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**ON
THE PACIFIC SALMON STRONGHOLD CONSERVATION ACT AND
THE NATIONAL FISH HABITAT CONSERVATION ACT**

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INSULAR AFFAIRS, OCEANS AND WILDLIFE
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON D.C.**

June 16, 2009

Good morning Chairwoman Bordallo and Members of the Committee. I am Dr. James Balsiger, the Acting Assistant Administrator of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Department of Commerce. Thank you for inviting me to testify at this important hearing on H.R. 2055, the *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act (PSSCA)*, and H.R. 2565, the *National Fish Habitat Conservation Act*.

BACKGROUND

Marine commercial and recreational fishing is an important part of our nation's economy. In 2007, U.S. landings of commercial marine fish were valued at \$4.1 billion, and the economic value of recreational marine fishing was \$5.2 billion that same year. Salmon ranked in the "top five" species by both landings and dockside value in 2007, and their importance to coastal communities goes far beyond their monetary value. Unfortunately, several species of salmon around the U.S. are listed as endangered or threatened under the *Endangered Species Act (ESA)*, making their recovery and management a challenge and a top priority for NMFS.

Healthy fish populations depend on healthy habitats, and thus habitat conservation is an important element of supporting fish populations and sustainable fisheries. Congress recognized this in passing the amendments adding the Essential Fish Habitat provisions to the *Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act)*, the Critical Habitat provisions to the *Endangered Species Act*, and the fish passage provisions to the *Federal Power Act*, which all serve to protect and restore habitats important to the nation's fish resources. As Congress noted when adding the Essential Fish Habitat provisions to the *Magnuson-Stevens Act*, "One of the greatest long-term threats to the viability of commercial and recreational fisheries is the continuing loss of marine, estuarine, and other aquatic habitats." More than half of the commercially harvested fish in the United States (46 percent by weight, 68 percent by value) and about 80 percent of sportfish landings depend on estuaries at some stage in their life cycle.

Further recognition of the importance of coastal and marine habitat came this spring when Congress provided \$167 million to NOAA under the American Recovery and Re-investment Act to fund habitat restoration.

Unfortunately, habitats for many marine and coastal fish and shellfish are in serious trouble, and existing legislation has not provided all of the tools necessary to help local communities conserve important habitat areas that sustain fish populations over the long term. A 2009 NOAA/U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service report on coastal wetlands determined that these important habitats are disappearing at a rate of about 59,000 acres a year in the eastern U.S. Similar problems affect coral reefs, oyster reefs, seagrass beds, and other habitats necessary for the continued survival of commercial and recreational fish. Healthy habitats also provide a broad range of ecological benefits to watersheds and aquatic ecosystems. The rivers and streams flowing through coastal watersheds are the lifelines between marine and inland ecosystems, allowing migrating fish such as salmon to reach spawning beds and young fish to return to the sea; bringing sediment to the Mississippi delta and other coastal marshes; and allowing the filtering and absorption of pollutants from upland sources.

Comprehensive habitat conservation is the most effective way to ensure these important habitats continue to play their vital role in our nation's ecosystems. One of the defining characteristics of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan is that it takes an ecosystem-wide approach to habitat conservation, including habitat protection and restoration efforts, coordinated with assessment, strategic planning, and education and outreach efforts. Protection, restoration, and stewardship are key to achieving increased recreational and commercial fishing opportunities, economic improvement, and more resilient coastal communities.

H.R. 2565 – THE NATIONAL FISH HABITAT CONSERVATION ACT OF 2009

The National Fish Habitat Action Plan (NFHAP or Action Plan) was signed by the Departments of Commerce and the Interior, as well as by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, on April 24, 2006, on the banks of the Potomac River, not far from this room. Since then, NOAA has been a committed partner in implementing the Action Plan's ambitious goals, including a scientific assessment of all of the nation's fish habitats, the identification of priority habitats, and the establishment of regional Fish Habitat Partnerships to protect and restore those priority habitats. The goals and principles of the Action Plan align with NOAA's vision to use a science-based, ecosystem approach to natural resource management.

