October 23, 2017
Dear Members of Congress,

The undersigned scientists write to urge you to oppose H.R. 200 and any other legislative efforts that would weaken science-based management of U.S. marine fish populations, so that current and future generations of Americans can enjoy fishing and healthy oceans teeming with fish for years to come.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) is the primary law governing marine fisheries management in U.S. federal waters. Congress passed the original law in 1976 to phase out foreign fishing in U.S. waters and to promote domestic fishing opportunities. In 1996 and 2006, the MSA was amended to strengthen its conservation provisions and ensure scientific advice provided the basis of fishery management decisions. These changes have enabled the United States to become a global leader in well-managed and profitable fisheries, with over 40 domestic fish stocks rebuilt since 2000. Preventing overfishing with science-based sustainable catch limits and timely rebuilding of fish populations that are depleted, as required under the MSA, are fundamental to good management of fishery resources and should be maintained to continue improving the health of our nation’s fisheries.

Yet, several pieces of legislation have been introduced this Congress that would unwind science-based conservation of U.S. marine fish populations. Chief among them is H.R. 200, which undermines the cornerstones of MSA’s success in several ways, including weakening or eliminating science-based management requirements and reducing the quality of science used in management decisions.

First, H.R. 200 will weaken the MSA’s successful recovery of depleted fish populations by establishing broad loopholes that effectively eliminate the requirement for managers to set reasonable and scientifically based rebuilding timelines. Decades of fisheries science shows that in order to succeed in rebuilding overfished stocks, managers must implement strong and timely management measures based on sound science.

Second, H.R. 200 would increase the risk of overfishing by removing the requirement for science-based annual catch limits for many species, including some that may be overfished or subject to overfishing. Annual catch limits are vital to the health of fish populations and provide the guardrails to make and keep fisheries sustainable. Removal of these key management tools will hurt our fisheries, our oceans and the U.S. economy.

Third, H.R. 200 undermines crucial environmental laws such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Antiquities Act. It is unacceptable to exempt fishery management plans from the bedrock requirements of NEPA that
provide for public participation in management and adequate analysis of decision-making. The MSA is effective at managing fisheries, but is not designed to achieve broader ocean management objectives, particularly with regard to maintaining the biological integrity of protected species and populations, or protecting special places and ecosystems. These essential laws must continue to preserve marine species and habitats, and to strongly protect our country’s marine national monuments, i.e., our nation’s blue parks.

Lastly, H.R. 200 and other legislative proposals roll back science-based management and lessen accountability in recreational fisheries. Recreational fisheries across the country are already able to use flexible management strategies so long as they comply with annual catch limits and ensure accountability for their catches. It is essential that recreational fisheries continue to be accountable for the fish they remove from the ocean to ensure future opportunities for recreational anglers and other resource users.

The last version of this bill was opposed by over 170 organizations, representing fishermen, business owners, chefs and community leaders. We, the undersigned scientists, similarly urge Congress to oppose H.R. 200 and other legislation that would weaken science-based management and the health of U.S. fish populations, and exempt fisheries managers from complying with other laws that protect our ocean resources.
Dr. Kerry Nickols  
Assistant Professor  
California State University Northridge

Dr. Elise Granek  
Professor  
Portland State University

Dr. Laurie Raymundo  
Professor  
University of Guam Marine Laboratory

Dr. Michael Orr  
Professor of Biology  
University of Guam

Dr. Jason Biggs  
Associate Professor  
University of Guam Marine Laboratory

Dr. Alan Shanks  
Professor  
U Oregon, Oregon inst of marine biology

Dr. David Combosch  
Professor  
University of Guam Marine Lab

Dr. Atsushi Fujimura  
Assistant Professor  
University of Guam

Dr. Kent Carpenter  
Professor  
Biological Sciences, Old Dominion University

Dr. John Cigliano  
Director of Environmental Conservation  
Cedar Crest College

Dr. David Kerstetter  
Assistant Professor  
Nova Southeastern University

Dr. James Hanken  
Director  
Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology

Dr. Neil Hammerschlag  
Research Assistant Professor  
University of Miami

Dr. Jan Hodder  
Senior Lecturer  
University of Oregon

Dr. Geraldine Knatz  
Professor of the Practice of Engineering and Policy  
University of Southern California

