

Hogarth Speech at the Sustainable Seafood Summit (January 31, 2006)

So far this week, you've heard from fishermen, marketers, retailers, and environmental advocates. Now you'll hear a slightly different perspective on the critical issue of sustainable seafood. I'd like to talk about the role of government, and specifically, what NOAA Fisheries Service is doing to ensure the sustainability of seafood supplies. Our mission is to ensure the long-term sustainability of fisheries, while balancing other factors such as the needs of fishing communities and the protection of ocean wildlife.

Worldwide, fisheries and aquaculture provide direct employment and revenue to an estimated 38 million people -- mainly fishermen, but also an increasing number of fish farmers (FAO, 2004). In the United States, the commercial seafood industry contributes nearly \$32 billion per year to our economy and employs over 135,000 people. We're also one of the biggest seafood traders in the world, importing \$12 billion per year and exporting over \$3 billion. Americans consumed about 16.6 pounds of seafood per person in 2004, marking an increase for the third year in a row.

The latest research shows that seafood plays an important role in a healthy diet, with compelling evidence demonstrating the importance of Omega-3 fatty acids for cardiovascular health. The world's top researchers have found that seafood can also help fight illnesses such as cancer, inflammatory diseases, and Alzheimer's. Studies have linked seafood consumption with lower heart rates, lower cholesterol, lower blood pressure and lower body weight. Eating just a small amount of seafood that is high in Omega-3 fatty acids (such as shrimp, canned light tuna, salmon, pollock and catfish) each day can cut the risk of death from heart disease by 20%.

There are health benefits for pregnant and nursing women as well -- although they should avoid the five species of fish that are high in mercury. Seafood contains important nutrients that promote brain development and may lessen the effects of dyslexia, autism, hyperactivity and attention-deficit disorder in their children. Some of these exciting results, including the benefit of naturally-occurring selenium, were presented at a recent conference that was sponsored by the governments of Canada, Norway, Iceland and the United States.

Recognizing that the available science can be confusing to consumers, NOAA has commissioned the National Academy of Sciences to undertake a broad study of the risks and benefits of seafood, giving particular attention to vulnerable subpopulations, such as women who are pregnant or nursing. A world-class panel of scientists is examining the evidence, and results are expected later this year.

If we begin to follow current scientific advice by consuming at least 2 servings of seafood each week, and as the world's population continues to expand, we can expect that the demand for seafood will continue to grow. Clearly it is in our best interest to manage this resource carefully, by using the best available science to support sustainable harvest practices. The critical question before us is: *how can we continue to meet this global demand in a way that is sustainable over the long term?*

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization reports that about half of all monitored stocks are now fully exploited and another 25 percent are overexploited, depleted, or slowly recovering. The remaining 25 percent are under-exploited or moderately exploited. In many areas where traditionally-harvested stocks have been depleted, many fishermen are beginning to target less valuable species (FAO, 2004). Naturally, fishermen need to be concerned about their livelihood and their short-term bottom line, but the government needs to take a more long-term view toward ensuring the sustainability of our living marine resources.

NOAA's goal is to protect, restore and manage the use of coastal and ocean resources through an ecosystem approach to management. At the same time, we need to continue tracking the status of individual stocks, and ensure that they are rebuilt to their optimum yield according to strategies that are based on the biology of each particular species. NOAA is working through regional fishery management plans to increase the number of fish stocks being managed at sustainable levels. We are funding cooperative research that looks at ways to modify gear to more effectively catch target species while minimizing bycatch. A clean environment is also required to minimize contaminants in seafood, and NOAA Fisheries has strong stewardship responsibilities in this regard.

