



# Fisheries Priorities and Annual Guidance for 2016



**NOAA**  
**FISHERIES**

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# Fisheries Priorities and Annual Guidance for 2016

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
National Marine Fisheries Service**



**NOAA  
FISHERIES**

# Introduction

This document provides guidance to all NOAA Fisheries employees in executing our mission responsibilities. The priorities described below consider NOAA Fisheries’ core mission functions in the context of current fiscal conditions. These priorities are intended to guide the development and execution of the FY 2016 Annual Operating Plan by establishing a framework for development of FY 2016 priority milestones. They will promote effective and efficient planning, management, and execution over the next 5 years.

In FY 2016 NOAA Fisheries will continue to advance efforts to promote productive and sustainable fisheries, improve the recovery and conservation of protected resources, and promote healthy ecosystems and resilient communities. Key elements of these services are the economic, societal, and environmental benefits they provide the nation. We will support these efforts with sound science and by implementing an ecosystem-based approach to management. NOAA Fisheries will strengthen our partnerships and encourage innovation in all parts of the organization. As noted in the Department of Commerce’s FY 2014–2018 Strategic Plan priorities, NOAA Fisheries will work to improve government, business, and community decisions through a data-enabled economy.

For FY 2016 NOAA Fisheries will focus on the following three core priorities:

- Ensure the productivity and sustainability of fisheries<sup>1</sup> and fishing communities through science-based decision-making and compliance with regulations.
- Recover and conserve protected resources through the use of sound natural and social sciences.
- Improve organizational excellence.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term “fisheries” encompasses commercial fishing, recreational fishing, and aquaculture.

<sup>2</sup> The DOC Strategic Plan defines organizational excellence as: strengthening capacity to achieve objectives, maximize return on program investments, and deliver quality, timely service.

## DOC Strategic Plan



### Strategic Goal 3 Environment:

Ensure communities and businesses have the necessary information, products, and services to prepare for and prosper in a changing environment.

#### Objective 3.4:

Foster healthy and sustainable marine resources, habitats, and ecosystems through improved management and partnerships (NOAA).



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**TOP PRIORITIES FOR 2014-2018**

- 1 Make communities more resilient
- 2 Evolve the Weather Service
- 3 Invest in observational infrastructure
- 4 Achieve Organizational Excellence

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All other NOAA Fisheries programs, projects, and investments should be designed and conducted in a manner that supports these three core priorities. By addressing these priorities, we will make communities more ecologically and economically resilient to severe events—such as drought, hurricanes, and fisheries declines—as well as changing conditions as a result of climate change. To be consistent with NOAA priorities, NOAA Fisheries will continue to support the goal of environmental intelligence by providing the science, tools, and data needed to support resilient communities.

NOAA Fisheries will continue to advance ecosystem-based management to deliver the information and services needed to achieve our

mission. Ecosystem-based management is an integrated approach that incorporates the entire ecosystem, including humans, into resource management decisions, responds to a changing marine climate, and is guided by an adaptive management approach. It is informed by science to protect and sustain diverse and productive ecosystems and the services they provide.

This guidance supports the priorities outlined in recent announcements by the Administration, the Secretary's priorities outlined in the 2014 Department of Commerce Strategic Plan (see sidebar), and the NOAA Administrator's priorities (see sidebar). In addition, this guidance reflects our mission in the context of external factors (e.g., climate events that may affect coastal and marine ecosystems substantially), outcomes of recent NOAA Fisheries Leadership Council discussions, and broad Administration priorities including the National Ocean Policy, the President's Climate Action Plan, the National Strategy for the Arctic Region, and the Presidential Initiative on Combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing and Seafood Fraud.

# Meeting Our Mission in the Face of Ongoing Challenges and Risks

NOAA Fisheries is committed to fostering healthy, productive, and sustainable marine resources, habitats, and ecosystems. We continue to innovate and make process improvements that increase efficiency. One example is advancing the use of electronic monitoring in conjunction with traditional monitoring techniques to create efficiencies. However, several challenges and risks could affect our ability to carry out our mission; for example:

- Staffing shortfalls will continue to reduce NOAA Fisheries' capacity to meet our mission objectives.
- Inadequate ship time will continue to erode our ability to produce critical data and science to inform management decisions.
- Dated infrastructure will degrade scientific and management capabilities.
- Increases in mission responsibilities without commensurate improvements in our authorities and resources (for example, our capacity to meet the full measure of recommendations of the Presidential Task Force on IUU and Seafood Fraud in order to eliminate IUU fishing) will constrain our ability to meet new and existing priorities.
- Insufficient capabilities to monitor climate-related changes that are affecting living marine resources will challenge our ability to support resilient communities that depend on those resources.

NOAA Fisheries will remain vigilant in responding to existing and emerging challenges and risks that may affect our ability to meet our mission. We will also seek out opportunities that enable us to improve how we meet our core priorities and balance economic, societal, and environmental benefits. These opportunities may include new mandates and resources to meet our nation's growing environmental challenges and business needs; integrating planning and execution more effectively; and improving coordination, collaboration, and synergy with federal, tribal, state, and external partners.

The Administration and Congress have committed to supporting our science and fisheries management programs, which has helped stabilize key operations. Nevertheless, the current budget climate remains highly uncertain with limited prospects for growth in program resources in FY 2016 and beyond. During the past 5 years, in response to significant budget reductions and continued uncertainty, NOAA Fisheries has reduced expenditures on staff; reduced spending on travel, training, and other discretionary expenses; and delayed or reduced various program activities. With far fewer people on board, NOAA Fisheries as a whole lacks the capacity needed to provide expected services. NOAA Fisheries staff are to be commended for their efforts to provide critically important services to the public, especially during this period of reduced budgets.

In this environment, as in prior years, it will be necessary to keep costs down and demonstrate gains in cost savings and efficiency. In FY 2016, NOAA Fisheries will enhance our focus to achieve organizational excellence, thus strengthening the organization during this challenging budget climate. Base budgets will focus on the highest agency priorities in FY 2016 and future years. Funding for lower priorities may need to be adjusted downward to realize additional gains for our core program activities as well as new priorities that emerge.