Dr. Dennis Lavrov  
Associate Professor  
Iowa State University

Dr. Terry Donaldson  
University of Guam Marine Laboratory

Dr. Aaron David  
University of Miami

Dr. Daniel Kramer  
Professor  
Michigan State University

Dr. Karen Alofs  
Assistant Professor beginning Jan 2018  
University of Michigan

Dr. Catherine Riseng  
Associate Research Scientist  
University of Michigan

Dr. Phoebe Zarnetske  
Michigan State University
Dr. Shawn Riley  
Lovejoy Professor of Wildlife Management  
Michigan State University

Dr. Terrie Klinger  
Professor  
University of Washington

Dr. Jay Zarnetske  
Faculty  
Michigan State University

Dr. Joseph Árvai  
Max McGraw Professor of Global Sustainable Enterprise  
University of Michigan

Dr. Daniel Hayes  
Professor  
Department of Fisheries and Wildlife,  
Michigan State University

Dr. Karen Neely  
Florida Keys Community College

Dr. Susannah French  
Associate Professor of Biology  
Utah State University

Dr. Blaine Griffen  
Associate Professor  
Brigham Young University

Dr. Chris Bird  
Asst Professor  
Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi

Dr. Rom Lipcius  
Professor  
Virginia Institute of Marine Science,  
College of William & Mary

Dr. Jeff Shields  
Professor of Marine Science  
Virginia Institute of Marine Science,  
College of William & Mary

Dr. Sarah Gerken  
Professor of Biological Sciences  
University of Alaska, Anchorage

Dr. Peter Castro  
California State Polytechnic University,  
Pomona

Dr. Richard Brusca  
University of Arizona

Dr. James Carlton  
Professor of Marine Sciences Emeritus  
Williams College

Dr. Joel Martin  
Associate Vice President, Research & Collections  
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

Dr. Martin Mendelson  
Clinical Professor  
School of Public Health, University of Washington

Dr. James M Furse  
Griffith University

Dr. Andrew Thurber  
Assistant Professor  
Oregon State University

Dr. Sherry Tamone  
Professor of Biology  
University of Alaska Southeast

Dr. Pam Jensen  
NMFS
Dr. Gustav Paulay
Professor / Curator
University of Florida

Dr. Thomas Dolan
Former Chief of the Bureau of Fisheries, US Virgin Islands

Dr. Jason Williams
Professor of Biology
Hofstra University

Dr. Daniel Fong
Associate Professor of Biology
American University

Dr. Loren Coen
Res. Prof
FAU

Dr. Joel Snodgrass
Professor and Department Head
Virginia Tech

Dr. Timothy Targett
Professor
University of Delaware

Dr. Robert Okazaki
Professor Emeritus
Weber State University

Dr. Deborah Steinberg
Professor of Marine Science
Virginia Institute of Marine Science

Dr. Jim Welch
Professor and Chair of Biology
Witttenberg University

Dr. Greg Cronin
Assoc. Prof.
CU Denver

Dr. De Forest Mellon
Professor of Biology
University of Virginia

Dr. L. David Smith
Professor
Smith College

Dr. Frederick Schram
Research Assc., Professor Emeritus
Burke Museum of Natural History

Dr. Nancy O'Connor
Professor
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Dr. Mary Fabrizio
Professor of Marine Science
Virginia Institute of Marine Science

Dr. Brad Erisman
Assistant Professor
University of Texas at Austin

Dr. Corinne Diggins
Virginia Tech

Dr. Keith Walters
Professor
 Coastal Carolina University

Dr. Brian Tissot
Professor & Director
Humboldt State University

Dr. Margaret Miller
Research Director
SECORE International

Dr. David Drumm
Environmental consultant
EcoAnalysts, Inc.

Dr. Diego Bernal
Professor
Univ. Mass. Dartmouth
Dr. Eric Hallerman  
Professor, Fish Conservation  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Dr. John Scarpa  
Associate Professor  
Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi

Dr. Bristol Denlinger  
Post-doc  
UC Berkeley

Dr. Timothy Sullivan  
University of Arkansas

Dr. Janet Nye  
Assistant Professor  
Stony Brook University

Dr. Julie Thayer  
Senior Scientist  
Farallon Institute

Dr. Peter Jumars  
University of Maine

Dr. R. Dean Grubbs  
Associate Director of Research  
Florida State University Coastal and Marine Lab

