



FIFTY TWO REASONS NOAA MUST CONDUCT FISHERIES STOCK ASSESSMENTS IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES ©

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“Science will set us free,” has been a rallying cry for commercial and recreational fishermen from Texas through North Carolina for several decades. It will continue to be a passionate, continuous rallying cry in 2013. Science is non-partisan. Fish are non-partisan. The private sector group of men and women who fight for equal protection under the law and more transparency in how our tax dollars are spent by NOAA are non-partisan.

(Week # 2 of 52 reasons) NOAA science centers should conduct joint stock assessment research with states and universities. This joint research must be peer reviewed by non-NOAA scientists

Congress enacted the Magnuson-Stevens Act in 1976, giving NOAA full authority to manage fisheries in the 200-mile federal fishing zone. NOAA was ill-prepared to scientifically manage the fisheries in the southeast because it had no foundation of ecological and biological data similar to the scientific database on fisheries stocks in Alaska and New England. I do not fault NOAA for that lack of knowledge, because stock assessment work in the southeast was not their mission at the time. NOAA professionals were conducting exploratory fishing, improving gear technology and laying the groundwork for American fishermen to harvest the maximum sustainable yield from American fisheries. Great work was done by the RV Oregon II and by Harvey Bullis and his staff of professionals. I still miss Harvey Bullis and his crew.

We know the size of fish stocks in the southeast cannot compare with the five-billion pound Pollock fishery in the Bering Sea. We realize many of our fisheries cannot be surveyed with trawl nets so we are limited to utilizing hook and line as our main tool. Obtaining sufficient scientific information from hook and line catch rates to arrive at an estimate of population abundance is more difficult than using trawls.

Gathering empirical data on what are considered small stocks of fish in the scheme of world fisheries will be very difficult. We know how tough it is to move people from their comfort zone, but we must find a way to get better data. We believe NOAA will not do stock assessments in the southeast unless they are prodded every day and in every way. We believe if state research labs and academic institutions, capable of doing stock assessment work, are part of the overall efforts, we will, over time, have empirical data proving the relative abundance of each major stock of fish.

Cooperative fishery stock assessment research will remove us from a system many believe is a “paint by numbers” approach where scientific gaps are filled in with guesses and assumptions. The honest number crunchers who obey dogma from headquarters do not have a dog in the hunt and nothing to lose. Their pay and benefit packages continue to rise. The people who suffer under the present inadequate scientific stock assessment system, especially in the South Atlantic, are the fishermen, dealers, restaurants, coastal communities and the nation.

How can we mandate meaningful joint research on stock assessments between NOAA and others?

Bob Jones, Executive Director
Southeastern Fisheries Association
Tallahassee, Florida 32303
www.sfaonline.org