NOAA Fisheries remains focused on advancing our core priority areas. We have controls in place that effectively ended chronic overfishing and supported significant growth in marine aquaculture, leading to a brighter future for fish stocks, fishers, aquaculturists, and fishing communities. We have also made progress in recovering protected species. We will continue to emphasize making progress in these core areas, especially as we face increasing fiscal and environmental challenges.

## **Guidance for FY 2016 Execution and Out-Year Planning**

Our approach to the three core priorities and supporting functions will be guided by the following overarching principles:

### **Guiding Principles**

- **Advance innovative solutions to emerging challenges (science and stewardship):** NOAA Fisheries will lead innovation and serve as a catalyst to spur innovation.
- **Cultivate our partnerships:** NOAA Fisheries will engage the expertise and capabilities of our partners from the international, federal, tribal, and state communities and from academia and nongovernmental organizations.
- **Improve internal and external communications and raise awareness of the NOAA Fisheries mission:** We will strive toward a “no surprises” approach to communicating with our stakeholders and, where practicable, build consensus on expectations and on identifying critical factors to measure success.
- **Improve our decisions and knowledge by transforming data capabilities and access in order to support our mission.** NOAA Fisheries will provide robust data and science utilizing the best available infrastructure and by anticipating customer’s needs.

# Maximize Productivity and Sustainability of Fisheries and Fishing Communities

To achieve our goals, NOAA Fisheries must continue to address the current and emerging challenges in FY 2016 and beyond. Effective fisheries management is essential in order to sustain, protect, and increase domestic seafood supply; maintain and enhance recreational and subsistence opportunities; protect ecosystem health and sustainability; and create jobs, support other economic and social benefits, and sustain community resilience.

We have made progress over the past 5 years to improve fishery sustainability (see sidebar). In partnership with the Regional Fishery Management Councils, we have made significant strides in building sustainable fisheries, including protecting essential fish habitats and habitats of particular concern, implementing effective annual catch limits and accountability measures, and implementing plans to rebuild depleted fish stocks and achieve long-term productivity and sustainability. We have strengthened foundational relationships with constituencies such as the recreational fishing community, leading to improved confidence, support, and stewardship. At the same time, we have increased opportunities to support a growing domestic marine aquaculture industry, which will continue to provide job opportunities for coastal communities and increase the U.S. supply of sustainable seafood.

In 2013, U.S. commercial and recreational saltwater fishing generated more than \$106 billion in sales and supported more than 1.2 million jobs (excluding imports). Additionally, jobs supported by commercial fishing grew by 12% from 2012. Approximately 11 million recreational saltwater anglers across the United States took 72 million fishing trips. These anglers spent \$25 billion on fishing-related equipment and durable goods and contributed \$29 billion to the GDP. The U.S. aquaculture industry was valued at \$1.2 billion in farm-gate sales in 2012. The marine aquaculture industry is growing at an average rate of 8 percent per year by value from 2007 to 2012. (FEUS 2013)

## Status of Stocks

2013	2014
28 (9%) on overfishing list	26 (8%) on overfishing list
40 (17%) on overfished list	38 (16%) on overfished list
34 stocks rebuilt	37 stocks rebuilt

The need to sustainably and substantially increase our nation's seafood supply is a continuing and growing challenge. NOAA Fisheries will focus on increasing our domestic seafood supply for both domestic consumption and to take advantage of the enormous trade opportunities that exist. Continuing progress on improving the sustainability of our fisheries and increasing seafood supply will require commitment to these priorities now and in the future. These include:

- Providing high-quality stock assessments and ecological and socioeconomic information required for the federal management of fisheries.
- Expanding observer programs on commercial vessels and, to the extent possible, supplementing observer coverage through the use of well-tested and calibrated electronic monitoring technologies.
- Implementing ecosystem-based management principles with an integrated approach linking biological, physical, and social science.
- Recognizing the impacts of climate change and other stressors on fisheries and the communities that depend on them.
- Enforcing regulations to stem illegal and unsustainable fishing practices.
- Significantly increasing the supply of domestic seafood through science-based development of U.S. marine aquaculture and a holistic understanding of the interaction between aquaculture and the marine environment.
- Working with commercial, recreational, and subsistence fishing interests; non-governmental organizations; states; and tribes to develop more robust, effective, and implementable cooperative science and management plans that prevent overfishing while achieving optimum yields from each fishery.
- Increasing consumer confidence in seafood through partnerships with industry and consumer groups to ensure properly labeled seafood through inspection, enforcement, and international cooperation.
- Improving public understanding about the sustainability and health benefits of U.S. seafood, both wild and farmed, through internal efforts (e.g., FishWatch) and in cooperation with partners.

## NOAA Fisheries FY 2015 Accomplishments

- NOAA Fisheries released a sweeping National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy and implementation plan to guide Agency work, allowing for improved efficiency and effectiveness of our recreational work.
- Marine aquaculture continued an upward trend with 8 percent average annual growth.
- Several northeast states had record shellfish harvests due to booming aquaculture sectors.
- Federal waters were opened to aquaculture development.

- Modernizing the agency's trade monitoring programs, and its tools and approaches, to support implementation of the Safe Ports Act and the goals of the Presidential Initiative on Combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing and Seafood Fraud, including trade-related and port state measures by international regional fisheries management organizations to achieve conservation objectives.
- Coordinating efforts to reduce the rate of loss of coastal habitats needed to support sustainable fisheries and working with constituents to establish habitat objectives to guide conservation efforts.