Dr. Gary Grossman  
Professor  
University of Georgia

Dr. Jeb Byers  
University of Georgia

Dr. Gorka Sancho  
Professor  
College of Charleston

Dr. David Dow  
Retired biological oceanographer- NOAA Fisheries

Dr. James Dooley  
Professor  
Adelphi University

Dr. James Cowan  
Professor  
Louisiana State University

Dr. Ivan Valiela  
Distinguished Scientist  
Ecosystems Center, MBL, Woods Hole

Dr. Peter Auster  
Research Professor Emeritus & Senior Research Scientist  
University of Connecticut & Mystic Aquarium

Dr. Ellen Pikitch  
Professor  
Stony Brook University

Dr. Jean Boal  
Professor  
Millersville University of Pennsylvania

Dr. Peter Auster  
Research Professor Emeritus & Senior Research Scientist  
University of Connecticut & Mystic Aquarium

Dr. William Sydeman  
President & Senior Scientist  
Farallon Institute

Dr. Daniel Pauly  
Professor  
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

Dr. Dee Boersms  
Wadsworth endowed chair in conservation science  
U of WA

Dr. Barbara Brennessel  
Wheaton College and Frends of Herring River, Wellfleet MA
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Tara Duffy</td>
<td>Lecturer</td>
<td>Northeastern University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro Zapata</td>
<td>Senior Advisor</td>
<td>Oceana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee Carlton</td>
<td>Marine Ecologist</td>
<td>Khaled Bin Sultan Living Oceans</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Foundation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frances Withrow</td>
<td>Science Associate</td>
<td>Oceana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Kallman</td>
<td>University of Miami</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brianna Almeida</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>University of Miami</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zoi Thanopoulou</td>
<td>University of Miami</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth Sheets</td>
<td>Research Biologist</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucie Hazen</td>
<td>Research Analyst</td>
<td>Stanford University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Baird</td>
<td>Director, Coast and Ocean Program</td>
<td>The Bay Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elana Rusnak</td>
<td>University of Miami Rosenstiel School of</td>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marine and Atmospheric Science</td>
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<tr>
<td>David Burdick</td>
<td>Research Associate</td>
<td>University of Guam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelley Tagarino</td>
<td>Extension Agent</td>
<td>American Samoa Community College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitney Hoot</td>
<td>Coral Fellow</td>
<td>NOAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alisha Gill</td>
<td>University of Guam</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Casey Te Beest</td>
<td>University of Guam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike Gawel</td>
<td>Resources Manager/Retired National Fisheries Officer</td>
<td>NPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifer</td>
<td>University of Guam Marine Lab</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Chris Barrows</td>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>US Coast Guard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AJ Reyes</td>
<td>Biologist</td>
<td>University of Guam Marine Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex Medina</td>
<td>Biologist</td>
<td>UoG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Drexler</td>
<td>University of South Florida</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Amy Wrobleski</td>
<td>Laboratory and Field Technician</td>
<td>Michigan State University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew McCarthy</td>
<td>University of South Florida</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elizabeth Herdter
Ph.D. candidate
USF College of Marine Science

Kelly Vasbinder
PhD Student in Marine Science

Donald Orth
Thomas H. Jones Professor
Virginia Tech University

Megan Hepner
Graduate Assistant
University of South Florida

David Knott
The University of Charleston

Christian Osorio
PhD Student
Virginia Tech - Dept. of Fish and Wildlife Conservation

Mike Muthersbaugh
Graduate Research Assistant
Virginia Tech (fish and wildlife conservation)

Sarah Grasty
Senior Biological Scientist
University of South Florida

Emily Thorne
PhD Candidate and Graduate Research Assistant
Virginia Tech Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation

Kate Dubickas
Master's Student
University of South Florida

Brianna Michaud
Graduate Student
University of South Florida

William Ellsworth
Graduate Student
Virginia Tech

Tess Geers
Marine Scientist
Oceana

Taylor Witkin
Master's candidate
University of Rhode Island

Ethan Lucas
FIP Project Director
FishWise

Anne Hilborn
PhD Candidate
Virginia Tech

Jean Wiener
Executive Director
Fondation pour la Protection de la Biodiversite Marine

Hayden Staley
Marine fisheries biologist
State of Florida

Shanae Allen
Research Scientist
FL Fish and Wildlife Research Institute

Dustin Addis
Research Administrator II
Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWC)

Marcy Cockrell
Ph.D. candidate
University of South Florida

Annie Roddenberry
Biological scientist
State of Florida
Holly Turner
HCRHS

Drew Martin
Conservation Chair
Loxahatchee Group