

ATLANTIC STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION

Sustainably Managing Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

Five-Year Strategic Plan 2014-2018



*The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources
as assets which it must turn over to the next generation
increased and not impaired in value.*

Theodore Roosevelt

Introduction

Each state has a fundamental responsibility to safeguard the public trust with respect to its natural resources. Fishery managers are faced with many challenges in carrying out that responsibility. Living marine resources inhabit ecosystems that cross state and federal jurisdictions. Thus, no state, by itself, can effectively protect the interests of its citizens. Each state must work with its sister states and the federal government to conserve and manage natural resources.

Beginning in the late 1930s, the 15 Atlantic coastal states from Maine to Florida took steps to develop cooperative mechanisms to define and achieve their mutual interests in coastal fisheries. The most notable of these was their commitment to form the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) in 1942, and to work together through the Commission to promote the conservation and management of shared marine fishery resources. Over the years, the Commission has remained an effective forum for fishery managers to pursue concerted management actions. Through the Commission, states cooperate in a broad range of programs including interstate fisheries management, fisheries science, habitat conservation, and law enforcement.

Congress has long recognized the critical role of the states and the need to support their mutual efforts. Most notably, it enacted the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act (Atlantic Coastal Act) in 1993, which built on the success of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act of 1984. Acknowledging that no single governmental entity has exclusive management authority for Atlantic coastal fishery resources, the Atlantic Coastal Act recognizes the states' responsibility for cooperative fisheries management through the Commission. The Atlantic Coastal Act charges all Atlantic states with implementing coastal fishery management plans that will safeguard the future of Atlantic coastal fisheries in the interest of both fishermen and the nation.

Accepting these challenges and maintaining their mutual commitment to success, the Atlantic coastal states have adopted this five-year Strategic Plan for the Commission. The states recognize circumstances today make the work of the Commission more important than ever before. The Strategic Plan articulates the mission, vision, values, goals, and strategies needed to accomplish the Commission's mission.

Mission

The Commission's mission, as stated in its 1942 Compact, is:

To promote the better utilization of the fisheries, marine, shell and anadromous, of the Atlantic seaboard by the development of a joint program for the promotion and protection of such fisheries, and by the prevention of physical waste of the fisheries from any cause.

The mission grounds the Commission in history. It reminds everyone of the Commission's sense of purpose that has been in place for over 70 years. The constantly changing physical, political, social, and economic environments led the Commission to restate the mission in more modern terms:

To promote cooperative management of marine, shell and diadromous fisheries of the Atlantic coast of the United States by the protection and enhancement of such fisheries, and by the avoidance of physical waste of the fisheries from any cause.

The mission and nature of the Commission as a mutual interstate body incorporate several guiding principles. They include:

- States are sovereign entities, each having its own laws and responsibilities for managing fishery resources within its jurisdiction
- States serve the broad public interest and represent the common good
- Multi-state resource management is complex and dependent upon cooperative efforts by all states involved
- The Commission provides a critical sounding board on issues requiring cross-jurisdictional action, coordinating cooperation, and collaboration among the states and federal government

Vision

The long-term vision of the Commission is:

Sustainably Managing Atlantic Coastal Fisheries

Values

The Commission and its member states have adopted the following values to guide its operations and activities. These values affirm the Commission's commitment to sustainable fisheries management for the benefit of recreational and commercial fishermen and coastal communities. They also acknowledge the growing importance of managing fisheries in a more holistic and adaptive way, seeking solutions to cross cutting resource issues that lead to long-term ecological and socio-economic sustainability.

