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Revisiting Fishery Research Funding

By Pietro Parravano and Zeke Grader

It was eight years ago this month when we wrote in this column of the dependence of our fisheries on solid fishery research, along with regular and comprehensive data collection. In that article (see *Fishermen's News*, August 2003, "Planning And Paying For Future Fisheries Research: Fish Stocks and Fishing Communities Depend on Good Data," www.pcffa.org/fn-aug03.htm) we recommended the creation of a national fishery trust fund that could provide the financial support for research and data collection, along with other essential fishery programs, that would be outside of the annual and always uncertain Congressional appropriations process.

Now there is nothing particularly significant about eight years, except that it reflects the time of a US President's full two terms. In the case here, that eight years reflects a period where doing nothing has taken us from concern for our fisheries to a crisis in our fisheries.

In that time, one national Administration failed to address the issue of fishery research and data collection needs and now, tragically, it appears that a second Administration – one that promised change – is following the same course of ignorance and indifference, to the peril of America's oldest industry.

The recession at that time, discussed in that 2003 essay, blew into a

full-fledged worldwide Great Recession. Now, the budget hawks who remained largely silent during the first eight years of the last decade are looking for massive cuts in federal spending, which could include funds for essential fishery research and data collection. Where were they in 2003, 2006, 2008?

In the past eight years, however, Congress has strengthened the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA), including provisions in the 2006 reauthorization to require regional fishery management councils to follow the advice of their Scientific & Statistical Committees. The MSA now mandates establishment of annual catch limits (ACLs) as part of the effort to control against overfishing.

While overfishing has not been a problem in recent years on the West Coast and Alaska, it is still a problem in parts of the country where they have struggled to prevent it while putting in place stock rebuilding plans.

Most of us recognize that the management of fisheries – for them to be sustainable – must be science-based. From that standpoint, the new language in the MSA is welcomed. The problem is, no one in Congress or the administration has come up with a solution for how to fund the science that is to be the foundation for our fishery management.

Indeed, the Department of Com-

merce's National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in this administration, proposed taking money from collaborative fishery research and using it to fund their fishery cure-all *du jour* – catch shares. Sure, NOAA – which seems to think it, not the National Marine Fisheries Service, is in charge of fisheries – blamed the Office of Management & Budget (OMB), but the effect was the same – less money for research and data collection when more was needed.

It is easy to become angry over what has happened over the past eight years. The Bush and Obama Administrations and the Congress committed to two major wars. Historians will debate the wisdom of one or both of those, but there is little doubt about the folly of not having a plan to pay for those two conflicts.

Instead, tax cuts were enacted – justified perhaps for the middle class to stimulate an economy, but foolhardy in thinking spending by the wealthiest one percent was going to stimulate demand for the fish we harvest.

Now as a result of the financial hole we allowed two Presidents and Congress and Wall Street to dig for us, massive cuts are being proposed in federal discretionary funding for everything from food stamps, to school lunch programs, to environmental protection, to food safety inspection, along with key



fishery research and data collection programs in the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) budget.

The Options

The solutions being offered up by many in Congress, and parts of the media, are no answer for our fisheries. Deregulation is certainly no answer. Most of us have long recognized that regulation is needed for our fisheries to work. Where government hasn't enacted rules, we often found ways to establish them on our own – just look at the history of America's lobster fishery. Moreover, we know strict environmental regulation is needed to protect the fish and shellfish stocks we depend on – in their watersheds, estuaries and the ocean.

None of us likes paying taxes. But fishermen have often been the first to devise ways to tax themselves to pay for the programs we needed. Look at what Alaskan fishermen have done; look at what California fishermen have done through their Salmon and Herring Stamp programs.

Our fisheries need to follow a prescription for what really ails them. We ignore science at our own peril. We need to get the science and then adhere to it.

The MSA is clear that our fisheries must follow the science. The issue, thus, is assuring we have the very best science available on which to base good fishery management decisions. However, developing that science base requires money for research on the stocks and their habitats (e.g., life histories) as well as regular and comprehensive data collection on the

size and status of fish stocks and their ecosystem.

