Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act

United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
August 23, 2017

Senator Thune, Ranking Member Nelson and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Ben Stevens, I am Koyukon Athabascan and a lifelong subsistence fisherman from the community of Stevens Village, on the Upper Yukon River. I grew up spending summers at my family's fish camp 30 miles upriver from Stevens Village and today I spend summers there with my own children, harvesting the winter's supply of fish. Salmon is a deep part of my heritage and culture, and fish camp is an integral part of this, where we live the values of caring for family and community, self-sufficiency, hard work and sharing.

I am speaking from that perspective: that of the subsistence fisherman, taking a fish from the water and putting it on my family's dinner table. I also speak from my role as the Director of the Hunting and Fishing Task Force for Tanana Chiefs Conference, the regional non-profit and tribal consortium for 40 villages, including 37 Tribes of Interior Alaska in the Yukon and Kuskokwim watersheds. I also currently serve on the Advisory Panel to the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, but my comments do not represent the opinion of the AP or Council.

I'm here to ask that you include the Subsistence sector into the new Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) and for continued vigilance.

Why include Subsistence and Tribal Interests in the Fishery Management Process?

Subsistence is an economy; it is a sector. There have been attempts to quantify subsistence harvest into economic terms with varying degrees of success; however, it is an economy of immense importance to the people of Alaska. According to the Federal Subsistence Management Program, "Subsistence fishing and hunting provide a large share of the food consumed in rural Alaska. The state's rural residents harvest about 18,000 tons of wild foods each year—and average of 295 pounds per person. Fish makes up about 56 percent of this harvest statewide." Nowhere else in the Unites States is there such a heavy reliance upon wild foods. This fact itself begs serious consideration for representation at the North Pacific Fisheries Management Council (the Council).

Furthermore, while our region may live far from the ocean, the species we depend on as primary components of our livelihoods are inextricably linked to the productivity and health of our marine environment and fisheries. In Alaska, the Council manages many fisheries including several groundfish fisheries which impact important subsistence species, such as salmon and halibut as bycatch. The fisheries managed by the Council also have significant habitat and ecosystem impacts on important subsistence species, including both fish and marine mammals.

The Council—and the MSA—therefore has direct management impacts on species of importance to tribal subsistence users. However, subsistence is notably absent from the current Act: the word "subsistence" only appears once (in reference to the West Pacific), and subsistence users are not represented throughout the Council system. While Washington tribes have a designated seat on the Pacific Council, tribes in the North Pacific do not have a designated seat. We recommend that the MSA be amended to include subsistence throughout and provide for tribal/subsistence representation on the North Pacific Council.

This would also provide an opportunity for inclusion of indigenous knowledge throughout the Council process. At a minimum, subsistence interests should be one of the groups Council membership must be balanced between, in addition to commercial and recreational fisheries.

Overall, we support the current MSA; however, we believe that the MSA fishery management system can be strengthened through inclusion of subsistence, subsistence needs and traditional knowledge to supplement and fine-tune the science-based fisheries management.

Science-based Fishery Management Works

Overall, the MSA's framework for science-based fisheries management is working. The current Act has successfully ended overfishing in most American fisheries, and has successfully rebuilt 39 once-overfished stocks. For subsistence communities, long-term sustainability of our resources is critical, and this means using science to set catch limits, and requiring accountability measures to rebuild when needed. Setting catch limits based on science to prevent overfishing, and requiring rebuilding plans to rebuild depleted fish populations are common sense provisions which support healthy ecosystems, communities and fisheries. While this can mean a bit of pain now for communities reliant on fisheries for food and/or income, the long-term benefits of maintaining healthy fisheries are well worth it.

For example, the Chinook salmon in our region have been in decline for over a decade, with record low returns in recent years. While this fishery is managed by the State of Alaska, not under MSA, the principles of rebuilding are well-illustrated here. Our communities have taken huge reductions in our subsistence harvest of Chinook salmon in recent years, with a harvest of zero in some years. Sacrificing our Chinook salmon harvests has been difficult, even painful, as we've lost not only an important source of food, but a key component of our culture as well. The sight of an empty fish camp is truly a tragic sight. Yet for our communities there is no doubt that we had to do this – when the fish aren't there, if you care about the long-term sustainability of the stock you need to give them a chance to recover. This is the heart of the science-based principles of the MSA.

While we wholeheartedly oppose any attempts to weaken Science based Fisheries Management as the backbone of US fisheries management we do believe it can be further strengthened by including the traditional knowledge and community based observations from subsistence users along the river.

Strengthening Requirements to Reduce Bycatch

In our villages, up and down the Yukon River, and in countless places throughout Alaska, our communities depend on salmon. While these salmon fisheries aren't managed under the MSA, the MSA does manage the groundfish fisheries which catch salmon as bycatch. Salmon bycatch in the Bering Sea Pollock fisheries has been a central concern for us for years and the degree to which bycatch played a role in historic declines of Chinook salmon is very much an open question. We are grateful that bycatch has been reduced significantly in recent years – from a high of 124,000 in 2007 to 22,000 in 2016—due in part to a response to a complex set of management regimes put in place by the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, noting the enormous efforts of the Pollock fishery and their attempts to avoid Chinook salmon. However, the high limit on permissible bycatch (up to 47,591 Chinook salmon unless it is a low abundance year, and as high as 60,000 Chinook salmon in 2 out of any 7 years), is still alarmingly high at a time when Chinook salmon stocks throughout Western Alaska are either continuing to rebuild or continue to be at dangerously low

levels, as on the Kuskokwim River. While National Standard 9 requires that bycatch be minimized or mortality minimized, the statutory requirements clearly have been strong enough given the high levels of bycatch which have been and are permissible under this standard. This creates a grave inequity in fisheries such as the groundfish fishery where species of tremendous cultural, subsistence, commercial and recreational value such as salmon and halibut are caught as bycatch. Furthermore, the manner in which National Standard 9 is balanced against that of National Standard 1 to achieve optimum yield, results in a situation in which reducing bycatch is never the top priority. The MSA should be strengthened to require and prioritize bycatch reduction.

Conclusion

The North Pacific Fishery Management Council is renowned nationally and internationally as a leader in fisheries management, and we should all be proud of that. Our fisheries resources are a foundation of Alaska's culture and economy, and there is a reason the "Alaska model" of fisheries management was the basis for the 2006 reauthorization. It is critical that the conservation and management provisions of the Act remain strong, and that we retain the commitment to science-based management on which our fisheries management system is based. In Alaska we've shown that science-based federal fisheries management works, and we should continue as a nation to strive for that standard, rather than lowering the bar.

Any changes in this reauthorization should move towards strengthening the Act, not weakening it further. Including subsistence and subsistence users in the Act will not only integrate an important user group which is currently left out of the Act, but will enhance and improve the current system of management.

Thank you for considering my comments today.

Enclosure: Proposed Amendment to MSA providing subsistence users an opportunity at appointment