## ***FY 2016 Priorities: Sustainability of Fisheries and Fishing Communities***

In FY 2016 we will make progress on ensuring that our regulatory programs are clear and cost-effective. Working with the Regional Fishery Management Councils, states, interstate marine fisheries commissions, tribes, fishing industries, foreign governments, and other stakeholders, we will continue to streamline and enforce regulations that support our mission. In particular, we must continue to set appropriate annual catch limits, ensure rebuilding plans are successful, and address management needs of rebuilt stocks. We will develop procedures that promote implementation of electronic monitoring and reporting of fishery catches and advance their use where appropriate. We will continue to work with Congress to develop recommendations for reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and will be working to finalize and, as appropriate, implement the proposed improvements to the National Standard 1 guidelines.

In concert with anglers and management partners, we will continue implementing the National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy through the National Implementation Plan, and will address regional priorities by developing region-specific recreational fisheries implementation plans.

In FY 2016 and beyond, we will continue domestic and international efforts to end overfishing; minimize bycatch; provide effective enforcement and compliance assistance; and focus on rebuilding and maintaining commercial fish stocks at sustainable levels to expand fishing opportunities and jobs.

NOAA Fisheries will also continue our leadership in implementing the Presidential Task Force recommendations on combating IUU fishing and seafood fraud as described in the Action Plan and interagency work plans. Without action, IUU fishing will continue to cause economic loss and threaten the sustainability of fish stocks on a global scale. Mileposts in this effort include international engagement, capacity building, enforcement, informing the public of the Administration's progress toward implementation of Task Force recommendations, and the establishment of a risk-based traceability program from point of harvest to entry into U.S. commerce.

Our goal of long-term sustainable fisheries will require continued science-based efforts to foster development of aquaculture to increase our nation's seafood supply and complement domestic commercial fisheries. With partners and public input, we will finalize a new 5-year



strategic plan to guide and prioritize the necessary key investments that will yield sustainable seafood, jobs, and healthy habitats and oceans. These will include developing new management tools and information for planning and decision-making, regulatory requirements, and understanding aquaculture's role in the provision of ecosystem services. We will complete rulemaking to implement the first-ever regional permitting system for aquaculture in federal waters under the MSA, pursuant to the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Plan for Aquaculture. We will continue to implement and expand the National Shellfish Initiative, which supports both commercial production and habitat restoration. We will also work with other regulatory agencies to streamline the permitting process for shellfish aquaculture, and develop a coordinated regulatory framework for aquaculture in federal waters.

### ***Advancing Science to Manage Fisheries Sustainably***

The increasing value of rebuilt domestic fisheries and improved economic performance of catch share management systems is evidence that our investments in research, assessments, and observers for fisheries are effective. In FY 2016 NOAA Fisheries will implement the Next Generation Stock Assessment (NGSA) Framework, Ecosystem-based Fishery Management Roadmap, and National Climate Science Strategy for NOAA-managed fish stocks and promote advancements in monitoring and data collection activities.

Our approach relies increasingly on partnerships to supply additional days at sea and to allow for comprehensive, high-quality, integrated science data and products/services. These efforts include:

- Collaborating through joint research and studies with other NOAA line offices (e.g., Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research for climate research, advanced modeling, and genomics; Office of Marine and Aviation Operations for the development of a long-term vision for survey platforms; and National Ocean Service on community resilience, ecosystem forecasting, and aquaculture impact assessment and siting information).
- Developing reimbursable agreements with industry and other federal agencies, such as the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, for research on

the Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf of Mexico coasts as well as in the Arctic.

- Providing grants and cooperative agreements to NOAA Sea Grant, academic partners (including the NOAA Cooperative Institutes), states, tribes, and commercial and recreational fishermen.
- Administering and overseeing Saltonstall-Kennedy research and development grants, which address needs of fishing communities in optimizing economic benefits by building and maintaining sustainable fisheries and practices, dealing with the impacts of conservation and management measures, and increasing other opportunities to promote the resilience of working waterfronts.

For NOAA Fisheries to meet our stewardship goals, we must have high-quality science delivered in a timely fashion that meets the needs of our managers and stakeholders. The Science Centers' Strategic Planning processes and annual Science Program Reviews are an important component of the process to support these needs.

NOAA Fisheries depends on highly specialized infrastructure—including information technology, facilities, and observing systems—to deliver on our mission priorities. To this end, we will work within NOAA and with external partners to develop next-generation mission-critical observation platforms (e.g. unmanned aircraft systems) and encourage research on advanced technologies to improve our capability to provide highly calibrated data and observations.



These efforts are necessary to respond to the rising demand for essential data and analyses of the ecological, physical, oceanographic, and chemical dynamics affecting living marine resources and to inform management decisions.

Increasing aquaculture production requires continued investment in the biological, genetic, and physiological requirements to culture organisms; evaluation of new culture species; and further development of native shellfish restoration strategies that restore habitat and increase harvest opportunities. This work will include development of science-based management tools (e.g., genetic and

ecosystem models), and aquaculture technology development and transfer to industry. We will work to implement the new National Strategic Plan for Federal Aquaculture Research, which will guide the development of strategic research goals and provide a coordination framework.

Socioeconomic research and forecast models are an important component of our assessments. These models complement our biological and physical science information and enable us to

better identify the social and economic consequences. Understanding human use patterns in marine ecosystems is crucial given the impact people have on these ecosystems, as well as their reliance on them. The impact of climate change on coastal communities' economies remains to be assessed. Ultimately, stock assessments, aquaculture management tools, and social and economic science products are needed to inform managers and to promote resiliency within communities.

### ***Focusing Habitat Efforts for Sustaining, Improving, and Rebuilding Fisheries***

Habitat protection and restoration are essential elements of a strategy for sustainable commercial and recreational fisheries. The quality and quantity of available habitat are critical to supporting living marine resources. Lost or degraded habitat has direct economic consequences for commercial, recreational, and tribal fishermen. Impaired habitat can threaten the sustainability not only of fishery resources, but of entire communities that rely on these habitats for food, commerce, and employment.

