

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



WHY IS NOAA FISHERIES REDESIGNING ITS ANGLER SURVEYS?

In recent years, fisheries managers, as well as partners in the recreational fishing community, increasingly raised concerns about the timeliness and accuracy of NOAA Fisheries' primary angler survey program, the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Surveys (often called MRFSS).

NOAA Fisheries responded by requesting a thorough review by the National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council in 2005. In April 2006, a group of independent scientists announced their findings, recommending the agency collaborate with its state partners to dramatically redesign the angler survey program.

In addition, when Congress reauthorized the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in January 2007, it echoed many of the council's recommendations and included a provision requiring a new national saltwater angler registry.

For these reasons, the nearly 30-year-old MRFSS is being phased out as thoroughly updated angler surveys are phased in. The new Marine Recreational Information Program will improve the collection, analysis, and use of fishing data and eventually replace MRFSS.

HOW IS THE NEW PROGRAM GOING TO BE DIFFERENT?

After carefully considering the recommendations from the National Research Council and Congress, NOAA Fisheries took an entirely fresh look at the way information about recreational fishing was collected. The new program needs to be far better at identifying and eliminating gaps and biases in the data and estimating total catch.

The Marine Recreational Information Program will be more than a one-size-fits-all survey. Rather, the program will be made up of an interconnected system of surveys, each targeted toward particular segments of the fishing community (for-hire, private anglers, and highly migratory species) and regions of the country. This allows NOAA Fisheries, regional fishery management councils, interstate fisheries commissions, state agencies, and partners to most efficiently capture information from these important segments.

Anglers who participate in sampling efforts may not immediately notice many differences, as some of the changes to the recreational fishing data program will be taking place behind the scenes. The process will be similar to rolling out a new car that looks similar to previous models, but under the hood is a completely redesigned engine.

WILL THE RECREATIONAL FISHING COMMUNITY BE INVOLVED WITH THE REDESIGN EFFORT?

Yes. Many people, both inside and outside NOAA Fisheries, will be involved throughout the process. Even the most statistically sound data program cannot succeed without the support of those who collect, use, and are ultimately affected by the data.

NOAA Fisheries has established teams of experts from the agency, regional fishery management councils, interstate fisheries commissions, state agencies, and partners organizations to lead the development of distinct aspects of the Marine Recreational Information Program. In addition, partners in



the recreational fishing community and the outdoor media are providing a vital service by helping NOAA Fisheries ensure anglers are kept well informed as the new program progresses.

Everyone who has an interest and a stake in the process has been invited and encouraged to participate from the beginning, and the agency will continue to lead a cooperative and transparent redesign process.

(A complete roster of team members can be found at www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov.)

WHAT WILL THE MARINE RECREATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAM DO?

The new surveys will help managers better understand saltwater sportfishing's relationship to fisheries sustainability by better answering these fundamental questions: Who fishes? What's being caught? How many fish are caught? Where and when are people fishing?

Data collection has traditionally been conducted through telephone interviews and in-person field sampling. These practices are expected to continue with the Marine Recreational Information Program, but many survey elements (related to both data collection and analysis) will be updated and refined to address issues such as data gaps, bias, consistency, accuracy, and timeliness.

One of the most important improvements is the development of a national saltwater angler registry, providing a much more efficient and effective route for collecting data than current techniques.

WHAT IS THE NATIONAL SALTWATER ANGLER REGISTRY?

Congress, through the recently reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, called on NOAA Fisheries to take the lead in creating a national registry of saltwater anglers. The legislation set a January 1, 2009 deadline for the registry to take effect. (In its recommendations to NOAA Fisheries, the National Research Council also advocated for such a registry.)

The registry will help improve data collection by creating a universe of saltwater anglers—essentially a phonebook of fishermen that is updated each year. This resource will help reduce bias and improve the efficiency of catch and effort surveys. It also will give saltwater anglers better representation in the policy-making process.

Instead of asking a random sample of coastal U.S. residents if they've gone fishing (what is currently done), an angler registry would allow surveyors to call upon those who have already identified themselves as saltwater fishermen. For example, if you needed a loaf of bread you wouldn't randomly visit a hardware store or a post office, you'd go directly to a grocery store. Likewise, if you want to know what anglers are catching, it's much more efficient and effective to go directly to the fishermen and ask.

WHY IS NOAA FISHERIES IN CHARGE OF CREATING A REGISTRY?

NOAA Fisheries is the logical choice because it's the federal agency with primary responsibility for the conservation of anadromous fisheries and marine resources in federal waters. Given that most fishing takes place in state waters (which include ocean waters up to 3 miles off the coasts), counting saltwater anglers is more than just a federal issue, however. NOAA Fisheries, regional fishery management councils, interstate fisheries commissions, state agencies, and partners are collaborating to design and implement the registry. Many states already collect the information needed for the registry, especially through saltwater fishing license records.



IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A REGISTRY AND A FISHING LICENSE?

Yes. A registry is like a national phonebook containing the names and contact information of saltwater anglers. By itself, a saltwater fishing license is not a registry. Rather a license is just one way to get the contact information contained in a registry.

