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NOAA unveils improved way to estimate saltwater recreational fishing

Method improves accuracy of recreational fishing catch statistics

NOAA today announced it has begun to use an improved method to estimate the amount of fish caught by saltwater anglers, which will allow rules that fishermen follow to be based on more accurate information.

The method is part of an overall effort to improve the accuracy of recreational catch data collected by the Marine Recreational Information Program, and was developed by a team of NOAA scientists and outside experts.

"The new estimation method is a fundamental change that better reflects what is happening on the water and within the recreational fishing community," said Eric Schwaab, NOAA's acting assistant secretary of commerce for conservation and management. "Better, more accurate estimates can only be a plus for the saltwater recreational fishing industry, which provides jobs for many Americans and contributes to the economic vitality of our coastal communities."

The agency today released recalculated estimates going back to 2004 using the new method. There were no overall trends in terms of size or direction of the new estimates; catch estimates for some species go up, some go down, and some remain about the same. To view comparisons of recreational catch estimates using the previous method and the revised method, go to: http://www.CountMyFish.noaa.gov.

"The recreational fishing community has a shared interest in scientifically sound, accurate data and a shared responsibility in making it available," said Bruce Freeman, a New Jersey recreational fisherman, scientist and member of the Jersey Coast Anglers Association. "With this new estimation method, NOAA is taking an important first step toward the high-quality catch data that many of us have been calling for."

Using these new estimates, NOAA will now work with the regional fishery management councils, the states, and other stakeholders to integrate these results into fisheries science and management.

Beginning this year, NOAA will use the new method to calculate estimates for the Atlantic coast and Gulf of Mexico for use in fishery management and stock assessment by NOAA, regional fishery management councils and states. Other areas of the country, such as the West Coast, Hawaii, and Alaska, use different survey and estimation methods for saltwater recreational catch. NOAA is working with these regional partners to conduct similar evaluations and, as necessary, implement improvements to their estimation methods.

The improved methodology addresses a key issue identified in the 2006 report by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. The study, commissioned by NOAA, identified a series of untested assumptions the agency was using to generate estimates based on information gathered from anglers. Some of those assumptions included the average amount of fish anglers were catching at different locations and the amount of fishing anglers were doing during different times of day.

By reviewing past data, the team of NOAA scientists and outside experts developed corrections as needed, resulting in more accurate estimates. Improving catch estimates was a major focus of the Magnuson-Stevens Reauthorization Act, passed by Congress and signed by the President in 2007.

Another important part of the Marine Recreational Information Program is the National Saltwater Angler Registry, which will help NOAA improve the accuracy of fishing effort estimates by increasing the proportion of fishing households that are surveyed. Additional improvements that will increase the accuracy of the estimates are being developed, including revised dockside survey methods, testing of approaches to improving data timeliness, and use of electronic logbooks in the for-hire vessel sector. To learn more about MRIP, go to: http://www.CountMyFish.noaa.gov.

NOAA's mission is to understand and predict changes in the Earth's environment, from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the sun, and to conserve and manage our coastal and marine resources. Join us on Facebook, Twitter and our other social media channels.

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