NOAA Fisheries will work to reduce threats to priority habitats, with a focus on coastal wetlands, rivers, hard bottom habitats (e.g., oyster and abalone), coral reef ecosystems, and submerged aquatic vegetation. NOAA Fisheries is promoting a holistic, landscape-scale approach to habitat conservation and resource management in a changing climate. By addressing issues at a landscape-scale, we can target conservation actions that will achieve optimal conservation values in order to support resilient ecosystems. Landscape-scale approaches are also essential to address the impacts of climate change. For example, ensuring healthy habitats for forage and juvenile fish ultimately supports commercial and recreational fisheries and coastal economies. These same habitats and conservation actions also increase the resilience of coastal communities by providing important ecosystem services such as protection from coastal flooding, extreme weather events, and coastal erosion.

We will continue to use the Habitat Blueprint as the framework to align habitat conservation efforts with the stewardship responsibilities and goals in NOAA's mission. The Blueprint leverages external partnerships and resources toward coordinated action to improve habitat conditions for marine, coastal, and riverine resources and coastal communities. Coupled with landscape-scale initiatives in the Gulf of Mexico, Puget Sound, and other regions, the Blueprint will drive investments toward targeted areas to maximize impact.

### **NOAA Fisheries FY 2015 Accomplishments**

- In July 2015 BP reached an agreement in principle of approximately \$18.7 billion with the federal government and Gulf states for the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. With partners, NOAA Fisheries is both leading and supporting restoration actions that will account for the majority of these and prior DWH settlement funds.
- NOAA Fisheries completed the selection of habitat focus areas in each of the regions, with 10 areas in total. Concentrating our efforts on these focus areas increases the effectiveness of our habitat conservation science and management efforts and yields significant improvements for protected species and aspects of rebuilding sustainable fisheries, such as increasing available forage fish.
- NOAA released the National Habitat Policy in August 2015. The Policy calls for the agency to use the full extent of its programs to protect, maintain, and restore habitats that support resilient and thriving marine and coastal ecosystems, communities and economies.

As part of the Blueprint and the Habitat Assessment Improvement Plan, we will implement a strategic approach to habitat science that will enable NOAA to improve the prioritization and implementation of our conservation actions. Improving habitat science and planning efforts with our partners is essential to linking habitat conservation improvements to fishery productivity.



## Recover and Conserve Protected Species

NOAA Fisheries is responsible for the conservation and recovery of protected species and their habitats as mandated by the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). Such species are critical to the sustainability and health of marine ecosystems and the resilience of coastal communities that depend on them. Many of these species are key components of their ecosystems, while others may have particular social and cultural importance. Activities that negatively affect protected species can be authorized if measures to minimize harm are incorporated into the activities.

NOAA Fisheries carries out the goals of the MMPA and ESA through specific requirements including reducing negative impacts of human activities, minimizing the impact of marine development and other human activities, developing plans to guide recovery and conservation, and enforcing regulations against harming marine mammals and endangered species. In FY 2016 and beyond, NOAA Fisheries will focus efforts on specific species in order to improve conservation outcomes while addressing the core requirements of the ESA and MMPA. The focus will be on those species most at risk and those that have improved to a nearly recovered state.

NOAA Fisheries will advance an integrated approach to achieve joint ecological and societal benefits that support living marine resource stewardship when protected species and sustainable fisheries decisions overlap. This integrated approach will increase transparency and collaboration among the Regional Fishery Management Councils and the regional offices with respect to ESA consultations for fishery management plans, and encourage stakeholder-engaged efforts such as Marine Mammal Take Reduction Teams. We will ensure that our recommendations and decisions deliver optimal conservation values and that conservation and enforcement programs are well-coordinated to optimize the use of resources.

Captive propagation and outplanting can be an important factor in species enhancement when traditional methods of recovery have failed. For the recovery of ESA-listed species, appropriate uses of controlled propagation include supporting recovery-related research, maintaining refugia populations, providing plants or animals for reintroduction or augmentation of existing populations, and conserving species or populations at risk of imminent extinction or

### NOAA Fisheries FY 2015 Accomplishments

NOAA Fisheries published a proposed rule to reclassify the endangered humpback whale into 14 distinct population segments under the ESA; 10 of the 14 populations would not be listed, two would be listed as endangered, and two would be listed as threatened. These proposed changes are significant because they recognize that most populations of the species are doing well and most populations are growing as a result of the ESA protections.



extirpation. For example, elkhorn and staghorn corals can be propagated using land-based and low-tech in-water nurseries. Also, three of our “Species in the Spotlight” are dependent on captive propagation and conservation hatcheries for recovery: white abalone, Gulf of Maine DPS of Atlantic salmon, and Central California Coast ESU of coho salmon (the salmon conservation hatcheries are operated by other federal agencies, states, and tribes).

### ***FY 2016 Priorities: Recover and Conserve Protected Species***

NOAA Fisheries will strengthen and better integrate our efforts to recover protected species and ensure protected species are not lost. For four decades the ESA has been successful in preventing species extinctions—less than 1 percent of the species listed under the ESA have gone extinct. While we have recovered and delisted a small percentage of listed species since 1973, we would likely have seen hundreds of species become extinct without the ESA and our efforts under it.

In FY 2016 we will focus on two major efforts to accomplish the goals of ESA: Species in the Spotlight Initiative and Strategic Review of Recovery Planning. The Species in the Spotlight Initiative will enable us to direct resources and target actions for species on each end of the endangered species spectrum: species that need immediate efforts to avoid extinction as well as species making noticeable improvements toward recovery. In addition, NOAA Fisheries will identify and implement measures to improve the recovery planning process and help guide partners that assist in recovery of listed marine and anadromous species.

Of all the species NOAA Fisheries protects under the ESA, we have determined eight that are among the most at risk of extinction in the near future. As a result, in 2015 we launched our “Survive to Thrive” initiative, a concerted agency-wide effort to spotlight and save these highly at-risk species.

This initiative includes targeted efforts vital to stabilizing their populations and preventing their extinction. Our approach involves intensive efforts to stabilize these species, with the goal that they will become candidates for recovery. Our overall aim is to ensure these eight species, as well as all other ESA-listed resources, survive and thrive.

