Fisheries management is working, Congress should stick to the science

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It's no coincidence that June, the start of beach-vacation high season, is also National Oceans Month — a time to appreciate all that the marine environment provides for millions of species, including us.

Although the ocean faces a variety of threats, this year there's good news: The annual report by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) on the state of U.S. fisheries shows continued progress in the science-based efforts to rebuild and manage ocean fish populations. With our nation's primary fishing law, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, up for reauthorization, it is critical that lawmakers build on these gains rather than erode them.

The NOAA report, released last month, found that only 15 percent of U.S. ocean fish stocks are classified as overfished, or at a population level so low that they require recovery. In addition, last year only 9 percent of fish experienced overfishing — caught at a level higher than the population can sustain.

Those two critical categories are at their lowest levels since NOAA first issued this report in 1996, indicating notable improvements in how the U.S. manages its ocean fish stocks. And since 2000, by following the strong science-based principles in the Magnuson-Stevens Act, our country has rebuilt 44 fish populations — a testament to the law's effectiveness.

One rebuilding success story is New England's Atlantic sea scallop fishery. Landings of sea scallops decreased through the 1990s, signaling a population decline, and bottomed out in 1998. That year, fishery managers implemented a science-based rebuilding plan, and the ensuing rebound in scallop abundance led to a highly profitable commercial fishery.

Today, scallops are the main reason that New Bedford, Massachusetts, consistently earns top honors as America's most valuable fishing port.

But not every ocean fish population in the country is thriving. This year, NOAA also added six species to the list of those experiencing overfishing and classified three more as overfished.

Recovery can be difficult; for instance, Atlantic cod is still struggling to recover from years of overfishing, possibly exacerbated by habitat loss and changing ocean temperatures. And despite clear international science showing western Atlantic bluefin tuna is still highly depleted, this year NOAA removed the population from the list of overfished species. The U.S. manages this migratory species with other countries, but NOAA's concerning retreat from its previous position calls into question the agency's commitment to rebuilding this stock.

What's more, the agency manages close to 500 fish populations across the country, but has assessed the fishing status of just 317 and the population status of only 235. As one example, NOAA has not estimated the number of northern anchovies, which are vital prey for a variety of West Coast wildlife, for more than 20 years. Clearly, we have more to do to ensure that we are avoiding overfishing, maintaining healthy fish populations, and rebuilding depleted stocks.

We also should not confuse steady improvement in our fish populations with fully achieving the goals of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. That's why we are concerned about a bill that could see a floor vote in the House this summer. H.R. 200 would compromise the science-based foundation of America's fisheries management system, allowing the gains our country has made to slip away.

If passed, the bill would threaten the rebuilding of vulnerable fish stocks; undermine science as the basis of annual catch limits, which are designed to prevent overfishing; and override key environmental laws such as the Endangered Species Act and the National Environmental Policy Act. For these reasons, Pew is part of a wide coalition of scientists, fishermen, and conservationists voicing opposition to H.R. 200.

H.R. 200 is also a departure from the long history of fruitful bipartisan cooperation on the Magnuson-Stevens Act and on U.S. fisheries in general. Lawmakers worked across the aisle to update the act in 1996 and 2006, strengthening the law's foundation in science and agreeing that healthy fisheries are those that are managed for long-term productivity and profit, not merely short-term gain.

Natural resource policy is most successful when decision-making is grounded in sound science, as it is for this law.

When Congress next updates the Magnuson-Stevens Act, it should ensure that the law reflects current science. For instance, scientists increasingly recognize that fishery managers should not set rules for individual populations in isolation but should consider the impact of fishing on other species, and the broader marine ecosystem. That means accounting for the roles that different fish play in the marine food web, integrating habitat protection into management from the start, and tracking how changing ocean conditions affect fisheries.

With U.S. fisheries management headed mostly in the right direction, Congress should focus on accelerating that progress, not reversing course by weakening the law. Rejecting H.R. 200 would be a good start.

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