- Effective stewardship of marine resources through strong partnerships
- Decisions based on sound science
- Long-term ecological sustainability
- Transparency and accountability in all actions
- Timely response to new information through adaptive management
- Balancing resource conservation with the economic success of coastal communities
- Efficient use of time and fiscal resources
- Work cooperatively with honesty, integrity, and fairness

Driving Forces

The Commission and its actions are influenced by a multitude of factors. These factors are constantly evolving and will most likely change over the time period of this Strategic Plan. However, the most pressing factors affecting the Commission today are increased pressure on fishery resources, elevated stakeholder scrutiny of the science supporting management decisions, a shifting legislative climate, shrinking state and federal budgets, a growing demand to address ecosystem functions, shifts in populations and habitats due to climate change, and the potential listing of coastal species as threatened and endangered under the Endangered Species Act. The Strategic Plan, through its goals and broad strategies, will seek to address each of these issues over the next five years.

Pressure on Fishery Resources and Industry

Fishery resources are impacted by a range of sources from fishing related events (harvest and discards) to non-fishery related factors such as trophic interactions, habitat quality and availability, invasive species, and climate change. The Commission, through the authority of the states' marine fishery agencies, can significantly affect fishery-related mortality (through harvest limits and input/output controls), but has little or no control over the non-fishery related factors. Partnerships, research, education, and advocacy will continue to play an important role in enabling the Commission and the states in addressing non-fishery related impacts.

The fishing industry also faces a variety of pressures, including global, national, and local market forces. Essential waterfront infrastructure is being lost to or dramatically changed by more profitable coastal development. Fishermen face increasingly stringent regulations that at times shift fishing effort, create inefficiencies, and restrict fishing opportunities. Resource allocation among the states and between various user groups will continue to be an important issue over the next five years.

Science-based Management

There is a tendency for the public and stakeholders to question the science supporting fisheries management decisions, due in part to a perceived disconnect between fishermen's on-the-water observations and stock assessment results. In some cases, this has resulted in stakeholders developing separate research initiatives or hiring their own fisheries consultants to develop alternative data sets, analyses, and stock assessments, often resulting in conflicting information available to managers. The Commission remains committed to management decisions based on sound science. This includes collaborating with stakeholders to conduct cooperative research, and seeking stakeholder input during the stock assessment process. It also includes an obligation to clearly communicate stock assessment results and advance the public's understanding of fisheries biology and stock assessment concepts through outreach tools.

Legislation

Over the next five years, there are several items on the legislative front that the Commission will need to track closely, including reauthorization of the Atlantic Coastal Act, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act, the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act, and the Anadromous Fish Conservation Act – all of

which have expired. Each of these laws has a tremendous impact on the states' fisheries programs, greatly influencing Commission/federal alignment in carrying out our shared stewardship responsibilities. The Commission is dedicated to advancing the states' interests to Congress as it reauthorizes these Acts or takes action on any other legislation that may affect the Commission's operations.

Federal, State, and Commission Resources

Federal funding continues to be restricted by the Budget Control Act of 2011, which includes spending caps on yearly appropriations bills as well as automatic, across-the-board spending cuts, commonly known as "sequestration". Beginning in 2013, nearly every stream of federal fisheries funding decreased by approximately ten percent, including grants that go directly to the states and funding for data collection, as well as the day-to-day operations of the Commission.

The states have also been severely impacted by reduced budgets over the past several years, resulting in an overall reduction in workforce and an associated reduction in fisheries management and research activities. This dire funding environment has led to a situation where current federal and state resources for fisheries science and management are insufficient to meet our collective responsibilities and mandates. Federal and state government resources will continue to be stretched as complex requirements are added without adequate complementary funding. Given these financial realities, the states and their federal partners must maintain and strengthen their partnerships, providing for efficient and effective fisheries management across all agencies. No one state or federal agency has the resources or authority to do it alone.

Ecosystem Functions

Nationally, there has been a growing demand for fisheries managers to address broader ecosystem functions such as predator/prey interactions and environmental factors into their fisheries management planning. The challenge in meeting this demand is its rigorous data requirements. The lack of resources to collect and manage these additional data sets has hindered the Commission in implementing ecosystem-based management. A majority of the Commission's species are managed and assessed on a single species basis incorporating ecosystem services information where available. The Commission remains committed to seeking ecological sustainability over the long-term through continuing its work on multispecies assessment modeling and the development of ecosystem-based reference points in its fisheries management planning process.