In FY 2016, we will begin to implement 5-year plans of action that will build on existing recovery plans and highlight the actions with the greatest conservation value for these species. Key to our strategy is engaging federal, state, tribal, and local agencies, industries, non-governmental organizations, institutions, and the public to take whatever actions they can to prevent these species, and all species we protect, from becoming extinct.

In addition we will identify species making noticeable improvements toward recovery, called the “Recovery Ready” initiative. In this initiative we will develop 5-year plans of action that highlight actions that will allow the species populations to continue to increase and improve their potential for downlisting or delisting.

To ensure NOAA Fisheries achieves the recovery goals of the ESA, we will conduct a program review of recovery plans and the recovery planning process. We will evaluate the current NOAA Fisheries recovery program to determine whether the current planning process results in effective recovery plans and actions, and identify improvements. The ultimate goal is to develop plans to better guide federal and state governments, non-governmental organizations, and other public and private entities to better support the recovery of all listed marine and anadromous species.

Additional areas of high priority include:

- Better understanding and managing for climate change impacts by supporting climate change assessments and implementing guidance to incorporate climate change uncertainty in ESA and MMPA decisions.
- Improving the effectiveness of ESA and MMPA programs by developing consistent guidance, faster processes, and high-quality documents and products.
- Continuing to reduce bycatch of marine mammals and ESA-listed species in federal and state fisheries and through other activities.
- Developing approaches to examine and combat the effects of invasive and nuisance species on protected species and their habitats.
- Continuing to identify best practices for communicating and working with our partners to better meet our shared objectives.
- Working with partners to continue environmental compliance efforts related to the development of numerous large coastal restoration projects under the RESTORE Act, Natural Resource Damage Assessment, and Clean Water Act settlement agreements in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Ensuring Arctic energy development occurs appropriately with respect to the National Environmental Policy Act, MSA, ESA, and MMPA.

## SPECIES in the SPOTLIGHT

Atlantic Salmon Gulf of Maine Distinct Population Segment	
Cook Inlet Beluga Whale	
Pacific Leatherback Sea Turtle	
Southern Resident Killer Whale	
Central California Coast Coho Evolutionarily Significant Unit	
Hawaiian Monk Seal	
Sacramento River Winter-run Chinook	
White Abalone	

- Continuing recovery efforts for protected species affected by the extreme drought in the western United States.
- Better aligning protected resources enforcement needs with Office of Law Enforcement and other federal and state agency law enforcement capabilities.
- Continuing to engage with international partners to improve bilateral and multilateral cooperation to reverse declining population trends of marine species. This will include finalizing and implementing the MMPA import rule, and working with the Government of Mexico to support sea turtle and vaquita conservation efforts.

### ***Advancing Science to Support the Recovery and Conservation of Protected Species***

An important goal of NOAA Fisheries' Protected Species science program is to conduct studies necessary to address protected species management questions and improve planning processes to better link research activities to management needs. The Species in the Spotlight Initiative and the Implementation Plans for these species' recovery will guide the FY 2016 research activities.

We will also seek to understand and address human impacts on protected species by examining innovative bycatch reduction techniques, implementing acoustic guidelines, addressing effects from land-based pollution, and focusing on science related to climate change. Understanding these impacts will enable NOAA Fisheries to assist managers in developing adaptive solutions. NOAA Fisheries will continue to develop new and improved methods for assessing the abundance and distribution of species protected under the MMPA and ESA, and for evaluating the impacts from various human threats.

Areas of focus include:

- Conducting broad-scale marine mammal surveys on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, in the Western Pacific, and in Alaska as identified in the FY 2016 Fleet and Aircraft Allocation Plans.
- Developing a tool to assess vulnerability of protected resources to climate change at a regional scale.
- Evaluating the impacts of the changing ocean and habitat conditions on protected species (e.g., loss of sea ice, warming temperatures, increasing acidification, drought).
- Understanding the impacts of specific sound sources on protected species, including implementation of the Ocean Noise Reference Station Network.
- Developing the Protected Species Toolbox to support ESA and MMPA decision-making.
- Developing bycatch reduction measures by means of the Bycatch Reduction Engineering Program.
- Addressing coral restoration science needs including outplanting, site suitability herbivore studies, and others.

- Identifying information needs with respect to oil spill impacts on protected species in the Arctic Region, including research on the effects of oil on forage species in the Arctic.

Climate change is a particular concern because it is likely to have highly complex, large-scale, wide-ranging effects on protected species. In FY 2016, NOAA Fisheries will continue to identify and begin to implement options for incorporating climate information into vulnerability analyses, stock assessments, and ESA consultations.

### ***Focusing Habitat Efforts for Recovery and Conservation of Protected Species***

Protection and restoration of critical habitat play an important role in supporting recovery and conservation of protected species and the ecosystems upon which they depend. NOAA Fisheries will continue to focus activities on habitat conservation priorities and objectives that will contribute to the recovery, conservation, and resilience of protected species such as salmon, coral, and sturgeon. The success of our management actions is linked to having healthy ecosystems and habitats that can support recovery of living marine resources under our stewardship. Habitat challenges in riverine, coastal and ocean areas around the country are significant and pervasive, requiring better informed and more strategic, integrated responses.

Our objective is to reduce threats to priority habitats, with a focus on coastal wetlands, rivers, hard bottom habitats (e.g., oyster and abalone), coral reef ecosystems, and submerged aquatic vegetation; reduce barriers to migratory fish passage; and promote a holistic, landscape-scale approach. By addressing issues at a landscape-scale and learning how the ecosystems function, we can direct conservation actions toward efforts that will achieve the greatest impact.

Following the Habitat Blueprint, we will strategically align habitat conservation and science efforts with NOAA's stewardship responsibilities and goals, including those to recover protected resources, especially those species included in the Species in the Spotlight initiative. We will continue to work closely with our state, federal, tribal, and other partners, including foreign governments, to leverage resources and coordinate conservation actions that improve habitat conditions for protected species. We will work to improve habitat science and planning efforts to identify and prioritize conservation actions.