And let's not forget the importance of a global approach. People around the world are concerned about ensuring the sustainability of our seafood supply. Meeting this goal will require coordination among all nations. I'd like to mention three examples:

1. Regional Fishery Management Organizations are providing a forum for members to set limits on harvest, minimize bycatch, and enforce conservation measures through trade restrictions. I have been involved in this work through ICCAT, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. ICCAT has taken some historic steps over the last few years, by banning the wasteful practice of shark finning, setting up a process for trade sanctions against countries that violate conservation agreements, and developing a register of authorized vessels as a way to discourage illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing. Over the last 10 years, ICCAT has successfully rebuilt the stock of North Atlantic swordfish, and adopted international rebuilding plans for other species as well.
2. Negotiations are underway at the World Trade Organization to eliminate government subsidies to the wild capture fisheries sector, which have led to overcapacity and overfishing. This is important because it will level the playing field for those fleets that are not subsidized, especially small-scale fishermen, and lessen the pressure on fish stocks.
3. The United States strongly supported negotiations at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization that led to the adoption of guidelines for the labeling of seafood and seafood products in 2005. These guidelines establish broad and substantive parameters for the labeling of seafood as sustainably harvested.

Projections suggest that global seafood demand will more than triple by the year 2025, and it is clear that wild-caught fisheries will not be able to meet future market demands if harvests are limited to sustainable levels. Aquaculture is key to the future of a sustainable seafood supply, complementing wild catches to meet global demands. While the number of jobs for fishermen is stagnating, opportunities in the aquaculture sector have been steadily increasing; aquaculture already accounts for nearly a third of the world supply of seafood (FAO, 2004).

Today, the primary production of commercial aquaculture in the United States is in freshwater species, such as catfish. Most commercial marine aquaculture in the United States is currently shellfish, such as oysters, clams and mussels. However, research funded by NOAA over the past decade shows that there is great potential for the expansion of offshore aquaculture. Pilot projects – for example, using submerged cages to raise finfish – are showing good results in terms of production and the environment. These projects have demonstrated that the use of best practices and careful placement of sites can minimize environmental effects.

The expansion of aquaculture industries is often cited as a potential source of economic harm to commercial fisheries – however, this is not necessarily the case. Fisheries around the world are experiencing significant overcapacity as more stringent regulations are put in place to rebuild overfished stocks. In the United States, rationalization of fisheries through the adoption of dedicated access privilege programs has the potential to dramatically increase the profitability of individual fishing operations as capital investment is reduced to levels supported by the resource base. A side effect of this rationalization program is the dislocation of labor from the fishery. However, aquaculture can provide a source of employment for this displaced labor. The expansion of aquaculture operations will also increase demands on fisheries-related local infrastructure (for example, processing plants and distribution centers), preserving it for use by both the aquaculture and wild capture commercial fisheries.

We have recently proposed legislation in the U.S. Congress that would establish the authority to issue permits for offshore marine aquaculture operations. This in turn will create jobs and revenues for coastal communities. Our goal is to develop a sustainable aquaculture program that balances the needs of fishermen, coastal residents and visitors, seafood consumers, the environment, and the aquaculture industry. Once the legislation is in place, NOAA will engage in a public process to establish clear environmental standards, taking into account the lessons already learned through other aquaculture projects around the world. It is hoped that this bill will spur even more development of innovative technologies for environmentally sustainable offshore aquaculture at home and abroad. We are already making significant funding available -- \$4 million in 2006 -- for researchers to develop best practices through pilot projects.

Finally, I'd like to mention another new initiative at NOAA Fisheries. We are proposing to help the U.S. fishing industry set up seafood marketing councils as a way to educate Americans and potential export markets about the health benefits of eating fish, the importance of sustainable fishing, and the value of premium fish products.

The government would create the organizational structure and operational guidelines, and would ultimately approve or disapprove the formation of a council. Industry would design and fund the councils, which would have to pass a referendum vote and be subject to analyses and

public comment before being approved and established. Seafood marketing councils would not result in increased fishing pressure on stocks that are overcapitalized, nor would they affect any fishery management measures. We are accepting public comment on this proposal until February 23.

In closing, I'd like to mention that a key part of the government's role is to provide the best available information to the public. Events like this are an important part of this dialogue.

Thank you for your concern about the critical issues surrounding the sustainability of the world's seafood supply. While you're here at the conference, please visit our NOAA booth. I hope that by working together, we can ensure that future generations can maintain access to this precious resource.