

**United States Senate**

*Committee on Commerce, Science,  
And Transportation*

Testimony for January 16, 2001 hearing on the decline of West Coast groundfish  
Oceans and Fisheries Subcommittee

TESTIMONY OF PETER HUHTALA  
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Thank you for this opportunity to submit testimony. My name is Peter Huhtala. I am the Rockfish Campaign Coordinator of Pacific Marine Conservation Council (PMCC). PMCC is a nonprofit, public benefit corporation working with commercial and recreational fishermen, scientists and conservationists to conserve and sustain West Coast groundfish and the coastal communities that depend upon them.

I very much appreciate that Senator Ron Wyden and the leadership of the committee have chosen to carefully examine the crisis in the West Coast groundfish fishery. The actions needed to respond to the existing disaster and move this fishery towards sustainability are complex. In this testimony I will highlight specific and practical investments that the federal government can make to obviate the situation. I will also briefly review some additional actions that merit attention and further development.

One of the primary factors precipitating this disaster is the attempt to manage the groundfish fishery with very little reliable information about the status of the fish stocks. The recent promise of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to begin conducting annual surveys of West Coast fish species biomass (rather than once every three years!) is a positive step. In addition, the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress appropriated \$2.275 million to begin a West Coast observer program.

An at-sea observer program is absolutely essential for gathering the data needed to responsibly manage this fishery. Current management is based on trip limits for individual species and mixed-species complexes, with additional limitations on other species caught incidentally, or "bycatch." Bycatch includes species that have declined to such a low biomass that they are subject to rebuilding plans, as well as juvenile fish and species for which there is not a market. There is also often an overage of target species landed in excess of trip limits. Almost all these fish are dead by the time they reach the boat. Most are discarded to the sea.

Observers record data on catch and bycatch, providing the (now lacking) data on total mortality of all species. Observers also provide information on habitat impacts and selectivity relative to location, gear and fishing strategies. Qualified observers are generally individuals

trained in fisheries science, so they can also collect data that will assist in better understanding the life history of various species.

In order for observer data to be considered reliable, the observers must be perceived to possess no conflict-of-interest. They are on board to objectively collect scientific information. Their purpose is neither advocacy nor enforcement.

I cannot overstate the vital importance of a comprehensive observer program to the recovery of the West Coast groundfish fishery. The initial funding will get this program started, but a rapid infusion of more money is needed to bring the program swiftly to the level where coverage is coast-wide and inclusive of all gear types. With adequate funding the observer program can provide the quantity and quality of data needed to move beyond the crisis mode of management.

Funds are also needed for the states of Washington, Oregon and California to develop near-shore observer and data collection programs. Many species of groundfish live all or part of their lives within the three-mile state waters zone. With state programs working in cooperation with the federally-contracted observer program important gaps can be filled.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council has created a strategic plan for groundfish recovery. The plan is well thought-out and has promise to make a very effective impact. It is urgent that funds be provided to increase staff and resources to support the implementation phase of the Council's plan.

PMCC asks for the following appropriations:

#### 2001 EMERGENCY SUPPLEMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS

- \$2.5 million to NMFS to augment the West Coast observer program
- \$3 million for observers and data collection in state waters and for state-managed fisheries (\$1 million each to Washington, Oregon and California)
- \$500,000 to the Pacific Fishery Management Council to help support implementation of their groundfish strategic plan, "Transition to Sustainability."

#### 2002 APPROPRIATIONS

- \$5 million to NMFS for the West Coast observer program, raising the total annual appropriation to \$7.275 million

- \$3 million for observers and data collection in state waters and for state-managed fisheries (\$1 million each to Washington, Oregon and California)
- \$500,000 to the Pacific Fishery Management Council to continue support for implementation of their groundfish strategic plan

These needed investments can set much of the stage for recovery. This by no means minimizes the present need for community relief. PMCC urges Congress to work with the states to insure that needed resources reach the individuals and families suffering from the impacts of a failing fishery.

PMCC also encourages continued and added support for scientific research related to West Coast groundfish. Fishermen involvement in many areas of research should be investigated and implemented as much as possible. This cooperation between fishermen and scientists provides economic benefit and increased understanding while contributing to the long-term goal of sustainable fishing.

Although PMCC recognizes that federal funding of the observer program is vital to this fishery in its distressed state, ultimately the industry should be expected to help pay for the program. Committee members may have the opportunity to consider the re-authorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation Act this session. PMCC asks that, within this legislation, the Pacific Fishery Management Council (through NMFS) be granted the authority to levy fees to support the observer program and other research.

Ultimately the groundfish fleet will restructure. Proposals are being developed that seek federal help with a buyback of permits and boats. PMCC will support a plan that helps industry rationally downsize while ascertaining that effort does not end up shifting to another fishery. I know that many in the industry are working hard towards this assisted restructuring. They need considerable guidance to perfect a plan that will be acceptable to Congress and which will meet applicable public conservation goals.

Thank you again for considering this matter. The needs of industries and communities that rely on the sustainability of natural resources are of national interest. Although it may have taken a declaration of disaster to focus attention on this fishery, careful investment now will provide the tools necessary to move towards sustainable fishing.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Huhtala