# Improve Organizational Excellence

One of the biggest challenges facing NOAA Fisheries is how to be responsive and nimble, constantly adapting to fast-changing environmental conditions and needs. Achieving organizational excellence is essential for NOAA Fisheries to achieve mission objectives and maximize value to the American people. The factors that determine organizational excellence include people, processes, technology, and management, each of which involves its own unique set of opportunities and challenges. This priority focuses on key, crosscutting initiatives that the NOAA Fisheries leadership team believes are the most critical to mission success.

Our mission success depends on a fully engaged workforce with the knowledge, skills, and effective leadership necessary to achieve results. To achieve this we need to ensure that our workforce has the resources they need to meet their objectives. NOAA Fisheries will focus on the following key areas in order to improve efficiencies, reduce risks, and streamline processes and employ strategic engagement principles (note details in text box). The intent is to transform the organization to be more responsive and resilient while delivering better services, solutions, and outcomes that benefit the American people.

## ***FY 2016 Priorities: Improve Organizational Excellence***

### ***Invest in our people.***

Consistent with the DOC 2014–2018 Strategic Plan and the NOAA Administrator’s Annual Guidance Memo priorities, NOAA Fisheries will focus on people, teams, and tools to advance organizational excellence. Given a budget-limited and downsized environment, we will continue to focus on retaining and supporting a talented and motivated workforce. To that end, we will work to develop effective staffing plans and provide our workforce with the tools, support, training,

## **Achieving Organizational Excellence through Strategic Engagement**

Integral to achieving our organizational excellence priority is evaluating and strengthening how we communicate and work with partners and serve our customers and stakeholders.

### **What Is Strategic Engagement?**

Strategic engagement is an ongoing process of building awareness, understanding, and trust with our partners and stakeholders, thereby enabling us to more effectively and efficiently achieve our mission. Engagement is a two-way relationship that helps us minimize risk to our efforts where possible and that provides an early warning when issues are unavoidable.

### **Why Engage?**

We engage because we cannot achieve our mission alone. Through strategic engagement, we are better able to anticipate and resolve issues, minimize risk to our initiatives, meet our mandates, and design effective solutions that make the best use of taxpayer dollars and serve the American public.

### **Engagement Principles:**

1. Foster a culture that embraces strategic engagement.
2. Engage with purpose.
3. Communicate regularly.
4. Be open, listen actively, and act in a trustworthy manner.
5. Be responsive.

and career opportunities they need to excel. Continued development of opportunities such as the Quantitative Ecology and Socioeconomics Training (QUEST) program, NOAA's Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (OAR) Sea Grant, cooperative institutes, and the Living Marine Resources Cooperative Science Center will provide knowledgeable new scientists and resource managers to support our mission. We will strive for a more diverse and inclusive workplace. We will evaluate and access pathways for recruitment that can promote diversity and identify opportunities in each office to promote diversity and inclusion in current operations.

***Improve risk management and internal controls.***

NOAA Fisheries will identify enterprise risks and take steps to reduce or mitigate those risks consistent with federal agency requirements. In addition, NOAA Fisheries will ensure continued compliance with fiscal, safety, security, and facilities requirements by analyzing internal controls, evaluating obligations, conducting management control reviews, and continuously improving the organization's governance (e.g., the allocation of authority and accountability across all major management functions).

***Ensure the cost-effectiveness of information technology, facilities, and observing systems.***

NOAA Fisheries is a science-driven agency whose credibility depends on the reliability and accessibility of our scientific findings. We must ensure that high-quality scientific information is delivered in a timely fashion to meet the needs of decision-makers and stakeholders. To support our core priorities we will provide robust data and science utilizing the best available infrastructure—including information technology, facilities, and observing systems—at the least cost and with productive, collaborative approaches that provide the highest return on investment. We will implement the President's policies on Open Data and Public Access to Research Results, and NOAA's Big Data Initiative. For example, NOAA Fisheries intends to have all digital data as of March 2015 used in management decisions available to the public through a public data portal by March 2016, as well as copies of all peer-reviewed publications. In addition, we will aim to reduce facility costs wherever possible, plan wisely for necessary capital improvements, and promote effective and efficient use of existing resources, including prioritization of vessel use for research, science, and monitoring activities.

***Enhance efforts in strategic planning and review.***

Strategic planning is important to identify new and existing operational and programmatic strategies that will help NOAA Fisheries regional offices, science centers, and program offices accomplish core mandates more effectively and efficiently, and provide greater flexibility to adapt and respond to changing priorities and fiscal conditions. Strategic plans will also assist in communicating with employees and the public about strategies for achieving our core mandates, as well as related challenges and opportunities. In FY 2016 NOAA Fisheries offices will complete the development of regional strategic plans and continue implementation of those plans, consistent with the national priorities established by the Assistant Administrator and the Leadership Council.

Strategic reviews of our core science and management programs are also an important feedback mechanism needed to provide fresh ideas and contributions toward constantly improving fisheries programs and to guide future strategic planning and operations.

