



Pacific Fishery Management Council

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Pete Hassemer, Chair | Merrick J. Burden, Executive Director

May 1, 2026

The Honorable Maxine Dexter, M.D.
1207 Longworth Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congresswoman Dexter,

Thank you for your letter of April 24, 2026, concerning the effects of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) staffing and funding reductions on the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC). We welcome the opportunity to respond to your specific questions.

1. Status of Impacts on Pacific Groundfish Regulatory Actions

Since 2025, PFMC regulatory actions have experienced significant implementation delays within the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). These delays are related to the presence of fewer staff but also appear to stem from a loss of clear institutional ownership and decision-making authority at NOAA headquarters — an outcome consistent with the disruption that typically accompanies large-scale workforce reductions and organizational restructuring. While some previously delayed regulatory packages have moved forward in recent months, it is not yet clear whether that progress reflects a sustained improvement or a temporary resolution.

2. Removal of Fish Stocks from Active Federal Management

The PFMC's consideration of removal of groundfish stocks from Federal management predates the NOAA staffing reductions. The initial impetus was NOAA's determination that the PFMC had not adequately defined "stocks" within the groundfish Fishery Management Plan (FMP), while at other times the Council lacked legal jurisdiction over certain stocks occurring primarily in state waters. Following NOAA's workforce reductions, NOAA West Coast and PFMC leadership have met regularly to align management priorities with available capacity. Additional stock removals have been discussed as a means of reducing the administrative burden on limited staff. These removals are expected to provide modest relief, though they are unlikely to resolve the broader capacity constraints facing west coast fisheries management.

In 2025, NMFS headquarters indicated that they intended to pursue an approach referred to as the "risk/value matrix" which was a method for identifying high priority stocks for continued management. The implication was that stocks would be removed from management because of

this exercise, and that NOAA scientific resources may be redistributed among the U.S. based on resulting science and management needs. Recently the eight U.S. regional fishery management councils were informed that NMFS had discontinued its pursuit of the risk/value matrix. Part of the justification for doing so was the recognition that the regional fishery management councils are pursuing capacity alignment and cost efficiency efforts through our own processes. It is not immediately clear if NMFS headquarters will continue to pursue some form of scope reduction in response to the 2025 staffing reductions that are above and beyond what the fishery management councils are already doing.

3. Ability to Implement Executive Order (EO) 14276, “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness”

The PFMC has engaged substantively with EO 14276. Following Council deliberations in June and September 2025, the PFMC submitted a formal EO workplan to NMFS in October 2025. The workplan identified four priority actions: (1) revising Pacific sardine stock definitions to ensure all West Coast sardine are properly managed and available to U.S. fishermen; (2) developing a flexible and adaptive groundfish management framework to improve access and reduce the risk of unnecessary closures; (3) establishing streamlined criteria for issuing Highly Migratory Species Exempted Fishing Permits, in anticipation of the 2027 prohibition on large mesh drift gillnets; and (4) revising the Pacific Halibut Catch Sharing Plan to optimize opportunity across commercial and recreational sectors. Implementation timelines for these actions extend through 2027 and, in some cases, 2028.

Achieving these outcomes, however, depends on NMFS capacity to act on Council submissions in a timely manner. As noted in response to Question 1, that capacity has been materially diminished. Several recent actions that are consistent with the EO — including gear marking and entanglement risk reduction measures transmitted to NMFS in December 2024, and a recommendation to repeal the Cordell Bank Groundfish Conservation Area closure transmitted in June 2025 — remain pending NMFS action. The PFMC has met its procedural obligations; resolving the implementation backlog at NMFS is now the pressing path to realizing the EO’s objectives.

4. NOAA Programs and Data That No Longer Operate Optimally

In the immediate aftermath of the NOAA staffing reductions, the PFMC and its partner agencies prioritized continuity and worked to sustain normal operations. Beginning in the middle of 2025 and continuing into 2026, however, the cumulative effects of those reductions are becoming more apparent. Key personnel in several program areas are operating at levels of workload that are not sustainable and have, in some instances, begun to affect the quality and timeliness of their work. We are also receiving reports that critical fishery data streams are increasingly at risk due to staffing shortfalls.