Short Term – Congressional Appropriations

In the intervening years since the publication of our August 2003 piece here in *Fishermen's News*, Congress has acted – as a result of language inserted by Senators Stevens and Boxer in the 2006 reauthorization of the MSA – to establish a national fishery trust fund that could support necessary fishery research and data collection, along with other essential fishery programs. The problem is, no funding mechanism has been developed yet to support that trust fund now embedded in the Magnuson-Stevens Act. That means, for now, we are still dependent on Congressional appropriations for funding key fishery programs.

In the short term this means fishermen will need to focus on appropriations for the 2012 fiscal year (FY 2012), or whatever fishery appropriations are provided for in a continuing resolution if there is no agreement on a federal budget.

Five core funding programs have been identified in the NOAA/NMFS budget, which are critical for both commercial and recreational fishery research and data collection. They are: 1) expanding annual stock assessments; 2) collecting fishery statistics; 3) observer programs; 4) cooperative research (i.e., fisherman-scientist); and 5) survey and monitoring.

These core programs provide the “best information available” upon which the annual catch limits are set, and are the science our

fishery management is to be based on. Remember, the less data, the more restrictive and precautionary quotas and other management measures will be set.

Likewise, bad data – that may be the result of a failure to conduct comprehensive and regular stock assessments – puts either fisheries or stocks at risk.

Yes, a lot of the dialogue from some NGOs and agency folks about the precautionary approach and ecosystem management can be tiresome. Putting that aside, however, the truth is that there is no getting around the need for good science. Efforts legislatively to work around the MSA mandates on science-based management decisions may provide some immediate relief for some fisheries, but then put those fisheries at greater risk for the future, if severe overfishing results and lengthy rebuilding plans later have to be enacted – even totally closing a fishery.

The better course, it seems, is to comply with the MSA and work now to get the funds needed to support the necessary scientific foundations for fishery management to make all our fisheries more sustainable.

Whether a budget is passed for this coming fiscal year or the government continues to be run on continuing resolutions, it is going to be important for the fishing industry to come together and work to ensure that these five core national fishery research and data collection programs are funded.

Unlike the rest of the NOAA/NMFS budget and numerous other federal discretionary funded programs,

the outlook for funding these five core programs looks encouraging, but it will still take work. First, these five core programs enjoy support – certainly no opposition – among most fishing and conservation groups. Second, there appears to be some bipartisan support for these programs. Finally, we have at least one organization in DC – the Marine Fish Conservation Network (MFCN) – that has made securing appropriations for these five core programs a high priority.

MFCN (www.conserve-fish.org) is a national coalition, whose membership includes some commercial and recreational fishing organizations, plus most of the nation's national and regional environmental organizations engaged in marine conservation, along with a smattering of large aquariums and research institutions. Since being organized almost two decades ago around the 1996 MSA reauthorization, the Network's primary focus has been on the Magnuson-Stevens Act and its implementation. Up until last year, MFCN's work centered on MSA policy – creating the statutory language, regulations and guidelines development and implementation by NMFS and the regional councils.

PCFFA has been a member of the Network since its earliest days and has been a tireless proponent at the MFCN general membership and board level arguing for a focus on fishery management appropriations.

What good did it do, after all, if we succeeded in our lobbying to require stricter adherence to prohibitions on overfishing, to reduce



NETWORK RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CORE FISHERIES PROGRAMS, FY2012

National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration/National Marine Fisheries Service Fisheries Research & Management Budget Lines	FY10 Enacted Budget (Million \$)	FY12 President's Request (Million \$)	FY12 MFCN Request (Million \$)
Expanding Annual Stock Assessments	50.9	67.1	67.1
Fisheries Statistics (MRIP)	21.0	24.4	24.4
Observer Program	41.0	39.2	50.0
Cooperative Research	17.5	7.2	17.5
Survey and Monitoring	23.7	24.2	24.2

Request: The Network requests \$21.2 million above the President's FY12 budget request for core programs within the National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS) that support fishery management by providing expanded data collection, improved catch accounting and monitoring, and additional fisheries stock assessments.

Justification: Information provided by these core programs reduces scientific and management uncertainty and improves the ability of fishery managers to set sustainable annual catch limits (ACLs) that prevent overfishing. The Network supports the President's request of \$67.1 million to expand annual stock assessments and \$24.4 for Fisheries Statistics to increase funding for recreational fishery monitoring activities, but seeks additional funding for Observers and Cooperative Research. Investments in these programs are vital to reduce the risk of overfishing, improve fishing opportunities, and increase fishing industry confidence in the science being used to make management decisions.