# NOAA Fisheries Priorities Document: Anticipated Results in FY 2016

<b>NOAA PRIORITY: PROVIDE INFORMATION AND SERVICES TO MAKE COMMUNITIES MORE RESILIENT</b>	
<b>Maximize Productivity and Sustainability of Fisheries</b>	<b>Recover and Preserve Protected Species</b>
<p><b>Fishery Management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement measures to ensure that fish stocks are not subject to overfishing and, where necessary, stocks are being rebuilt to sustainable levels by not exceeding annual catch limits.</li> <li>• Improve the agency’s performance at achieving fish stock sustainability as evidenced by continued increases in the Fish Stock Sustainability Index.</li> <li>• Improve the sustainability of fish stocks and dependent communities through improved agency guidance and statutory changes.</li> <li>• Develop regional saltwater recreational fisheries implementation plans in support of the National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy.</li> <li>• Identify and implement efforts to establish electronic monitoring and reporting across the country.</li> <li>• Continue the implementation of the Cooperative Research and Cooperative Management White Paper, involving training, partnership building, and stakeholder engagement.</li> <li>• Update the National Bycatch Strategy to facilitate coordination between domestic and international bycatch initiatives, and improve their effectiveness.</li> <li>• Implement “Simple Multi-Attribute Rating Technique” (SMART) tool to evaluate species for improved release mortality estimates.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Protected Species Management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement the Species in the Spotlight initiative through outreach and partnerships to implement priority recovery actions for eight most at-risk species and for recovery-ready species.</li> <li>• Identify and implement improvements to the recovery planning process and products.</li> <li>• Conduct Section 7 consultations in a streamlined and efficient manner to ensure that impacts on ESA-listed species are minimized. Coordinate with other federal agencies to ensure they are aware of their obligations under Section 7(a)(1) of the ESA to use their resources and authorities for the conservation of ESA-listed species.</li> <li>• Move forward with status review for ESA-listed species where downlisting or delisting appears sensible and, as appropriate, move forward with the regulatory actions necessary to change a status listing under the ESA.</li> <li>• Streamline the current process under which NOAA Fisheries issues research permits as required by the MMPA and ESA.</li> <li>• Develop recovery plans for newly listed species and update existing recovery plans as needed to ensure that the recovery actions being undertaken are having an impact on the recovery potential of the species.</li> <li>• Implement guidance for incorporating changing climate information into our management of protected resources.</li> <li>• Reduce fishery interactions with protected species.</li> <li>• Implement guidelines for assessing the effects of anthropogenic sound on marine mammal hearing.</li> <li>• Support National Bycatch Strategy development with the Office of Sustainable Fisheries.</li> <li>• Finalize joint rules with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of regulatory reform to improve ESA implementation.</li> <li>• Implement protected species reintroduction efforts.</li> <li>• Reduce backlog of Hatchery and Genetic Management plans needing review.</li> </ul>

<b>Maximize Productivity and Sustainability of Fisheries</b>	<b>Recover and Preserve Protected Species</b>
<p><b>Science and Assessment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete fish abundance surveys, biological data collections, fishery monitoring, and resulting stock assessments to support status determinations and updating of annual catch limits.</li> <li>• Implement the fish stock assessment prioritization process on the Pacific Coast.</li> <li>• Publish the update to the Stock Assessment Improvement Plan describing the Next Generation Stock Assessment framework.</li> <li>• Evaluate progress of first series of Strategic Initiatives for Advanced Sampling Technologies.</li> <li>• Release the first Ecosystem-based Fisheries Management Policy Statement, clearly defining EBFM, identifying current efforts and ways to accelerate the implementation of EBFM within NOAA Fisheries and our partners.</li> <li>• Complete and publish the Ecosystem Based Fishery Management Roadmap.</li> <li>• Implement regional electronic technology programs with cooperatively funded projects.</li> <li>• Initiate National Research Council review of the Marine Recreational Information Program.</li> <li>• Expand the managed fish stock climate vulnerability assessment to the West Coast and Alaska.</li> <li>• Complete Regional Action Plans for the National Climate Science Strategy.</li> <li>• Continue to develop joint science initiatives with OAR, including the Northeast Climate and Fisheries Initiative, advanced modeling, Sea Grant partnerships, and genomics.</li> <li>• Implement NOAA plan to increase Public Access to Research Results (PARR).</li> <li>• Publish Fisheries Economics of the United States for 2014.</li> <li>• Develop a national strategic plan to guide socioeconomic research on recreational fisheries.</li> <li>• Conduct national Program Review for Ecosystem Science.</li> <li>• Expand communication of NOAA Fisheries science to congressional and regional stakeholders.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Science and Assessment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide science support for implementing Species in the Spotlight.</li> <li>• Continue to research the use of passive acoustic technologies for marine mammal population assessment.</li> <li>• Expand use of unmanned aircraft systems and autonomous underwater vehicles for protected species applications, including the first UAS survey of whales in the Arctic Region.</li> <li>• Complete the third year of research on the protected species assessment methods toolbox, and especially the development of tools for risk assessment.</li> <li>• Conduct protected resources climate vulnerability assessment in at least one region.</li> <li>• Support the review of methods for conducting Marine Mammal Cumulative Impacts through the National Academy of Sciences.</li> <li>• Support the Joint NOAA Fisheries/OAR/NOS initiative for corals in the Western Pacific (CAPSTONE).</li> <li>• Implement the Ocean Noise Reference Station Network.</li> <li>• Develop ecosystem models for protected anadromous fish management.</li> <li>• Address coral restoration science needs.</li> <li>• Develop bycatch/release mortality science and identification of gear modifications that can be undertaken to reduce risk.</li> <li>• Conduct research on the effects of climate change on ESA-listed species and implement actions to ensure that protected species are as resilient to climate change as possible—e.g., restoring species' full access to important thermal refugia.</li> <li>• Complete Atlantic and Pacific Coast marine mammal surveys.</li> </ul>

