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ADMINISTRATION

Contact: Susan Buchanan
(301) 713-2370

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NOAA Announces 2001 Status of U.S. Fish Stocks
Fisheries on a Path Toward Recovery

Stock levels for many marine fish managed by the U.S. are healthy and others are steadily rebuilding, according to an annual report released today by the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). The government also is seeking additional funding to strengthen fishery stock assessments to determine the abundance of other federally managed species.

"While there is still progress to be made in some fisheries, overall fish populations are more plentiful than last year, proof that our rebuilding programs are working," said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries). The agency is responsible for managing the nation's 2 million square miles of federal fishing waters, equivalent to approximately two-thirds of the continental landmass. These resources contributed over \$50 billion to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product from commercial and recreational fishing activities in 2001.

Many fish species – like Georges Bank haddock and yellowtail flounder – that were heavily over-harvested five years ago are either healthy today or headed toward recovery, thanks to responsible management by NOAA Fisheries and the regional fishery management councils.

Since 1994, haddock and yellowtail flounder stocks have multiplied from under 10,000 metric tons to about 60,000 due to area fishing closures within the bank that were identified as spawning grounds. A new management regime, that limited the number of days per year fishermen could target these species, along with catch limits and restrictions on the mesh size of fishing nets to protect the smaller fish, has helped haddock and yellowtail flounder rebound from record low numbers.

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NOAA Fisheries and the councils have developed fishery programs that are reversing the depletion of many species primarily caused by decades of overfishing. Fishery programs are designed to allow fishing to continue under strict regulations while the stocks grow to stable levels.

The number of stocks with sustainable harvest rates rose by 45 percent between 1999 and 2001 (from 159 to 230), while those with sustainable stocks sizes increased by a third. At the same time, the number of stocks being over-harvested has been reduced by 15 percent (from 77 stocks to 65), and the number of stocks deemed as overfished declined by 12 percent in 2001.

Last year, two species – Georges Bank and mid-Atlantic sea scallops – were fully rebuilt, and eleven more were taken off the overfished species list (down from 92 stocks to 81). One of these species – summer flounder – is doing so well that regulations were relaxed last year, allowing fishermen to harvest 36 percent more while the stock continues to rebuild. The total stock size of summer flounder almost doubled to 80 million pounds between 1992 and 1999. Of the 81 species that are still classified as overfished, 67 are steadily growing under rebuilding programs.

An additional nine rebuilding programs are currently under development by the regional fishery management councils in efforts to meet the Sustainable Fisheries Act mandate to rebuild all overfished species. The councils are directed by Congress to work with local fishing constituents to formulate and recommend fishery management programs to the U.S. government through the Secretary of Commerce.

The councils created other measures in 2001 to protect and conserve marine resources. For example, a springtime shrimping closure in the South Atlantic ensured the preservation of the spawning population of white shrimp after an unusually cold and long winter wiped out a large portion of the species.

In the North Pacific, regulations were developed to further reduce seabird bycatch and minimize fishing interactions with marine mammals. In the Gulf of Mexico, a new permit requirement on shrimp trawls will help to better calculate the amount of shrimping effort and bycatch in that fishery.

The councils in the Caribbean and Hawaii developed regulations to further protect the coral reef fish habitats in those regions of the country. The new Coral Reef Ecosystem Plan in Hawaii includes an innovative, holistic approach to conserving the entire marine ecosystem in federal waters in the Western Pacific. For the first time under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, marine resources will be managed based on the inter-relationships of species and their surroundings.

A NOAA Fisheries' goal is to determine the abundance of species whose stock status is unknown, and so the agency is seeking an additional \$9.9 in funding for 2003 to expand fishery stock assessments. Most of these species have a lower assessment priority because they are not targeted by fisherman, and are therefore at less risk of becoming overfished.

Out of 959 federally managed fish stocks, there is enough data to determine the abundance of 304 species.

The collective landings of the 655 species whose status is unknown represent less than one percent of all fishery landings in the United States. However, the report classifies 120 of these species as "major" stocks since fishermen landed at least 200,000 pounds of them last year. These "major" species whose stock abundance is unknown will take priority in future data collection programs.

NOAA Fisheries and the councils have to curtail overfishing of the 65 fish stocks for which harvest amounts still exceed allowable harvest levels as outlined in fishery management plans. Improvements have been made in this area, as in 2001. Twenty more stocks had sustainable harvest rates in 2001 than in 2000. Efforts also are being increased to lower fishery bycatch of endangered and non-targeted species and marine mammals. The agency has pledged to improve the public accessibility and timeliness of the decision-making process in meeting these challenges.

"The improvements recorded are evidence of the effectiveness of the agency's fishery management approach and its rebuilding programs this year," Hogarth said. "Now we have to fix problems in the remaining fisheries, strengthen our data for those species whose stock status is unknown, and target limited resources on activities that will most benefit fish stocks."

Depending on the fishery, rebuilding programs may consist of a variety of management regulations that limit fishing effort, set restrictions on allowable gear, or impose minimum size limits to ensure protection of young fish that have not yet contributed to the population.

These regulations may also include fishery closures during spawning seasons and in areas that are important havens for juvenile fish. Some fisheries are managed under long-term rebuilding programs because they are long-lived species and do not mature and spawn for a decade or more. The timeframes of these long-term rebuilding programs are directly tied to the biology of the fish in question and allow the fisheries to remain viable while the numbers of fish grow to stable stock levels.

NOAA Fisheries also will focus its resources on reducing harmful fishing activities to fish habitats and continue providing recommendations to other agencies for reducing harmful non-fishing activities that can lead to a decline in fish stocks.

"Success in achieving fully recovered fish stocks by reducing bycatch and overfishing will contribute substantially to the U.S. economy," Hogarth said. "It will ensure a long-term, plentiful supply of domestic seafood for American citizens, recreational opportunities for anglers and support for American fishing communities."

NOAA Fisheries, an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA fisheries, please visit <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/>

Copies of the report will be available today at www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/reports.html.

Note to reporters:

The Status of Stocks report and this press release use fishery data as of December 31, 2001. Since fishery science is constantly evolving as new information becomes available, this may not be the most up-to-date information.

"Overfished" is an adjective that applies to the state of a fishery resource, while "overfishing" (being overharvested) is a verb that applies to the act of fishing. When a fishery is "overfished," the resource has become depleted. When "overfishing" occurs in a fishery, a level of human activity is adversely affecting the stock abundance. If the fishery is not experiencing overfishing, it has a sustainable harvest rate.