These challenges have had tangible effects on specific fisheries. For example, at the start of the 2026 Pacific whiting management cycle, the Council and its advisory bodies did not have access to the level of survey and analytical information that is typically available to inform catch limit negotiations. Disruptions to the integrated survey resulted in reduced survey coverage and deviations from established design protocols, and the government shutdown delayed analytical work by NOAA's acoustic survey team. As a result, the Joint Technical Committee was unable to complete its customary pre-season analyses. Under these circumstances, the technical and management bodies agreed to proceed using a catch-only assessment update, without incorporating survey-based biomass estimates or age composition data. While this approach allowed the process to move forward, it reflects a reduced analytical foundation relative to prior years.

The full extent of these impacts remains uncertain, but the direction is clear: the current pace and rigor of work cannot be maintained without meaningful changes to scope or resources.

5. Obligations to Preserve Treaty-Reserved Fishing Rights of Federally Recognized Tribes

The PFMC process and related forums — including the North of Falcon process, which coordinates annual harvest management for salmon fisheries subject to treaty fishing rights — have continued to function in a manner consistent with prior years. The North of Falcon process proceeded reasonably well in both 2025 and 2026. Nevertheless, the staff supporting these processes are experiencing workload pressures similar to those described above. Whether and how this will affect the Council's ability to fulfill its treaty-related obligations over time remains to be seen. We are monitoring this situation carefully and take these obligations seriously.

6. Anticipated Future Changes to Council Operations

PFMC and NMFS West Coast leadership have been meeting regularly to explore ways to align management priorities with available resources. In the coming months, we expect to bring several options before the Council for consideration. Those options may include further reductions in the number of federally managed stocks, modifications to core management systems such as the groundfish Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) program, and increased delegation of certain management functions to state or international processes. The Council's response to these options is not yet known, and we recognize that each involves meaningful trade-offs. We are committed to a transparent public process as we work through these decisions.

We hope this response is useful to you and your colleagues. The PFMC remains committed to the sustainable management of Pacific fisheries and to maintaining the public engagement that is central to our process. We welcome continued dialogue with your office on these matters.

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Merrick Burden", is written over a light-colored rectangular background.

Merrick Burden
Executive Director

MJB:ael

Cc: Council members



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

April 24, 2026

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PFMC

Merrick Burden
Executive Director
Pacific Fishery Management Council
7700 NE Ambassador Place, Suite 101
Portland, Oregon 97220-1384

Dear Director Burden:

Last year, the Council Coordination Committee (CCC) responded to an inquiry from Congressman Magaziner outlining how reductions of personnel and funding at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) are impacting our nation's fisheries. The CCC noted that the reduction in NOAA resources and uncertainties about near-term and sustained funding caused disruptions to Council activities.

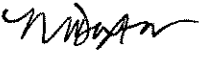
Given the importance of reliable fishery management in the state of Oregon, I would like to learn more about how these cuts continue to impact the Pacific Fishery Management Council's (PFMC) work. Specifically:

1. The May 2025 CCC letter highlighted that "[r]eductions in staffing at NOAA have hampered the ability to move Pacific groundfish regulations." Can you please expand on the status of these impacts?
2. Last fall, the PFMC agreed to remove 39 fish stocks from active federal management, and at its most recent meeting, the Council voted to remove another eight stocks. Can you please describe the constraints that motivated this decision and how this will impact affected species?
3. Do you anticipate these hindrances will impact PFMC's ability to implement Executive Order 14276, entitled "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness?"
4. Are there any specific NOAA programs or public data that the Council relies on that no longer operate or function in an optimal manner?
5. Have any of these changes inhibited your ability to fulfill obligations to preserve treaty-reserved fishing rights of Federally recognized tribes?
6. Are there any other changes that you anticipate the Council will make to account for the cuts to NOAA?

Since September of 2024, NOAA has lost over 1,000 employees from its workforce, in part due to layoffs and early retirements. Last year, 23 National Marine Fisheries Service offices were housed in facilities slated for closure due to lease terminations. Given the Council's emphasis on public participation and engagement, we in Congress and the public rely on your expertise to understand how the long-term sustainability of the Pacific Fishery will be impacted by these changes.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maxine Dexter', written in a cursive style.

Maxine Dexter, M.D.
Member of Congress