Ocean Planning

Marine spatial planning has become an increasingly popular method of balancing the growing demands on valuable ocean resources. More specifically, the competing interests of commercial and recreational fishing, renewable energy development, aquaculture, marine transportation, offshore oil exploration and drilling, military needs, habitat restoration, and weather forecasting are all components that must be integrated into successful ocean use policies. The Commission has always emphasized cooperative management with our federal partners; however, the states' authorities in their marine jurisdictions must be preserved and respected. The Commission will continue to prioritize the successful operation of its fisheries, but it will be imperative to work

closely with federal, state, and local governments on emerging ocean use conflicts as they diversify into the future.

Climate Change

Climate change and warming water temperatures will play an important role in the health and availability of coastal fishery resources for years to come. Potential impacts include prey and habitat availability, water quality, susceptibility to disease, and spawning and reproductive potential. The Commission is exploring the relationship between climate change and warming coastal water temperatures, and possible shifts in the geographic distributions of several key Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and South Atlantic stocks. Where shifts are occurring, the Commission may reconsider state-by-state allocation schemes and the need for adjustments to our fishery management plans.

Protected Species

Like coastal fishery resources, protected species, such as marine mammals, sea turtles, and listed and candidate fish species, traverse both state and federal waters. The protections afforded these species under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and Endangered Species Act can play a significant role in the management and prosecution of Atlantic coastal fisheries. The Commission and the states have a long history of working closely with our federal partners to minimize interactions with and bycatch of marine mammals and sea turtles by state water fisheries. The recent listing of Atlantic sturgeon under the Endangered Species Act and the potential listing American eel add a whole new level of complexity in the ability of the Commission and its member states to carry out their stewardship responsibilities for these important diadromous species. These species spend the majority of their lives in state waters and depend on estuarine and riverine habitat for their survival. Listing has the potential to jeopardize the states' ability to effectively monitor and assess stock condition, as well as impact fisheries that may encounter listed species. It is incumbent upon the Commission and its federal partners to work jointly to assess stock health, identify threats, and implement effective rebuilding programs for listed and candidate species.

GOALS & STRATEGIES

The Commission will pursue the following seven goals and their related strategies during the five-year planning period, from 2014 through 2018. It will pursue these goals through specific objectives, targets, and milestones outlined in an annual Action Plan, which is adopted each year at the Commission's Annual Meeting to guide the subsequent year's activities. Throughout the year, the Commission and its staff will monitor progress in meeting the Commission's goals, and evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies. While committed to the strategies included in this plan, the Commission is ready to adopt additional strategies to take advantage of new opportunities and address emerging issues as they arise.

Goal 1 - Rebuild, maintain, fairly allocate, and promote Atlantic coastal fisheries

Goal 1 focuses on the responsibility of the states to conserve and manage Atlantic coastal fishery resources for sustainable use. Commission members will advocate decisions to achieve the long-term benefits of conservation, while balancing the socio-economic interests and needs of coastal communities. Inherent in this is the recognition that healthy and vibrant resources often means more opportunities for stakeholders. The states are committed to proactive management, with a focus on integrating ecosystem services, socio-economic impacts, habitat issues, bycatch and discard reduction measures, and protected species interactions into well defined fishery management plans. Fishery management plans will also address fair allocation of fishery resources among the states. Understanding global climate change and its impact on fishery productivity and distribution is an elevated priority. Improving cooperation and coordination with federal partners and stakeholders can streamline efficiency, transparency, and, ultimately, success. In the next five years, the Commission is committed to ending overfishing and working to rebuild overfished or depleted Atlantic coast fish stocks, while promoting sustainable harvest of and access to rebuilt fisheries.

