

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.

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