

The Magnuson–Stevens Act

Supporting Abundant Stocks and Opportunities for Anglers

A Product of the American Saltwater Guides Association

The Magnuson–Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), first enacted in 1976, is the landmark fisheries management law for U.S. federal waters, which typically extend from 3–200 miles from shore. Below we outline our priorities for consideration in an MSA reauthorization.

I. Keep MSA Strong

MSA’s stock rebuilding timelines and requirement to adhere to science-based annual catch limits have been integral to its success in preventing overfishing and providing recreational opportunity. ASGA continues to support these core conservation tenets, which have led to the rebuilding of 47 previously overfished stocks since 2000 and resulted in 93% of stocks with known status not experiencing overfishing.

Recommendations:

- Maintain the law’s current requirements for Annual Catch Limits, Accountability Measures, and rebuilding timelines.
- If some fisheries are to be characterized as “depleted” instead of “overfished,” do not let such a change in terminology change the actions required by managers and fishermen.

II. Recreational Data & Research

NOAA Fisheries collects data on fishing effort, catch, and harvest of millions of recreational anglers, which are critical inputs to management. The addition of complementary catch data collection activities, coupled with an increased emphasis on collaborative recreational fisheries research, could further enable managers to provide for long-term fishery sustainability while also maximizing the individual and community benefits.

Recommendations:

- Provide NOAA’s fisheries statisticians with the resources and structure to ensure that such new, non-federal recreational data sources, such as angler self-reported data logged on smartphone apps, meet a certain set of quality standards before being used for management purposes.
- Provide a federal framework and funding for recreational fisheries research that prioritizes collaboration with the recreational community.

III. Forage Fish Protection

Prey species such as herring, sardines, and mackerel—known as forage fish—form the ecosystem backbone of many of our recreational fisheries, transferring energy from plankton up through the food web. A comprehensive federal strategy for forage fish is sorely needed.

Recommendations:

- Prohibit the development of any fisheries for these species if a plan for how to manage the species does not yet exist.
- Set conservative forage fish catch limits to ensure that sufficient abundance remains to support marine predators such as fishes, marine mammals, and seabirds.

IV. Climate-Ready Fisheries

Changing ocean conditions can impact not only where fish are found along the coast, but also aspects of their biology—growth rates, prey species, and reproductive success. Scientists and managers broadly recognize these changes, but MSA currently lacks a mandate or comprehensive framework for ensuring that our fisheries stay healthy as ocean conditions continue to change.

Recommendations:

- Integrate the consideration of climate change impacts into routine federal fisheries management activities.
- For shifting stocks that straddle the jurisdictions of multiple fishery management councils, ensure that councils effectively coordinate with one another to prevent loopholes that could undermine management.

V. Improve Habitat Protection

Healthy fisheries rely on healthy habitats. Regional fishery management councils are required to describe and identify Essential Fish Habitat (EFH). However, what to do with those areas after they've been identified is less clear.

Recommendations:

- Remove the “practicability standard” for protecting EFH when considering fishery management actions.
- Require councils to plan for how to protect EFH, and to regularly review and update EFH for a given species or stock.
- Strengthen requirements for EFH consultations to ensure that non-fishing impacts to habitat are minimized, including increased oversight by the councils and the public.

VI. Recover Unhealthy Fisheries

While MSA currently includes mandates to end overfishing and rebuild stocks, more guidance is needed to effectively and efficiently rebuild and maintain healthy fisheries.

Recommendations:

- Require that councils take immediate action to end overfishing when a stock is found to be overfished or approaching an overfished condition, as opposed to having two years.
- Require the revision of a rebuilding plan if NOAA Fisheries determines that the plan is not achieving its goals.
- If a rebuilding plan reaches its end and the stock hasn't recovered, a subsequent plan should have stricter requirements to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Effective federal fisheries management means abundant fish stocks, resilient ecosystems, and a reliable source of income and recreation for businesses and anglers. During the 117th Congress, we look forward to working with legislators and with our partners in the fishing and conservation communities to ensure a bright future for our fisheries resources and those who depend on them.

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