NOAA supports the National Fish Habitat Action Plan as an unprecedented national effort to address fish habitat conservation at a landscape level through voluntary, incentive-based programs that protect and restore species and habitats by addressing the causes of habitat loss and degradation, not just the symptoms. NOAA believes habitat conservation is most successful when it is science-based (for planning, monitoring, and decision-making), partnership-driven (with public, private, NGO, and non-traditional partners), and focused on producing measurable outcomes, which is the approach outlined in the *National Fish Habitat Conservation Act of 2009* (NFHCA).

Through our science and technical assistance programs, NOAA has significant capabilities to support the National Fish Habitat Board and Fish Habitat Partnerships in their assessment,

strategic planning, and project implementation. NOAA has been involved in the implementation of the Action Plan by serving on the National Fish Habitat Board, assisting the Science and Data Committee with the ongoing assessment of fish habitat, coordinating and collaborating with other Federal Research agencies such as the U.S. Geological Survey in supporting the science needs, working directly with the Fish Habitat Partnerships, and providing funding for some NFHAP projects.

For example, NOAA is working with the Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership (SARP), one of the five original pilot Fish Habitat Partnerships recognized by the National Fish Habitat Board under the Action Plan, to conserve habitat important for a number of commercial and recreation species. At MacDill Air Force Base, outside Tampa, Florida, we are working with Tampa Baywatch and other partners to create near-shore oyster reefs to stabilize sediments and promote new sea grasses and vegetation on which a host of marine species thrive. On the Pascagoula River in Mississippi, we are working with partners to restore tidal marsh habitat in the Bennett Bayou Marsh, which had been affected by Hurricane Katrina and urban development. The Pascagoula River project will benefit multiple Gulf species, including red drum, brown and white shrimp, Gulf sturgeon, speckled trout and Atlantic croaker, among others.

In Alaska, NOAA has been involved with the Matanuska-Susitna Basin Salmon Habitat Partnership (another one of the five original pilot Fish Habitat Partnerships) since its inception in 2005. The Mat-Su, as it is known locally, covers 24,500 square miles in southcentral Alaska, roughly the combined size of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. The basin supports thriving populations of chinook, coho, sockeye, pink, and chum salmon as well as world-class rainbow trout, char, and grayling, making it one of the country's premier sportfishing and wildlife viewing destinations. Salmon and other fish are at the heart of Alaskan ecosystems, economy, and culture. NOAA has assisted the partnership in developing a strategic plan and implementing projects to restore degraded stream reaches. On Moose Creek, we worked with the Chickaloon Village Tribal Council, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Alaska Department of Fish & Game, and others to restore a stream channel that had been diverted for a mining project in the early 20th century, blocking fish passage. On Coulter Creek, we worked with The Nature Conservancy, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and local land owners to replace four inadequate culverts, thereby restoring access for salmon throughout their historic range in the creek. A variety of education projects are also part of the partnership, such as engaging Girl Scouts in fish monitoring and working with the Wasilla Soil and Water Conservation District to enhance guidelines for building setbacks from streams. The common element in all of these efforts is for local sponsors to identify priorities for improving fish habitat and then draw upon technical expertise and funding from NOAA and other partners to accomplish on-the-ground projects.

Fish Habitat Partnerships, such as SARP, Mat-Su, and others, provide a focal point for fish habitat conservation efforts that has not previously existed to any great extent. NOAA sees enormous benefit in the leveraging of resources and information-sharing that occurs with these partnerships. We support the development of additional partnerships for coastal and marine resources, such as the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership, a Candidate Fish Habitat Partnership that is currently developing a strategic plan, and the Pacific Coastal and Marine Fish Habitat Partnership, which is forming out on the west coast. NOAA believes our involvement in providing technical advice and actively participating in these partnerships is important to ensuring success. Implementing these habitat conservation programs pursuant to the National

Fish Habitat Action Plan, as envisioned by the *NFHCA*, would help all of the involved groups at the federal, state, and local levels make conservation dollars go farther in restoring and protecting fish habitat, enabling NOAA, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, state agencies, and other partners to accomplish goals and aspirations together that none of us could do on our own.

