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Agenda 2013 – Part II

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In last month's *Fishermen's News*, we began a discussion of those issues needing to be at the forefront of a fishery policy agenda for 2013. Seven were proposed, and three were addressed in Part I in the November 2012 issue:

Protecting fishing communities, developing sustainable onshore aquaculture, and protecting and restoring rivers and watersheds.

Here in Part II, are the other four issues that we think fisheries will need to focus on in 2013.

Research, Stock Assessments, Data Collection

The management and regulation of our fisheries is dependent on knowledge generated from a combination of research, stock assessments and data collection. Without this information it is nearly impossible to sustainably conduct fisheries.

Regulations based on too little information can result in overfishing and less fish for the future, or even stock collapses. On the other hand, imposing extremely conservative regulations on a fishery where there is little information means the full economic benefit of the stocks may never be realized, in addition to the economic hardships that can befall fishing fleets and communities.

This column has discussed the need for fishery research, robust stock assessments and regular and continuous data collection for more than a decade now. The need for good science should be obvious to everyone; the problems with "bad science" are well known. Indeed, the amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act in 2006 prescribe a "precautionary approach" requiring more severe constraints on those fisheries that are "data poor."

It is then in everyone's best interest to work to ensure we have a good knowledge base for fishery management. Ocean instrumentation, dedicated research vessels, and collaborative research and data collection programs involving fishermen and their vessels working with scientists will all be key to developing a deep and up-to-date science base for managing fisheries.

While there is a fairly broad consensus on the need for good science in fisheries, the problem this next year will be finding the resources to support the necessary research, stock assessments and other data collection. With or without budget sequestration, the federal budget deficit – much as we warned would happen back in August 2003 – puts our fishery needs in stiff competition with all our federal priorities, ranging

from defense to education, never mind demands for research dollars elsewhere such as funding weather satellites. And, given the condition of most States' budgets, don't look for any help there.

Our challenge in 2013 is going to be two-fold. First, fishermen will need to make a strong case for fishery science to Congress, the Administration and the public. Second, we will need to fight to get fishery science funding into the appropriations process, or find alternative funding methods as discussed below.

Addressing and Adapting to Climate Change

Global climate change, including its "evil twin" of ocean acidification, is already starting to hit our industry. And all projections are that these impacts will get worse over the next several decades.

Our first task as an industry now is to figure out ways to adapt to what we know is coming. Our second task is to engage politically with other organizations worldwide in trying to limit the climate change damage.

Adapting to Sea Level Rises and Stronger Storms: All current climate model projections show major increases in worldwide sea levels over the



next decades. Some of that increase has already occurred, with sea levels already rising 7-10 inches during the 20th Century. Coupled with stronger storms, coastal destruction like that of recent hurricane Sandy may soon become the norm.

The National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council recently published a report assessing how sea level rises will affect the US West Coast, Sea-Level Rise for the Coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington: Past, Present, and Future (2012) (<http://dels.nas.edu/Report/Level-Rise-Coasts/13389>). Several states now have adaptation programs. Protecting commercial fishing port infrastructure should be a higher priority, both from sea level rises and stronger storms.

Adverse Impacts on Salmon: The west coast's basic hydrology is projected to change over the next decades, adversely affecting salmon runs. Vulnerable salmon runs need to be protected from currently uncontrollable global climate impacts by reducing already existing (but controllable) local stresses, such as water over-appropriation and loss of historic habitat. The fishing industry has been working on salmon protection for decades, but needs to greatly ramp up its efforts.

Changing Oceans, Changing Fisheries: Major ocean currents are changing, as are upwelling patterns affecting ocean food chains. These changes are accelerating. Thus the past is becoming less and less useful as a predictor of the future.

What that means is that fishery management must become much more flexible, and based far more on real-time ocean monitoring, than in the past. We can no longer depend on ocean fish migrations patterns of the past. Even the species composition of ocean ecosystems is now changing in ways that we cannot predict. Ocean ecosystem research is thus no longer a luxury, but a pathway to fisheries survival.

Ocean Acidification: Excess CO₂ in the air combines with seawater to make carbonic acid. The shellfish industry in Washington's Puget Sound is collapsing

and coral reefs in many places are dying off from acidification in combination with ocean temperature rises. We have no real idea what impact increasing ocean acidification will have on most other species. Again, research is the key to adaptation.

Climate Change Prevention – And Political Action: The US fishing industry collectively pumps at least \$152 billion per year into the US economy, providing two million jobs. Worldwide the commercial fishing industry accounts for 8 percent of the world's economy and is a major food provider for billions.

And yet our industry has been missing in action in the political fight to head off the worst impacts of global climate change. This is a complacency our industry can no longer afford – either in Congress or worldwide. We have far more to lose than most.

