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PACIFIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL RESPONDS TO PEW OCEANS COMMISSION REPORT

The Pacific Fishery Management Council thanks the Pew Oceans Commission for bringing national attention to marine fisheries management issues. A lively and open debate on fisheries management is vital as we address our mandate to balance sustainable fishing with healthy fish stocks. Hopefully, the national attention brought by the Pew report, the upcoming Ocean Commission report, and the National Conference on Marine Fishery Management later this fall will result in critically needed additional scientific research and improved fishery management.

First, we note that the Pew Oceans Commission is not the U.S. Commission on Oceans Policy, established by the Oceans Act of 2000. The report of the U.S. Commission on Oceans Policy is scheduled for release later this year. The Pew Foundation is a private organization without government funding. The Pacific Council was not an invited participant in the Pew Oceans Commission hearings or developmental process, and the Pacific Council perspective was not considered for their report.

Many issues raised in the Pew report are of concern to the Pacific Council, and we agree it is important that they be addressed. However, it is also important to note the Pacific Council is already addressing many of them. It is unfortunate the Pew report failed to highlight how many U.S. fisheries—including many on the West Coast—are sustainably managed.

Ocean Governance

The Pew Oceans Commission emphasizes the need for systemic change to U.S. ocean governance. The Council believes the existing regional fishery management system is effective, given its openness, responsiveness, stakeholder involvement, regional focus, and reliance on the best available science. In managing fisheries to provide sustainable harvests, the Councils are mandated to balance conservation with socioeconomic considerations based on the quality of scientific information. Fishing community participation is an important part of the regional council process. The four major West Coast fisheries managed by the Pacific Council provide examples of the effectiveness of the existing regional fishery management system.

Marine **salmon** fishery management is a success story for the Pacific Council. Recent improvements in ocean conditions, an improved record in achieving spawning escapement goals, and freshwater habitat restoration efforts have resulted in record or near-record returns for many salmon stocks, including stocks listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 2003, after meeting 41 conservation objectives for various salmon populations, from ESA-listed species to consistently healthy stocks, the Council set seasons that provided the largest number of angler trips since 1991 and the second highest commercial value since 1989. There have been highly successful selective fisheries for fin-clipped hatchery coho salmon that allow wild salmon to be protected by catch-and-release

practices. The Pew report emphasizes the need to address the importance of estuaries, rivers, and point pollution sources in improving the health of fish populations. The Pacific Council strongly agrees that these matters are important and has been very active with its Habitat Committee in encouraging adequate water flows for fish production in the Klamath and other rivers and recommending habitat protection measures to outside agencies on such matters as hydroelectric dam licensing and inriver dredging.

The **coastal pelagic species** fishery (sardines, anchovies, mackerel, and market squid) are generally viewed as healthy and well-managed, and management takes a precautionary and ecosystem-based approach. Recent fisheries for Pacific sardine have expanded off Oregon and Washington due to an increase in coastwide abundance and availability of sardine in Pacific Northwest waters, but the total U.S. West Coast harvest has been below a conservatively-set annual harvest guideline. The Council created an ecosystem-based harvest control rule for sardine that recognizes the close relationship of sardine abundance to oceanic and climate variability and the value of sardines as forage for other fish, sea birds, and marine mammals. No coastal pelagic species are overfished, and the fishery is stable.

The Council manages over 80 species of **Pacific coast groundfish**. The Council has moved quickly to respond to new information about groundfish stocks. For example, the Council was presented with revised science on May 13, 2002, that showed three species designated as overfished—yelloweye, bocaccio and canary rockfish—were reproducing more slowly than previously thought. The next month, the Council adopted expansive continental shelf closures to protect these species. These restrictions went into effect in summer 2002 and continue, with some modifications, today. The Council is now developing rebuilding plans for these overfished stocks.

The Council has also implemented a number of management measures to ensure groundfish are harvested sustainably and bycatch is minimized. These include depth-based closures, gear restrictions, quotas and trip limits, and an observer program. In the near future, an electronic vessel monitoring system will be implemented to ensure regulations are enforced. Council fisheries will also benefit from a groundfish capacity reduction program recently passed by Congress and developed in partnership with the fishing industry.

The Council is also moving towards precautionary and proactive management of the West Coast **highly migratory species** fishery, which includes tunas and sharks. A fishery management plan for these species has been proposed and is awaiting approval by National Marine Fisheries Service. The plan was developed in close cooperation with representatives of conservation groups and recreational and commercial fisheries. This inclusive representation resulted in a comprehensive and precautionary fishery management plan for domestic fisheries. It is hoped the plan will also provide a template to guide improvement of international fisheries management.

Science

The Pacific Council agrees with the Pew report that improved scientific knowledge is needed to better manage fisheries. For West Coast groundfish in particular, a greater financial commitment is needed for more accurate science. However, the Pacific Council is now, and has continually, relied on the best available science in decision making and has made responsible decisions when scientific information was inadequate or unavailable. The Pacific Council has five scientific advisory committees that provide sophisticated analyses for decisionmaking.

Marine Reserves

The Pew Oceans Commission recommends establishing a national system of fully protected **marine reserves**. The Council has created large *de facto* marine reserves that were specifically designed to protect overfished rockfish species. Examples include the 4,300-square mile cowcod conservation areas off California, where all bottom fishing is prohibited; the large depth-based rockfish conservation areas along the continental shelf (seasonally ranging from 13,518 to 19,796 square miles) closed to trawling, and the 36,000 square miles closed to nontrawl fisheries. The Council is also working closely with National Marine Sanctuaries in California in considering marine reserves in federal waters of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and, potentially, other California sanctuaries.

Ecosystem Management

The Pew Oceans Commission recommends redefining the principal objective of U.S. marine fishery policy to protect marine ecosystems. This goal reflects a shift toward a broader perspective of management that recognizes the complex relations between species and their environments. The Council recognizes and agrees on the importance of ecosystem management. However, we believe the concepts of “ecosystem” and “ecosystem management” must first be defined, and these definitions must acknowledge and account for regional differences and provide flexibility in development and implementation. Fishery stakeholders should be included at the earliest stages of forming these definitions, and should take part in ecosystem monitoring and research. The regional councils provide an important forum for fishing communities to participate in the development and use of ecosystem management principles. Depending on one’s definition of ecosystem management, the Pacific Council currently makes ecosystem-based decisions, as described above for salmon, coastal pelagic species, and groundfish.

Further Policy Development

The Pacific Council will review the Pew report in greater detail, and will also analyze closely the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy later this year. The Pacific Council will also be a principal participant at the National Conference on Marine Fishery Management scheduled for November 13-15, 2003 in Washington, DC. These reports and the national conference will provide the basis for improvements in the management of marine fisheries in 2004 and beyond.

The Pacific Council is one of eight regional councils in the United States established by Congress to manage U.S. fisheries and is responsible for fisheries in federal waters off Washington, Oregon, and California.

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