NOAA believes the key to the success of the Action Plan, as outlined in the *NFHCA*, is the use of science to target protection and restoration actions that will create meaningful benefits for fish habitat and the fish populations those habitats support. This strong scientific foundation is of paramount importance to effective fish habitat conservation. The ongoing national assessment effort initiated under the Action Plan will allow us to pinpoint the causes of habitat loss and degradation so we can treat problems at their source, rather than just treating the symptoms. NOAA is proud to be involved in this precedent-setting national fish habitat assessment, and we support the provisions of the *NFHCA* that would further this effort.

H.R. 2055 –THE PACIFIC SALMON STRONGHOLD CONSERVATION ACT OF 2009

NOAA supports the strategies outlined in the *Pacific Salmon Stronghold Conservation Act of 2009 (PSSCA)* to protect and restore intact and productive habitats as a means of supporting healthy salmon populations. These strategies and activities support salmon conservation and are aligned with NOAA's ecosystem-based approaches to resource conservation. Since the first listing of salmon under the *ESA* in 1989, NOAA has used a number of tools to restore these species to healthy populations. The current Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund (PCSRF) program has been one of our primary tools for working with states and other partners to achieve this goal through the conservation of habitat critical to the continued survival of threatened and endangered or otherwise at-risk salmon stocks. Through the PCSRF, participating States and Tribes have acquired or protected over 122,000 acres and 2,300 stream miles, and 523,000 acres of salmon habitat have been created or improved. The *PSSCA* would authorize another program to engage a broad range of partners and use scientific criteria to identify, restore, and protect biologically important habitat called "salmon strongholds" of greatest value to Pacific salmon. Those same partners would then work with local stakeholders to design and implement high-impact projects to achieve long-term protection. Together, the PCSRF and the *PSSCA* address many of the same needs of Pacific salmon conservation and species recovery. The need to protect salmon habitat strongholds is even more important in light of the threat posed by global climate change and changing ocean conditions.

THE BENEFITS OF ENACTING THE *NFHCA* AND THE *PSSCA*

To the extent to which the *NFHCA* and the *PSSCA* would increase the total amount of habitat conservation conducted by NOAA, they will provide additional benefits to commercial and recreational marine species, which, as I mentioned earlier, contribute almost \$10 billion annually to the nation's economy. Focus on priority projects identified through a science-based strategic planning process has proven to be effective with respect to the PCSRF, and will result in better use of fish habitat conservation dollars and more gains in habitat quality and quantity, leading to healthier fish populations. However, it is important to note that implementation of the *PSSCA* has the potential to divert resources from other NOAA programs that protect and restore fish habitat.

NOAA would like to work with the Committee further to strengthen aspects of the *PSSCA* and ensure that it builds on existing programs. NOAA believes there are a number of existing partnerships, not limited to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which would be appropriate in helping us administer this program. Additionally, given that salmon are a treasured resource throughout the west coast of the United States, we recommend the Salmon Stronghold Partnership Board be constructed in such a way to ensure balanced representation from the northwest and southwest United States.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that NOAA's goal is to have healthy habitats supporting healthy fish that in turn support productive and vibrant coastal economies. The *NFHCA* and the *PSSCA* both seek to achieve healthy habitats, healthy fish populations, and healthy coastal ecosystems, as well as increased ecosystem services, aesthetic value, and fishing opportunities for the American public. Thank you, Chairwoman Bordallo, for holding this hearing. I welcome any questions you may have and I look forward to continuing to work with you on these important issues.