Strategies to Achieve Goal

- a. Manage interstate resources that provide for productive, sustainable fisheries using sound science
- b. Strengthen state and federal partnerships to improve comprehensive management of shared fishery resources
- c. Adapt management to address emerging issues
- d. Practice efficient, transparent, and accountable management processes
- e. Evaluate progress towards rebuilding fisheries
- f. Strengthen interactions and input among stakeholders, technical, advisory, and management groups

Goal 2 – Provide the scientific foundation for and conduct stock assessments to support informed management actions

Sustainable management of fisheries relies on accurate and timely scientific advice. The Commission strives to produce sound, actionable science through a technically rigorous, independently peer-reviewed stock assessment process. Assessments are developed using a broad suite of fishery-independent surveys and fishery-dependent monitoring, as well as research products developed by a vast network of fisheries scientists at state, federal, and academic institutions along the coast. The goal encompasses the development of new, innovative scientific research and methodology, and the enhancement of the states' stock assessment capabilities. It provides for the administration, coordination, and expansion of collaborative research and data collection programs. Achieving the goal will ensure sound science is available to serve as the foundation for the Commission's evaluation of stock status and adaptive management actions.

Strategies to Achieve Goal

- a. Conduct stock assessments based on comprehensive data sources and rigorous technical analysis
- b. Proactively address research priorities through cooperative state and regional data collection programs and collaborative research projects
- c. Facilitate stakeholder involvement in research initiatives and the stock assessment process
- d. Promote data collection and research to support ecosystem-based management
- e. Provide stock assessment training to improve the expertise and involvement of state and staff scientists

Goal 3 – Promote compliance with fishery management plans to ensure sustainable use of Atlantic coast fisheries

Fisheries managers, law enforcement personnel, and stakeholders have a shared responsibility to promote compliance with fisheries management measures. Activities under the goal seek to increase and improve compliance with fishery management plans. This requires the successful coordination of both management and enforcement activities among state and federal agencies. Commission members recognize that adequate and consistent enforcement of fisheries rules is required to keep pace with increasingly complex management activity and emerging technologies. Achieving the goal will improve the effectiveness of the Commission's fishery management plans.

Strategies to Achieve Goal

- a. Develop practical compliance requirements that foster stakeholder buy-in
- b. Evaluate the enforceability of management measures and the effectiveness of law enforcement programs
- c. Promote coordination and expand existing partnerships with state and federal natural resource law enforcement agencies
- d. Enhance stakeholder awareness of management measures through education and outreach
- e. Use emerging communication platforms to deliver real time information regarding regulations and the outcomes of law enforcement investigations

Goal 4 – Protect and enhance fish habitat and ecosystem health through partnerships and education

Goal 4 aims to conserve and improve coastal, marine, and riverine habitat to enhance the benefits of sustainable Atlantic coastal fisheries and resilient coastal communities in the face of changing ecosystems. Habitat loss and degradation have been identified as significant factors affecting the long-term sustainability and productivity of our nation's fisheries. The Commission's Habitat Program develops objectives, sets priorities, and produces tools to guide fisheries habitat conservation efforts directed towards ecosystem-based management.

The challenge for the Commission and its state members is maintaining fish habitat under limited regulatory authority for habitat protection or enhancement. Therefore, the Commission will work cooperatively with state, federal, and stakeholder partnerships to achieve this goal. The Commission and its Habitat Program endorses the National Fish Habitat Partnership, and will continue to work cooperatively with the program to improve aquatic habitat along the Atlantic coast. Since 2008, the Commission has invested considerable resources, as both a partner and administrative home, to the Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership, a coastwide collaborative effort to accelerate the conservation and restoration of habitat for native Atlantic coastal, estuarine-dependent, and diadromous fishes.

