



Highlights of [GAO-06-289](#), a report to congressional requesters

## FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

# Core Principles and a Strategic Approach Would Enhance Stakeholder Participation in Developing Quota-Based Programs

### Why GAO Did This Study

Dedicated access privilege (DAP) programs are one tool the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) uses to help end overfishing and promote conservation. Under a DAP program, NMFS sets an allowable catch in a fishery and allocates the privilege to harvest a portion of the total to eligible entities, such as fishermen. Because DAP programs can have significant impacts on fishermen and their communities, many believe that effective participation by fishermen and other stakeholders in the development of these programs is critical. GAO was asked to determine (1) the extent to which the regional fishery management councils are using a framework for effective participation and (2) the methods stakeholders and participation experts suggest for enhancing stakeholder participation in developing DAP programs.

### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NMFS establish a formal policy for stakeholder participation, including adopting a set of core principles; provide guidance and training to the councils and others on developing and using a strategic approach to stakeholder participation; and ensure that the councils develop and implement a framework for effective stakeholder participation.

NOAA reviewed a draft of this report and the agency generally agreed with the findings and recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-289](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-289).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Anu K. Mittal at (202) 512-9846 or [mittala@gao.gov](mailto:mittala@gao.gov).

### What GAO Found

The fishery management councils that GAO reviewed lack key elements of an effective stakeholder participation framework and therefore may be missing opportunities for all stakeholders to participate in the DAP program development process. Based on GAO's review of the literature and the experience of leading federal agencies in stakeholder participation, such a framework should include a strategic implementation approach that embodies a set of core principles, such as making key information readily available and understandable and fostering responsive, interactive communication between stakeholders and decision makers. However, fisheries stakeholders identified several areas where council practices do not fully adhere to the core principles GAO identified. For example, while the councils make DAP-related information available to stakeholders, this information is not always presented in an easily understandable way. Also, while stakeholders can testify at council meetings, according to participation experts, this one-way communication is not an effective way to share information because it does not lead to a dialogue between stakeholders and decision makers. Unlike other federal agencies, NMFS has neither developed a formal stakeholder participation policy nor provided the councils with guidance or training on how to develop and use a strategic approach to enhance stakeholder participation. While not legally required to do so, if NMFS adopted such an approach it could help ensure, among other things, that all relevant stakeholders are identified, specific participation goals are defined, and participation plans are implemented by the councils developing DAP programs.

Methods suggested by stakeholders and participation experts that could enhance stakeholder participation in the DAP program development process principally fall into five categories: (1) providing education and outreach; (2) holding meetings using different times, locations, and formats; (3) streamlining the DAP program development process; (4) diversifying interests represented in the council process; and (5) sharing decision-making authority. While using these methods can result in more effective participation, particularly when they are employed as part of a participation plan, these methods can also have certain disadvantages, such as increased costs. For example, the Marine Resource Education Project (MREP), which is sponsored by a group of universities in New England, offers several examples of promising practices. MREP provides stakeholders with training on fisheries management and science to help them better understand the council process and DAP issues, teaches the importance of being involved early and throughout the process, and provides diverse stakeholders with the opportunity to exchange information in informal settings. However, such training can be costly and may reach relatively few stakeholders.