A registry that many people are familiar with is the “do not call” telemarketing list. Instead of using a license to add names to the list, the “do not call” registry allowed people to voluntarily register by visiting a website or calling a number to provide their information.

DON'T MOST STATES ALREADY HAVE A SALTWATER FISHING LICENSE?

Many states do have some kind of fishing license for saltwater anglers. The actual requirements for who has to have a license vary from state to state. States that are currently without any saltwater fishing license include Connecticut, Hawaii, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and the western Pacific and Caribbean territories.

DOES THE REGISTRY PRECLUDE THE NEED FOR A STATE SALTWATER LICENSE (ASSUMING THE STATE HAS ONE?)

No. Actually the reverse is true. Having a resident saltwater fishing license would preclude an angler from having to register because their state would automatically take care of that with the information provided for the license.

The national registry never pre-empts state licensing requirements. Any person fishing in state waters must abide by those state's regulations. For example, if an angler registers because he or she lives in a state that does not have a saltwater fishing license, but goes fishing in another state which requires a saltwater fishing license, then the angler would have to buy that state's fishing license. Unlike licenses, an angler's registration carries over from state to state, and it is only necessary to register once each year.

WHAT INFORMATION WOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE REGISTRY?

The registry will include just enough information to make it possible to contact anglers to conduct surveys of catch and effort. As is the case already, surveys may be handled by representatives of NOAA Fisheries or state fisheries agencies. More specific information about minimum data requirements and acceptable state fishing license exemptions will be more clearly spelled out when NOAA Fisheries releases a proposed rule on the national saltwater angler registry in the summer of 2008. (A proposed rule is a public document announcing significant government plans and offering opportunity for public input, usually for 45 days or more).

WILL IT COST ANGLERS MONEY TO BE REGISTERED?

It could. Congress gave NOAA Fisheries the option of collecting a fee to cover administrative costs of running a registry, but not before 2011. However, if NOAA Fisheries ends up collecting fees, the agency will not necessarily be privy to the revenue generated. In general, fees from any federal government program go back into the U.S. Treasury and can be used for any federal program, unless specific legislation or special Congressional action funnels it back to the originating agency. (This is meant to protect the public interest by avoiding an automatic incentive for federal agencies to charge fees. The downside is that anglers' dollars would not necessarily be channeled back into fisheries conservation and management).

Anglers investments would be more likely to go to programs they care about if states administered their respective portions of the national registry. Congress provided an added incentive for states to do so by



giving them the option of collecting fees for the registry if they require a saltwater fishing license or otherwise collect the data the registry requires. If states collect fees for the registry they can use their discretion on how the fee revenue is spent.

If any fees become necessary, whether collected by NOAA Fisheries or state fisheries agencies, the benefits of such investments would be better surveys, better fisheries conservation and management decisions, and better fishing experiences, which are in everyone's interests.

ARE THERE ANY EXEMPTIONS FROM THE REGISTRY REQUIREMENT?

If states already have a program in place that gathers the data necessary for the registry (such as a complete saltwater fishing license that accounts for all anglers), there is no requirement that they develop another system for collecting this information from anglers.

DOES THE REGISTRY APPLY TO FISHING IN STATE WATERS?

Generally, no, but with one major exception. Congress specified that the registry would only apply to those fishing in federal waters and those fishing for anadromous species in any waters, including those in state jurisdiction. In other words, even anglers in inland states like Idaho or Pennsylvania would have to be registered to fish for salmon or striped bass. (The Great Lakes would not be subject to the registry.)

Inland state anglers not fishing for anadromous fish would have no registry requirements. For example, an angler surf fishing for flounder within the 3-mile coastal zone (managed by state agencies) would not be required to register. This is an obvious gap that would impact the benefits of using a registry to conduct surveys. That's one reason why NOAA Fisheries and states are working together to ensure there is a complete accounting of saltwater anglers whether they fish in state or federal waters.

WILL ANGLERS FISHING FROM FOR-HIRE VESSELS HAVE TO BE REGISTERED?

No. If the only fishing anglers do is from a charter or party boat, they will not have to register. This is because the for-hire sector is already well accounted for. For-hire vessels are sampled weekly from a coast-wide vessel directory to report trip information for the previous week's fishing activity. Catch information is obtained through a dockside field survey.

SINCE A VESSEL-BASED SURVEY IS USED FOR THE FOR-HIRE INDUSTRY, WOULD IT BE POSSIBLE TO REGISTER PRIVATE BOATS IN THE SAME WAY AND USE THAT IN PLACE OF AN ANGLER REGISTRY?

It's theoretically possible, but problematic for several reasons. First, the National Research Council made it clear in its recommendations that the best option is for anglers to be registered directly, instead of trying to get catch and effort information indirectly through a boat registry. Secondly, the sheer number of private recreational boats makes this option difficult. There are an easily manageable number of for-hire vessels compared to the millions of private recreational boats. Lastly, using registered boaters would require the design of a specialized survey different from both the for-hire and angler surveys. This would increase the complexity of managing the surveys and data and would significantly raise survey administration costs.