- **Expand annual stock assessments** – Assessments provide the scientific basis for determining whether a stock is experiencing overfishing or overfished. Increased funding is needed to increase the number of major fisheries stocks with adequate assessments and to update existing assessments on a regular basis.
- **Fisheries statistics** – Fisheries Statistics includes funding for the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), which is designed to expand and improve the quality of marine recreational fishery data. Increased funding for MRIP is vital to improve the precision and timeliness of recreational fishing data in order to manage recreational saltwater catch limits more effectively.
- **Observer Program** – Trained observers provide fisheries catch and bycatch data that is essential to produce stock assessments, reduce bycatch, monitor fishery compliance with catch limits, and increase industry confidence in scientific information used to set catch limits. Moreover, many fisheries now require observers and that cost could be onerous on many fleets without some federal funding.
- **Cooperative Research** – Cooperative research funds fishing industry partnerships with scientists to help improve the quality of fish stock assessments, reduce non-target bycatch mortality, and test new technologies by making use of fishermen's experience and knowledge in the collection of data.
- **Survey and Monitoring** – This activity supports the collection of fishery-independent survey data that is essential for developing and updating stock assessments. Funding for this activity supports resource surveys of red snapper, bluefin tuna, bluefish, striped bass, Alaska pollock and others.

bycatch and protect habitat, and to base management decisions on good science, if we did not also work for the funding required to get that information – the research and data collection – that was to be the foundation for fishery conservation and management? In all of our efforts surrounding Magnuson-Stevens, our intent was never to restrict or close fisheries, but to ensure they were well managed.

Most conservation and fishery organizations – within and outside of the Network – have largely been oblivious to the appropriations process (excepting for some small items an individual group might want, usually through an earmark). However, the Network's staff has been sympathetic to appropriations needs, and now has its membership support to "work for the money." Indeed, one of MFCN's new staff hirer's background is in Defense Department appropriations work.

The following is from MFCN's fact sheet on the five core fishery programs that it has been discussing with members from both chambers and both sides of the aisle.

Our fishing fleet depends on good scientific information, all of which has to be paid for.

Fishermen should take the time now to contact their US Representative and Senators asking their support for these five core programs. Contact the Marine Fish Conservation Network – whether you agree with them on other issues or not – and ask how you can support Congressional appropriations for these five core programs.

The alternative of greater restrictions on fishing, or no fishing at all because of a lack of scientific information, is no real alternative.

Long Term – A National Fishery Trust Fund

The long-term solution to the chronic problem of fighting for Congressional appropriations for key fishery programs each year, even in the best of times, is to develop a dedicated funding mechanism outside of the appropriations process, i.e., a fishery trust fund.

The nation's recreational fisheries have greatly benefited from the Sportfishing Restoration Fund (SRF), also known as the Wallop-Breaux and, before, the Dingell-Johnson fund. Much of the nation's transportation infrastructure (e.g., federal highways, bridges) are paid for out of the Highway Trust Fund, a fund supported by our highway gas and diesel taxes. Trust funds are, thus, nothing new and in many instances have proven highly successful.

Both the Pew Oceans Commission and the US Commission on Ocean Policy recommended the creation of a national oceans trust fund to pay for the nation's ocean programs. We have always believed a similar trust fund, with its own revenue source and its own funding priorities, made a great deal of sense for our fisheries.

Since the publication of August 2003 *Fishermen's News* article, we at PCFFA and IFR have put together a discussion draft of model legislation for a national fishery trust. That draft largely followed the outline of the article, including a proposed



nominal conservation fee applied to the sale of all fish and shellfish – wild or cultured, foreign or domestic – sold in the US as its funding source.

During the 1996 MSA reauthorization, PCFFA pushed, albeit mostly alone, for inclusion of a trust fund in the legislation. We did have some success. As was mentioned, the late Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK) and Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) successfully inserted language amending the MSA during that reauthorization to include the national fishery trust fund language, but unfortunately no funding source was then identified.

With the 2006 Stevens-Boxer language as an impetus, we have had discussions with numerous Congressional offices about the trust fund – suggesting funding sources as well as mechanisms for distributing the funds collected. The idea has met with varying degrees of favor.

What most Congressional offices ask, understandably, is, “where is the support?” All we can reply is that there’s not much yet, since most conservation and fishing groups have not been paying attention to funding for research or other fishery programs, and certainly not to the development of a trust fund outside of the normal appropriations process.

