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**NOAA MARKS ANOTHER YEAR OF SUCCESS IN REBUILDING
AMERICA'S MARINE FISH STOCKS; RELEASES ANNUAL REPORT TO CONGRESS**

Released today, NOAA's annual Status of U.S. Fisheries Report to Congress for 2002 demonstrates the continuing efforts of government and fishermen alike to improve America's marine fish stocks. The report states that an additional fish stock was fully rebuilt, four species were taken off the overfished list in 2002 as they head toward full recovery, and 70 overfished species continue to recover under federal rebuilding plans. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an agency of the Department of Commerce.

"We pause this year to look at our total progress to date in fulfilling Congress' vision of robust, healthy fisheries since implementation of the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996," said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries). "NOAA Fisheries, the councils, the states and fishermen have made concerted efforts to end overfishing and rebuild depleted fish stocks in order to enhance the long-term viability of U.S. fisheries."

A review of the past five years of fisheries management shows steady, incremental improvement in the status of America's fisheries. Twenty species have been taken off the overfished list and overfishing has been eliminated for twenty-five species, in spite of certain limitations such as slow growth and maturity of many exploited species and variable environmental impacts on fish populations.

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A smaller number of stocks have been newly declared as overfished or subject to overfishing in the past five years. However, many of these changes in status were due to increased knowledge and availability of information about those stocks and not from an actual deterioration of the stock condition.

In 2002, the Gulf of Maine/northern Georges Bank stock of silver hake was fully rebuilt. Meanwhile, four other fish stocks continue rebounding and are no longer overfished: redbfish, southern Georges Bank/mid-Atlantic silver hake, scup and South Atlantic gag grouper. Fishing pressure has been reduced substantially for Gulf of Maine haddock, South Atlantic red porgy, and Gulf of Mexico gag grouper, and these species are no longer subject to overfishing.

Status determinations for this year's report are based on fish stock assessments completed on or before Aug. 1, 2002. Between Aug. 1 and today's announcement, North Atlantic swordfish and Atlantic pollock have been assessed to be no longer overfished, and swordfish are almost fully rebuilt.

Seventy of the remaining 86 overfished species continue to recover under federal rebuilding plans and are monitored to ensure progress toward successful restoration. The remaining 16 stocks are either protected under other federal programs – such as the Endangered Species Act – and do not require rebuilding plans, rebuilding programs may be in development, or the stock may have been newly declared as overfished and will now require a rebuilding program.

Overfishing

The Status of Stocks report includes information about fishing activities on federally managed fish stocks to monitor whether fishing pressure is too high. If overfishing is occurring, NOAA Fisheries and the councils design plans to reduce fishing pressure to ensure that species do not become overfished.

In 2002, three stocks (Gulf of Maine haddock, South Atlantic red porgy, and Gulf of Mexico gag grouper) were removed from the overfishing list, while five stocks (Georges Bank cod, witch flounder, Cape Cod yellowtail flounder, Pacific whiting and finetooth shark) were added to the list. Overfishing determinations for several other species changed to "unknown" due to lack of a current stock assessment.

Overfished

A fish stock that is newly listed as overfished sets into motion a series of actions that prompt development of a rebuilding plan.

This year's good news is tempered by information that some stocks were added to the overfished list in 2002. Stocks declared overfished for the first time in this report include Pacific whiting and yelloweye rockfish in the Northwest region and southern New England/mid-Atlantic windowpane flounder in the Northeast region.

Several New England groundfish stocks were returned to the overfished list in 2002. However, this was a result of changes in the overfishing definitions and calculations of biological reference points, and in fact the fish biomasses have steadily continued to increase. Five stocks were already managed under rebuilding programs and had made significant gains in recent years.

Summer flounder in the mid-Atlantic was returned to the list of overfished species in 2002, having been taken off in 2001. However, the last assessment – which determined summer flounder to be overfished – also projected the stock would no longer be overfished as of Jan. 1, 2003. The Mid-Atlantic Council will receive results of a new assessment this summer.

Unknown Status

The Status of Stocks report has been the subject of a considerable amount of criticism from marine advocacy groups in the past due to the number of species not routinely assessed, and therefore not labeled with a status determination. While all marine life is valuable in an ecosystem context, science and management funding is prioritized to address those fisheries under the most harvesting pressure.

NOAA Fisheries has undertaken an aggressive plan of action to improve its ability to assess more of the 673 fish stocks whose status is labeled unknown in this report, and to strengthen existing data collection and assessment programs. The agency is in the process of implementing its [Marine Fisheries Stock Assessment Improvement Plan](#), which calls for multi-year increases in staffing and budget to upgrade the agency's stock assessment capabilities.

“This Status of Stocks Report reflects how marine management programs are designed to be flexible to respond to shifts in species status in the dynamic ocean environment,” Hogarth said. “Resource management programs in the U.S. are among the best in the world at balancing conservation of marine life with sustainable harvest and consumption, and we continue to improve our policy decisions with an eye toward developing and maintaining robust and productive marine ecosystems for both current and future generations.”

Status of Stocks, 2002 at a Glance

- 932 Federally managed stocks
 - 259 Major stocks (200,000 + pounds in landings)
 - 673 Minor stocks (under 200,000 pounds in landings)
- 695 Status unknown or not defined
- 86 Overfished stocks
- 1 Stock approaching an overfished condition
- 66 Stocks subject to overfishing
- 70 Rebuilding programs in place

- The 259 major fish stocks in the United States account for 99.9 percent of total landings, totaling 9 billion pounds.

- Of the 658 stocks with an unknown overfishing status, 89 stocks, or 14 percent are major, as defined above.
- Of the 274 stocks with a known overfishing status, 170 stocks, or 62 percent, are major.
- Of the 695 stocks with an unknown overfished status, 99 stocks, or 14 percent, are major.
- Of the 274 stocks with a known overfished status, 160 stocks, or 68 percent, are major.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.

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