Strategies to Achieve Goal

- a. Identify critical habitat through fisheries management programs and partnerships
- b. Educate Commissioners, stakeholders, and the general public about the importance of habitat to healthy fisheries and ecosystems
- c. Engage local, state, and regional governments in mutually beneficial habitat protection and enhancement programs through partnerships
- d. Foster partnerships with management agencies, researchers, and habitat stakeholders to leverage regulatory, political, and financial support
- e. Identify mechanisms to evaluate ecosystem health
- f. Engage in state and federal agency efforts to ensure climate change response strategies are included in habitat conservation efforts

Goal 5 – Strengthen stakeholder and public support for the Commission

Stakeholder and public acceptance of Commission decisions are critical to our ultimate success. For the Commission to be effective, these groups must have a clear understanding of our mission, vision, and decision-making processes. The goal seeks to do so through expanded outreach and education efforts about Commission programs, decision-making processes, and its management successes and challenges. It aims to engage stakeholders in the process of fisheries management, and promote the activities and accomplishments of the Commission. Achieving the goal will increase stakeholder participation, understanding, and acceptance of Commission activities.

Strategies to Achieve Goal

- a. Increase public understanding and support of activities through expanded outreach at the local, state, and federal levels
- b. Clearly define Commission processes to facilitate stakeholder participation, as well as transparency and accountability
- c. Strengthen national, regional, and local media relations to increase coverage of Commission actions
- d. Use new technologies and communication platforms to more fully engage the broader public in the Commission's activities and actions

Goal 6 – Advance Commission and member states’ priorities through a proactive legislative policy agenda

Although states are positioned to achieve many of the national goals for marine fisheries through cooperative efforts, state fisheries interests are often underrepresented at the national level. This is due, in part, to the fact that policy formulation is often disconnected from the processes that provide the support, organization, and resources necessary to implement the policies. The capabilities and input of the states are an important aspect of developing national fisheries policy, and the goal seeks to increase the states’ role in national policy formulation. Additionally, the goal emphasizes the importance of achieving management goals consistent with productive commercial and recreational fisheries and healthy ecosystems.

The Commission recognizes the need to work with Congress in all phases of policy formulation. Several important fishery-related laws will be reauthorized over the next couple of years (i.e., Atlantic Coastal Act, Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, Interjurisdictional Fisheries Act, Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act, and Anadromous Fish Conservation Act). The Commission will be vigilant in advancing the states’ interests to Congress as these laws are reauthorized and other fishery-related pieces of legislation are considered.

Strategies to Achieve Goal

- a. Increase the Commission’s profile and support in the U.S. Congress by developing relationships between Members and their staff and Commissioners, the Executive Director, and Commission staff
- b. Maintain or increase long term funding for Commission programs through the federal appropriations process and other available sources.
- c. Engage Congress on fishery-related legislation affecting the Atlantic coast
- d. Promote member states’ collective interests at the regional and national levels
- e. Promote economic benefits of the Commission’s actions (return on investment)

Goal 7 – Ensure the fiscal stability & efficient administration of the Commission

Goal 7 will ensure that the business affairs of the Commission are managed effectively and efficiently, including workload balancing through the development of annual action plans to support the Commission’s management process. It also highlights the need for the Commission to efficiently manage its resources. The goal promotes the efficient use of legal advice to proactively review policies and react to litigation as necessary. It also promotes human resource policies that attract talented and committed individuals to conduct the work of the Commission. The goal highlights the need for the Commission as an organization to continually expand its skill set through training and educational opportunities. It calls for Commissioners and Commission staff to maintain and increase the institutional knowledge of the Commission through periods of transition. Achieving this goal will build core strengths, enabling the Commission to respond to increasingly difficult and complex fisheries management issues.

Strategies to Achieve Goal

- a. Conservatively manage the Commission's operations and budgets to ensure fiscal stability
- b. Utilize new information technology to improve meeting and workload efficiencies, and enhance communications
- c. Refine strategies to recruit professional staff, and enhance growth and learning opportunities for Commission and state personnel
- d. Fully engage new Commissioners in the Commission process and document institutional knowledge.
- e. Utilize legal advice on new management strategies and policies, and respond to litigation as necessary.