In so doing, it is incumbent upon NMFS to fulfill its stewardship responsibilities in a broadly inclusive manner which seeks to minimize disruptions to, and burdens on, the regulated community, and facilitates public understanding of the natural and regulatory environment.

Within this context, this policy broadly pertains to non-commercial activities of fishermen who fish for sport or pleasure, as set out in the MSA definition of recreational fishing, whether retaining, consuming, sharing or releasing their catches, as well as the businesses and industries, such as the for-hire fishing fleet and tournaments, which support them.

This policy recognizes the authorities and responsibilities of natural resource management agencies, regional fishery management councils, interstate marine fisheries commissions, states, and advisory bodies and seeks partnership in its implementation.

## POLICY

In support of the stated goals of this document, it is the policy of NMFS to **foster, support, and enhance a broadly accessible and diverse array of sustainable recreational saltwater fishing opportunities for the benefit and enjoyment of all Americans**. To further this policy, NMFS will:

- 1) **Promote public access to quality fishing opportunities** by supporting consideration of relevant cultural, social, and economic factors in decision-making; encouraging periodic review of fishery allocations; fostering expanded fishing opportunities based on conservation gains (e.g., improved release survival, restored habitats, easing of regulatory fishery restrictions when conservation goals are achieved); and, understanding factors which affect fishing participation and angler satisfaction (e.g., changing and complex regulations, impediments to fishing) and finding mechanisms to address them.
- 2) **Support ecosystem conservation and enhancement** which provide natural and, where appropriate, enhanced habitats to support diverse, healthy fisheries and fish populations including abundant and resilient forage fish stocks; and, encourage development and application of sustainable, safe aquaculture to support recreational fisheries consistent with existing agency policy.
- 3) **Coordinate with state and federal management partners** to align science, management, and enforcement priorities and strategies in support of stable, predictable, and well monitored recreational fisheries.

- 4) **Advance innovative solutions to evolving science, management, and environmental challenges** through partnership by supporting investigation and development of new scientific tools, methods, data collection techniques (e.g., electronic catch reporting), gear technology, and management approaches.
- 5) **Provide scientifically sound and trusted biological, cultural, social, and economic information** to enable balanced, well- informed decision-making bolstered by continuing programmatic improvements.
- 6) **Communicate and engage with the public** in a credible and transparent manner to build trust and promote public awareness of, and involvement in, science and management processes through active two-way dialogue, public-private collaboration (e.g., cooperative research and citizen science activities), and other approaches which complement NMFS's ongoing science programs.

#### AUTHORITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

NMFS' headquarters directorate and office directors, regional leadership (Regional Administrators and Science Directors), and the National Policy Advisor for Recreational Fisheries are responsible for Agency-wide implementation of this policy. NMFS Regional Administrators and headquarters Office Directors will play an especially critical role in effective policy implementation, management, and Agency compliance. Their responsibilities as Agency representatives to the regional fishery management councils and interstate marine fisheries commissions, principle liaisons to state and other federal agencies, and managers of personnel who interact with the public on a daily basis are key to success.

This policy is not intended to, and does not, create any right or benefit, substantive or procedural, enforceable at law or in equity by any party against the United States, its departments, agencies, or entities, its officers, employees or agents or any other person.

#### IMPLEMENTATION

The NMFS National Policy for Saltwater Recreational Fisheries is effective upon release. This policy will henceforth guide NMFS' approach to saltwater recreational fishing until such time as it is amended or rescinded by the NOAA Assistant Administrator for Fisheries.

The policy will be implemented through consideration and integration of policy goals and supporting principles in agency, office, and program level planning, budgeting, and decision-making.