Overhauling Fishery Management

Our nation's fisheries management is a mess. This is not an indictment of any one Administration or political party – the problem has spanned across administrations of both parties going back to the Nixon reorganization creating the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration and putting fisheries under a mainly science agency.

The old non-regulatory Bureau of Commercial Fisheries – combined with the marine section of the Bureau of Sport Fisheries when the two were extracted from the US Fish & Wildlife Service to create the new National Marine Fisheries Service – was suddenly thrust into a regulatory arena with the 1976 passage of the Fishery Conservation & Management Act. The fledgling agency was hardly ready for the role of regulating vast resources in the newly created 200-mile fishery zone, nor having to work and support the new regional fishery councils with members from both the public and the States.

The creation and transition to a regulatory entity was not easy, and the difficulties can be seen in the decadal reauthorizations of the Magnuson-Stevens Act when, each time, Congress has

to go back and give the agency further direction to correct numerous screw-ups.

All of this has not been helped by the fact that NOAA, which has suffered an inferiority complex since its creation, has felt the need to increasingly interject itself into fishery matters – for which it had no knowledge or experience – to gain attention for itself (e.g., referring to NMFS as “NOAA Fisheries” or promoting IFQs and now “catch shares”).

Both the Administration and Congress are aware of the problems with NOAA and fisheries. The President suggested moving NOAA (and with it NMFS) from Commerce to Interior. House Republicans, on the other hand, just want to do away with the Department of Commerce, seemingly oblivious to where our nation's fishery agency would be housed.

The overhaul of fishery management was discussed in this column this past July (“A Fishery Declaration of Independence: Time for NMFS to Get Out of NOAA,” www.pcffa.org/fn-Jul12.htm). It suggested removing NMFS from NOAA, making fisheries a stand-alone agency within the Department of Commerce. At the same time, it proposed that the nation's freshwater fisheries be removed from the Fish & Wildlife Service and placed in NMFS, creating an all-encompassing fishery agency. In recognition of the growth of aquaculture, NMFS would then take over existing programs within Interior and Agriculture, creating a single fishery and aquaculture entity. It further suggested marine mammal protection be removed from NMFS and given to USFWS to create a national wildlife agency.

In that July 2012 issue was also a recommendation for bolstering the Department of Commerce, by moving to it both USFWS and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) from Interior. This would create a stronger science presence in a cabinet department while giving NMFS enough independence to carry out its non-physical science responsibilities. It would, in a sense, be a kind of Department of Commerce, Science



& the Environment – and a much better venue for our nation’s fisheries.

Rather than quibble on final details at this time, however, it is important the discussion take place on overhauling our nation’s fishery management. Simply relying on a good law, or set of laws, and expecting the courts to enforce them (e.g., ending overfishing), as we have in the past, is not, in itself, sustainable.

Financing it All – A National Fisheries Trust Fund

The forthcoming battle about budget sequestration or, assuming that does not happen, over the federal budget and what kinds of cuts it takes may provide the opportunity finally to advance the long-overdue creation of a National Fishery Trust Fund to support fishery science and other fishery needs.

Such a trust fund could establish a stable financial base for supporting fishery science. Since it would be outside of the appropriations process, it would not be competing annually with other national priorities for scarce federal dollars. Moreover, since it would

be stable and relatively predictable it would be ideal for supporting on-going data collection (which, in most instances, requires uninterrupted collection of data sets to be useful).

It is not as if some progress has not been achieved in the decade since a National Fishery Trust Fund was first proposed in this column. The MSA reauthorization of 2006, included language by Senators Ted Stevens (R-AK) and Barbara Boxer (D-CA) establishing such a fund. It was, however, silent on a funding source.

In March of 2012, Senators John Kerry (D-MA) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) introduced S. 2184 to designate Saltonstall-Kennedy Act (S-K) funds for fishery research. A similar measure was introduced in the House. The S-K monies, derived from a tariff on fish products, are largely unaccounted for presently within NOAA. S. 2184 would bring transparency (NOAA is fighting this) and ensure that monies are used the way S-K was intended by its authors. The concept of tapping the S-K Fund, ending its use as an agency “slush fund,” could serve further as the base support for a National Fisheries Trust fund.

It will be a few months before the new Congress settles in and the Administration begins setting out its priorities. Those brief few months may give fishermen here on the coast and nationally some time to discuss what our fishery agenda should be for the upcoming year.

What are the top priorities? What is most pressing? What actions need to be taken to ensure not just sustainable fisheries, but a brighter future for fishing communities and future generations of fishing men and women?

In last’s month’s FN, and now in this one, seven key issues have been put forward as a potential basis for a 2013 federal fishery agenda. These have been advanced not necessarily as answers, but to begin discussions on the issues fishermen need to be pushing in 2013. 🐟

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