

Comments on Draft Recommendations of U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy Stewardship Working Group

Good afternoon. My name is Lee Crockett and I am the Executive Director of the Marine Fish Conservation Network. The Network is a national coalition of fishing and environmental groups dedicated to the long-term conservation of ocean fish. We have more than 150 member organizations representing nearly 5 million people. Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to comment on the Stewardship Working Group's draft recommendations.

In general, the Network is pleased that the Working Group made positive recommendations in many of the areas that we have been concerned with for years. In our view adopting precautionary management principles and using ecosystem-based management tools will go a long way towards improving the management of our ocean resources. However, we question whether the current user dominated management system is able to carryout these new conservation mandates. While we generally support the Working Group's recommendations to make the councils more representative, and to separate quota setting from allocation among user groups, we question whether this is goes far enough. We encourage the Commission to explore more substantive changes to the management system. Specifically, the Commission should explore changes that put the conservation of marine ecosystems first, and allow exploitation of ocean resources to the extent that it is consistent with the conservation of marine ecosystems.

I would now like to briefly go over our major comments on the Working Group's draft recommendations.

Precautionary Approach.

- The Network strongly supports the use of the precautionary approach in managing ocean and coastal resources and applauds the Working Group for recommending its use to the full Commission.

- We suggest that the Commission not recommend limiting its use to instances where there are “threats of serious or irreversible damage,” rather it should be used to prevent this from happening.
- Finally, we recommended the definition of precautionary management included in our written comments because it is less limiting.

Ecosystem-based management.

- The Network has long argued that U.S. fisheries management should move from single species management to ecosystem-based management. Therefore we strongly support the Working Group’s recommendation that we begin phasing in ecosystem-based management.
- We recommend that the Commission make it clear that ecosystem-based management includes all species, not just those that are commercially important and that its primary goal be the conservation of biodiversity.
- We disagree with the Working Group’s recommendation that current fishery management council boundaries be used to delineate ecosystems. Ecosystem delineation should be a science-based process.

Biodiversity.

- We strongly support the Working Group’s statements on the need to protect and restore biodiversity. However, we encourage the Commission to go beyond studying biodiversity and the causes of its decline. Where existing knowledge is adequate, action to conserve, protect, and restore biodiversity is necessary.

Use and Review of Scientific Information.

- Our Board generally supports separating quota setting from allocation, because of their experience with the councils inappropriately manipulating stock assessments and quotas. However, we do not support giving this task to the SSCs because they are still subordinate to the councils and not truly independent.

Nomination and Appointment of RFMC Members.

- We think that the Working Group's recommendation will do little to rectify problems with council composition. In our view the Secretary of Commerce should be legally required to appoint a balanced membership for each council.
- We also recommend that the Commission address the conflicts of interest of many council members by recommending that any member who has disclosed a financial interest be prohibited from voting on any matter before the council that would affect that financial interest.

Dedicated Access Privileges or IFQs.

The Network is deeply concerned that privatizing public fish resources will facilitate the corporatization of our ocean fisheries with potentially devastating impacts on coastal communities. We are equally concerned that poorly regulated IFQs will do little to improve the conservation of ocean fish. Because of these concerns we believe that Congress must place a moratorium on new IFQ programs unless and until legislation to establish national standards for the design and conduct of IFQ programs is signed into law. The Network believes that such national standards, at a minimum, must:

- Promote the conservation of ocean fish by providing additional and substantial conservation benefits to the fishery.
- Limit the duration of IFQ programs and quota shares to 7 years.

- Provide for a fair and equitable initial allocation of quota shares.
- Ensure that IFQ programs and shares are reviewed and renewed only if they are meeting or exceeding the conservation requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.
- Define and prohibit the excessive consolidation of quota shares.

Reducing Capacity.

- The Network generally supports initiatives to reduce excess fishing capacity as long as such programs ensure that capacity is permanently reduced by eliminating vessels and permits.