The second problem, of course, is much of the national debate over budgets and funding has been dominated by all the “no new tax” rhetoric, regardless of the merits or necessity of any program. This is too bad, because even a modest 3.5 percent fee on fish sales nationally would

raise an estimated \$4 billion annually – or about four times NMFS annual budget. With that kind of stable funding there would be no more “data poor” fisheries and many other programs ranging from new gear development to seafood health inspections, seafood labeling enforcement and seafood marketing could be fully met.

Even in these difficult financial times, however, there may be some hope for finally identifying a revenue source for a national fishery trust fund. This past year, Senators Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) introduced national ocean trust fund legislation, to create a National Endowment for the Oceans, Coasts, and Great Lakes (S. 973) “in order to protect and preserve these natural resources for future generations.”

According to the Senate authors, “The National Endowment for the Oceans will provide the necessary funding to implement this much needed policy. Current federal funding for the research and protection of ocean and coastal regions is unreliable at best – subject to the yearly budget and appropriation process. The National Endowment for the Oceans, Coasts, and Great Lakes Act would provide steady funding that universities, non-profit organizations, and government agencies can count on every year to supplement their existing efforts. It will fund research to ensure that ocean policy decisions are based on sound science, and provide resources to ensure that regional planning entities can create and implement coastal and marine spatial planning that both

manages and protects ocean and coastal resources. The Endowment would be funded by interest accrued from the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund and the dedication of 12.5 percent of revenues from offshore energy development, including oil, gas, and renewable energy.”

Earlier this year, when discussions were ongoing regarding another continuing resolution to fund the government, PCFFA wrote to President Obama suggesting he consider support for a revenue stream for the fishery trust fund that could, at least, remove some of the pressure from NOAA/NMFS funding. That St. Patrick’s Day letter (www.pcffa.org/FishFundingLtrtoPresident-17Mar11.pdf) was met with stone silence. Not even a reply acknowledging receipt.

Things in DC, it turns out, were much as we thought. NOAA and NMFS will complain incessantly about a lack of funds, but won’t lift a finger to help or support proposals that would provide them funding. And, that’s exactly why we have narrowed our support for the two agencies’ budgets to the five core programs only.

Since the St. Patrick’s Day letter, at least one alternative revenue source has been proposed for financing the national fishery trust fund. It is much more modest than that proposed by PCFFA – only about \$180 million, not \$1 to 4 billion, annually – but could certainly help to fund many of our fishery research and data collection needs. The best part is there is no new tax or fee to raise the ire of the Tea Party. That proposal would redirect the exist-

ing Saltonstall-Kennedy Act (S-K) monies to the MSA’s national fishery trust fund for distribution to the regions based on a competitive grants program open to the fishing industry, academia and government (including tribal, state and local).

S-K funds are derived from a tariff on fish and fish products (e.g., jewelry made from coral) imported into the U.S. The S-K program, since its inception in 1954, has been used for various programs in the past, including marketing and development, but has become largely a slush fund for NMFS in recent years with no accountability. The current proposal would be to enact accountability and transparency into S-K Act funding and direct it now where it is most needed for fishery research and data collection.

We are cognizant of the effort in Alaska and elsewhere to dedicate the S-K Act funds for national fishery marketing programs and certainly understand the need – for some Alaska fisheries and to help the Gulf recover its markets. It may be that a program redirecting S-K to the trust fund could include marketing, along with research and data collection. The top priority, however, is to be sure we can fish and that requires money for the science. Then we can begin thinking about marketing. Although much more modest than our proposal of eight years ago, redirecting S-K revenues to the national fishery trust would be a good start on resolving the uncertainty of money for science and, in turn, whether our fleets can fish.

Conclusion

It is easy to become disillusioned over the current



situation regarding lack of funds for the research and data collection needed to support good fishery management and to keep our fisheries open.

But before letting depression settle in, let's look at the opportunities that are before us for funding our core fishery programs in the near term, and see an opening to

develop (after all these years) a reliable revenue source capable of supporting our research and data needs over the long-term.

Its time to get behind the MFCN appropriations campaign for the five core fishery programs. Its time to get behind efforts to redirect S-K monies to the national fishery trust fund that supports pro-

grams essential for the future of our fisheries. 🐟

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