

Science-Based Catch Limits Are Essential To Healthy Fisheries

Chronic overfishing has diminished the nation's fisheries for decades, at great economic and ecological costs. In 2006, a bipartisan majority in Congress took action to require fishery managers to set science-based annual catch limits (ACLs) to prevent overfishing, and accountability measures (AMs) to ensure fishermen stay within those limits. After years of efforts, and in time for the 2011 statutory deadline, fishery managers and their scientific advisors are now on the cusp of implementing these measures in every federal fishery in the country. However, just as they approach the finish line, a bill that would weaken these requirements, misleadingly named the "Fisheries Science Improvement Act" (H.R. 2304), has been introduced in Congress. Failure to implement science-based catch limits would derail efforts to stop overfishing and rebuild depleted fish populations to healthy levels. Supporters of H.R. 2304 are promoting the legislation with false claims about the inadequacy of fisheries science to implement ACLs. This fact sheet responds to some of these misconceptions.

ANNUAL CATCH LIMITS CAN BE SET FOR ALL SPECIES

Claims that ACLs cannot be set for fish species lacking full stock assessments are false. All fish species managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) have data—such as catch history, fishing effort over time, and life history characteristics—that can be used for setting rational catch limits.¹ Indeed, for scores of species throughout the country, ACLs have been set or are close to finalization using these approaches. For example, the fishery managers in the South Atlantic have developed a flexible mechanism. ACLs for species not yet assessed are set as a function of recent landings, effort, and vulnerability. For species that show no particular vulnerability or history of overfishing, catch limits are set at status quo landings levels, with no anticipated impact on fishing opportunities.

For more information,
please contact:

David Newman

dnewman@nrdc.org

212.727.4557

 [switchboard.nrdc.org/
blogs/dnewman](http://switchboard.nrdc.org/blogs/dnewman)



H.R. 2304: A Setback for Science and Sustainable Fisheries

The bill threatens to:

- Delay ACLs and AMs for the majority of federally-managed fish species, including some that are overfished
- Permanently exclude certain species from being subject to ACLs and AMs
- Reduce incentives for improving scientific knowledge of a majority of managed stocks
- Undercut years of progress and millions of tax dollars spent toward advancing the nearly-completed adoption of ACLs and AMs

Science-Based Catch Limits Are Essential To Healthy Fisheries

The South Atlantic: A Case Study in Chronic Overfishing and the Need for ACLs & AMs

- Nine species of snapper and grouper have been subject to overfishing for more than twenty years
- Seven of the top 15 most landed snapper and grouper species are still being overfished
- Five species are depleted to less than one-half healthy levels

Source: NOAA Fisheries, Status of U.S. Fisheries, First Quarter Update (2011); South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC), "Snapper Grouper Stock Rankings Presentation," Council Meeting Briefing Book (February 2011); SAFMC, Snapper-Grouper Fishery Management Plan, Amendment 4 (1991).

FLEXIBLE MANAGEMENT OPTIONS FOR MULTI-SPECIES FISHERIES

A common assertion is that ACLs for minor species could limit broader fishing opportunities if their limits are exceeded. Several regions with large numbers of stocks not assessed, such as the Pacific, Gulf of Mexico, and South Atlantic, are adopting fishery complexes, wherein groupings of species with similar life history characteristics are managed by aggregating their collective ACLs. If done properly, this approach permits variability in catch levels of individual species within the complex, while still preventing overfishing. Fishery managers may also designate certain fish as "ecosystem component" species. This designation—intended for minor fish species that are neither threatened by overfishing nor overfished, and not targeted by fishermen—permits fishery managers to continue monitoring their place in the ecosystem without having to set and enforce ACLs and AMs. Where appropriate, this approach can alleviate the administrative costs of managing ACLs for species that are not sought by fishermen or vulnerable to overfishing.

PROCEDURES EXIST FOR ACCURATELY MONITORING RECREATIONAL CATCH AND ENFORCING CATCH LIMITS

Proponents of weakening the MSA argue that recreational catch data is not sufficiently precise to justify any consequences when an ACL is exceeded. This concern is being addressed with a revamped recreational data collection system and flexibility in the methods available to hold fishermen accountable to ACLs. The newly improved system, the Marine Recreational Information Program, was designed to estimate recreational catch with greater precision. It is a significant improvement over the former program. While the time lag needed to process the data may prevent immediate in-season actions to constrain catch below an ACL, managers have the flexibility to design accountability measures, through the use of annual catch targets (ACTs) and post-seasonal adjustments to ACLs, which do not require near real-time catch reporting. New data collection tools—such as Smartphone catch reporting apps, expanded observer coverage, and vessel monitoring systems—are continuing to improve the accuracy and timeliness of the data. Delaying the use of ACLs will reduce, not improve, incentives to advance these data collection tools.

STAYING THE COURSE TOWARD SCIENCE-BASED CATCH LIMITS

It is misleading to claim that we can improve fisheries science and management by delaying or eliminating science-based catch limits and accountability measures. Yet, H.R. 2304 would do just that. The hard work of establishing a new system of ACLs is on track for completion by the end of 2011. Turning back now would be wasteful, unnecessary, and counterproductive. For the sake of restoring and maintaining healthy fish populations and the economically important fisheries that depend on them, we must stay the course with science-based fisheries management and reject such efforts to turn back the clock.

¹ See Kristen T. Honey *et al.*, "From Rags to Fishes: Data-Poor Methods for Fishery Managers," *Managing Data-Poor Fisheries: Case Studies, Models & Solutions* 1:159–184, California Sea Grant (2010) (describing established scientific tools using sequential trend analyses with population and length-based models); see also MRAG Americas, "Use of Productivity-Susceptibility Analysis (PSA) in Setting Annual Catch Limits for U.S. Fisheries: An Overview," (2009) (describing the use of life history information to conduct a productivity-susceptibility analysis for purposes of setting ACLs for unassessed species); NOAA Fisheries Toolbox, Version 3.1 (containing scientifically reviewed and accepted tools for conducting data-poor assessments).