Maximize Productivity and Sustainability of Fisheries	Recover and Preserve Protected Species
<p><b>Habitat</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a plan to integrate ecosystem and habitat management with science center research plans.</li> <li>• Complete the development of an integrated strategic plan for the NOAA Habitat Enterprise.</li> <li>• Engage with leadership across agencies and non-traditional partners to increase funding for the protection and restoration of wetlands, and other priority habitats, in coastal watersheds.</li> <li>• Improve habitat contributing to sustainable fisheries managed under the MSA by providing funding and technical support for habitat protection and restoration.</li> <li>• Promote a comprehensive approach to restoring the Gulf of Mexico, including coordinating with the public, agencies, and co-trustees on restoration planning and project implementation for the Deepwater Horizon Natural Resources Damage Assessment, RESTORE Act, Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund, and other initiatives.</li> <li>• Implement priority actions in the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement to advance oyster recovery, ecosystem-based fisheries management, monitoring of ecosystem conditions, and environmental literacy.</li> <li>• Work with the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative to implement habitat conservation projects that will remove habitat-related beneficial use impairments leading to the delisting of designated Areas of Concern.</li> <li>• Integrate habitat considerations into the implementation of an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management.</li> <li>• Expand the inclusion of habitat into stock assessments and fishery management strategy evaluations.</li> <li>• Prioritize investments for habitat protection and restoration where the ecosystem benefits support sustainable fisheries or protected resources as well as reduce risks and hazards to coastal communities building resilience to extreme weather and changing climate conditions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Habitat</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a plan to integrate ecosystem and habitat management with science center research plans.</li> <li>• Complete the development of an integrated strategic plan for the NOAA Habitat Enterprise.</li> <li>• Improve habitat conditions and address limiting factors to the recovery of species managed under the ESA, with a focus on Species in the Spotlight, by providing funding and technical support for protection and restoration projects in priority areas.</li> <li>• Conserve and restore habitat for endangered coho salmon, threatened Chinook salmon, and steelhead trout within the Russian River Habitat Focus Area.</li> <li>• Coordinate efforts and resources with other agencies, the tribes, and partners to accelerate Puget Sound salmon recovery and implement high-priority, large-scale projects that deliver multiple benefits.</li> <li>• Conserve and restore habitat for endangered Atlantic salmon and river herring by mitigating impacts of dams and other river barriers within Maine watersheds.</li> <li>• Reduce land-based sources of pollution as threats to nearshore coral species, including ESA-listed Acropora.</li> <li>• Maintain coral nurseries and improve techniques to propagate coral colonies for restoration.</li> <li>• Support advancement of abalone recovery through restoration of kelp forest and rocky reef habitat, and by improving techniques in abalone outplanting.</li> <li>• Develop innovative tools to support coordinated habitat conservation that addresses both managed fisheries and protected resources (e.g., habitat banking).</li> </ul>

Maximize Productivity and Sustainability of Fisheries	Recover and Preserve Protected Species
<p><b>Enforcement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure we continue to provide fair and effective law enforcement services that include an emphasis on compliance assistance, effective patrols, monitoring, and investigations to ensure compliance and a level playing field.</li> <li>• Work collaboratively with our state and federal partners to combat IUU fishing and seafood fraud.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Enforcement</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue implementing appropriate enforcement strategies, including shifting existing resources to compliance assistance and monitoring activities that foster voluntary compliance and deter violations.</li> <li>• Work collaboratively with state, federal, and international partners to combat wildlife trafficking.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Aquaculture</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalize a new 5-year strategic plan to guide and prioritize key investments in aquaculture development.</li> <li>• Complete an Aquaculture Program Science Review.</li> <li>• Implement the interagency National Science and Technology Council Committee on Science National Strategic Plan for Federal Aquaculture Research.</li> <li>• Issue a final rule for the Gulf of Mexico Aquaculture Fishery Management Plan and related guidance for a consolidated interagency federal permit process.</li> <li>• Conduct economic analysis of commercial shellfish aquaculture.</li> <li>• Conduct study evaluating ecosystem services provided by shellfish aquaculture relative to natural habitats.</li> <li>• Initiate NEPA process for offshore aquaculture operations in the Pacific Islands.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Aquaculture</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that aquaculture practices are conducted in a manner that minimizes any potential impacts to protected resources.</li> <li>• Ensure continuation of captive propagation and conservation hatcheries for recovery efforts for white abalone, Gulf of Maine DPS of Atlantic salmon, and Central California Coast ESU of coho salmon.</li> </ul>

<b>Maximize Productivity and Sustainability of Fisheries</b>	<b>Recover and Preserve Protected Species</b>
<p><b>International</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with international partners, advance efforts to sustainably manage and rebuild northern Pacific bluefin tuna.</li> <li>• Publish a final list of at-risk species and principles.</li> <li>• Advance international best practices for combatting IUU fishing and seafood fraud within the RFMO and FAO communities.</li> <li>• Develop a strategic and coordinated capacity building plan.</li> <li>• Standardize and clarify species names and codes.</li> <li>• Develop an IUU and seafood fraud public web portal.</li> <li>• Publish proposed and final traceability rulemaking.</li> <li>• Participate in the deliberations of Regional Fishery Management Plans that manage catch levels of transboundary stocks of fish.</li> <li>• Maintain and expand, where feasible and appropriate, U.S. recreational fishing opportunities on internationally managed stocks.</li> </ul>	<p><b>International</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate in the deliberations of the International Whaling Commission and its Scientific Committee.</li> <li>• Advance partnerships and efforts to address international threats to protected species and reverse declining population trends.</li> <li>• Continue to work with federal partners to ensure sustainable trade in wildlife through the Convention on Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).</li> <li>• Complete and implement proposed rule to reduce marine mammal bycatch associated with foreign commercial fishing operations.</li> </ul>

## NOAA Priority: Achieve Organization Excellence

<b>NOAA Fisheries Priority: Improve Organizational Excellence:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct management control reviews to assess financial, security, safety, and operational risks.</li> <li>• Develop a facilities condition and inspection management plan.</li> <li>• Continue development of opportunities such as the Quantitative Ecology and Socioeconomics Training (QUEST) program, NOAA's Office of Oceanic and Atmospheric Research (OAR) Sea Grant cooperative institutes, and the Living Marine Resources Cooperative Science Center that will provide a pool of new scientists and resource managers for the agency.</li> <li>• Update staffing plans to address future needs and address fiscal constraints and understaffing.</li> <li>• Implement governance plans for each region, center, and program office to clearly delineate functional roles and decision-making rights in key leadership positions across the agency.</li> <li>• Routinely analyze internal controls and evaluate risks and obligations. Where the value of past policies is no longer extant, efforts will be made to revise or remove policies that no longer contribute to the agency's mission.</li> <li>• Promote improved engagement with the agency's partners through routine, strategic interactions, including state directors and tribal representatives.</li> <li>• Improve internal communications to ensure employees are aware of current issues and successes.</li> <li>• Develop strategic plans for each regional and program office.</li> <li>• Implement action plans for diversity and inclusion.</li> </ul>





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