

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH AND SUSTAINABILITY OF AMERICA'S MARINE FISHERIES



REPORT SUMMARY



INTRODUCTION

Since 1998, the American Fly Fishing Trade Association (AFFTA) has been dedicated to guiding the sustainable growth of the fly fishing industry through both trade development and stewardship. Recognizing that the long-term enjoyment of wild places and quality fly fishing requires a sustained commitment to stewardship and conservation of the natural world, AFFTA established the AFFTA Fisheries Fund (AFF) in 2015. AFF works to leverage the full weight of the fly fishing industry to protect and restore our fisheries, amplify the industry’s conservation voice, and provide powerful business support for critical conservation issues.

A 2019 report from the United Nations provided the first-ever global scientific consensus on the health of the oceans and the picture it painted was grim. Without dramatic action our marine fisheries and habitats—as well as our recreational fishing—have a tough road ahead. But the other message sounded by these same scientists is that it is not too late to make a difference. As voices of the fly fishing industry, AFFTA and AFF believe it is our responsibility to advocate for the solutions that will allow fisheries—and anglers—to thrive over the long term.

In response to growing threats to healthy marine fisheries and their habitats, AFFTA and AFF undertook a rigorous process to identify and better understand the primary issues related to marine fisheries and habitats. Our goal was to identify policy solutions capable of addressing these threats head-on. To

marshal this effort, we convened a Steering Committee of AFFTA members in 2019.

To identify and instruct us on the primary threats to the sustainability of our marine fisheries, the Steering Committee assembled a “blue ribbon” panel of top scientists and managers (see page 6 for committee and panel membership). For each of the topics in this report, we consulted with experts in their respective fields to ensure a diversity of thought and input.

This Blue Ribbon Panel Report identifies a set of solutions that, on their implementation, will strengthen marine fisheries conservation and management, and help lead to more abundant and sustainable recreational fisheries (see page 3 for summary). We recognize this solution set is not exhaustive, but it is focused and achievable.

There are numerous issues threatening our fisheries that the fly fishing industry have fought long and hard to address: the threat to Bristol Bay from development of the Pebble Mine, the overwhelming issue of ocean plastic pollution, and the continued decline of the Everglades fishing grounds, to name three. The solutions identified in this report represent a comprehensive and systematic approach that help

We gratefully acknowledge the David and Lucile Packard Foundation for their generous support of our marine fisheries work.

address these and other marine fisheries issues in U.S. coastal and offshore waters, including U.S. territorial waters in the Caribbean, Hawaii, and the far Western Pacific.

In the background, as the Steering Committee and Blue Ribbon Panel crafted their recommendations, there was the ongoing drumbeat of climate change. Far from diminishing or even remaining a steady cadence, the impacts of climate change have continued to grow and magnify. Witness a few:

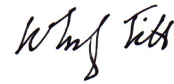
- Chronic and debilitating drought in the western U.S.
- Increasingly violent and unprecedented weather events—hurricanes, storms, and floods
- Higher water temperatures leading to stressed fisheries and reduced fishing opportunities
- Shifting migrations and fish displacements

Importantly, the increasing impacts of climate change have not altered the recommendations presented here. To the contrary, climate change is making these recommendations more and more urgent to address as the window to make proactive, meaningful, and lasting responses gets smaller and shorter. In 2022, AFF and partners launched Tomorrow’s Fish to raise knowledge and awareness and move anglers to engage in actions that build climate-ready fisheries.

We urge the fly fishing industry to continue to work together in pursuit of these solutions. We need to lead; We need to act.

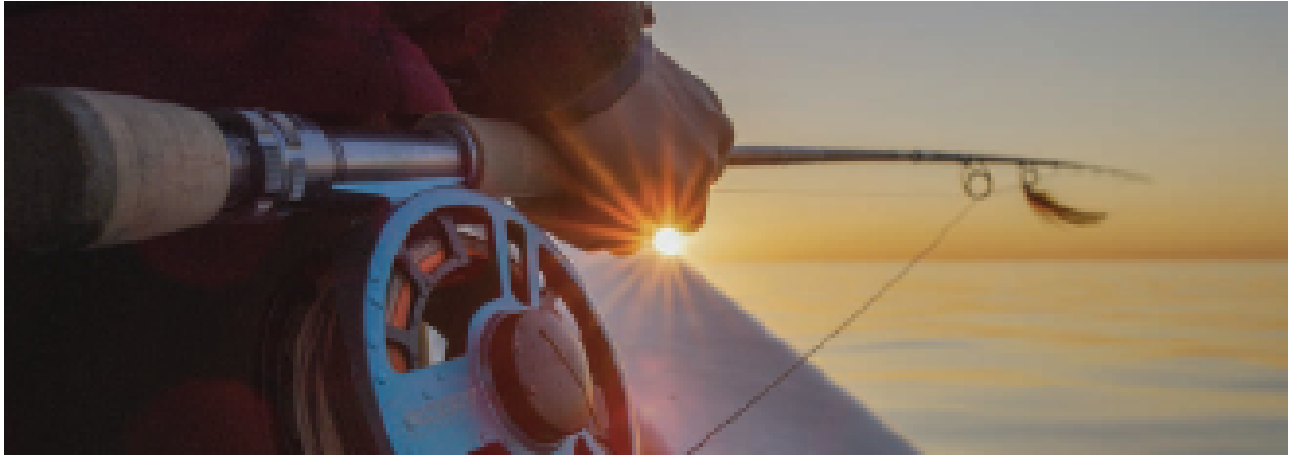


Lucas Bissett
AFFTA Executive Director

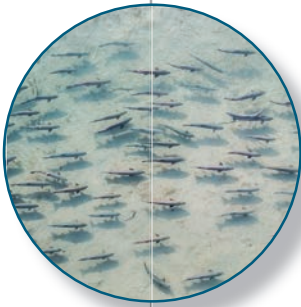


Whitney Tilt
AFF Executive Director





AFFTA's policy solutions fall under three key categories:



RECOVER IMPERILED & OVERFISHED SPECIES

1. Continue to implement the conservation requirements in the Magnuson-Stevens Act
2. Extend proven conservation requirements to fisheries managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
3. Recover wild salmon and steelhead in the Pacific Northwest



MANAGE FOR ABUNDANT RECREATIONAL FISHERIES

4. Manage for abundance in US recreational fisheries
5. Ensure forage fish are managed in a way that acknowledges their role as a food source
6. Improve the accuracy, timeliness, and compatibility of data collection in recreational fisheries



ADDRESS KEY THREATS TO SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES

7. Protect wild fish populations from industrial finfish aquaculture
8. Give managers tools to adapt to climate change impacts in the oceans
9. Improve habitat protection and increase habitat restoration

POLICY SOLUTIONS



RECOVER IMPERILED & OVERFISHED SPECIES

1. Uphold the science-based measures that end and prevent overfishing and ensure prompt rebuilding of federal fisheries.

- Continue to base fisheries management decisions in best scientific information available.
- Ensure annual catch limits and accountability measures are applied to all sectors.
- Swiftly recover overfished fisheries using current rebuilding timelines, which will ensure abundance and increase fishing opportunities.

2. Extend proven conservation requirements to fisheries managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

- Require an immediate end to overfishing, establish annual catch limits for all stocks, and impose accountability measures when catch limits are exceeded.
- Require within two years a rebuilding plan intended to fully rebuild the stock within a specific time period for any stock designated as overfished.

3. Improve recovery efforts for wild salmon and steelhead in the Pacific Northwest

- Transition to place-based management that emphasizes harvest of targeted fisheries in or near rivers of origin, and away from ocean mixed-stock fisheries.
- Significantly reduce reliance on hatcheries to recover and maintain genetically diverse wild salmon and steelhead populations.
- Identify and protect cold-water refuges to help mitigate the impact of climate change and warming waters on salmon and steelhead populations.

MANAGE FOR ABUNDANT RECREATIONAL FISHERIES

4. Manage for abundance in U.S. recreational fisheries

- Require managers to:
 - Account for the economic and social importance of abundance to recreational fisheries when setting optimum yield for fisheries.

- Include goals and objectives in a fishery management plan that address the value of having an abundance of fish in the water.

- Fund research into the tools and methods to appropriately value abundance in recreational fisheries.

5. Promote abundance by ensuring forage fish are managed in a way that acknowledges their role as a food source

- Require Councils to identify and manage important forage fish in the region, and to set harvest limits for those forage fish that account for its role in the ecosystem.
- Prohibit the creation of new directed fisheries on forage fish until management measures have been put in place to adequately protect the stock.
- Establish buffer zones around areas important to recreational and commercial fishermen to protect fishing grounds from industrial-scale harvest and prevent localized depletion.

6. Improve the accuracy, timeliness, and compatibility of data collection in recreational fisheries

- Fund efforts that increase angler awareness of the importance of providing accurate and timely information to the Marine Recreational Information Program and other fishery surveys.
- Establish minimum standards for all data used to measure recreational effort, catch and landings before they are certified as MRIP-compatible and used to establish federal fishing regulations.
- Increase investment in MRIP to foster improved data collection and validation.
- Support new research to evaluate ways to increase the participation and accuracy of angler-provided data.

ADDRESS KEY THREATS TO SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES

7. Protect wild fish populations from industrial finfish aquaculture

- Establish clear standards ensuring exemplary economic and environmental safeguards for open-ocean finfish aquaculture.
- Explore and, if appropriate, support alternative finfish aquaculture opportunities, such as through closed-loop, land-based facilities.

8. Ensure managers have the appropriate knowledge, information and tools to sustainably manage fisheries in light of climate change impacts

- Create and adequately fund a federal climate-fisheries initiative that can assist managers with the data, information and tools necessary to manage fisheries in a changing climate.
- Establish clear legal standards to address allocation conflicts between jurisdictions.
- To increase the resilience of fish stocks, require Councils' scientific and statistical committees to account for the effects of climate change when recommending acceptable biological catch.

9. Improve fisheries habitat protection and increase habitat restoration

- Improve the integration of habitat protection into fisheries management by incorporating habitat protection and restoration action into fishery management plans.
- Ensure habitat protection and restoration is designed to account for the impacts of climate change.
- Identify and prioritize protection and restoration of blue carbon habitats, which are coastal habitats like mangroves and tidal marshes that effectively store carbon, providing a critical natural solution to mitigate the impacts of carbon emissions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the result of the hard work, dedication and leadership of many individuals and organizations.

The spirit of collaboration, curiosity, and a commitment to conservation that epitomizes the fly fishing industry was evident in the Steering Committee that oversaw the development of the policy solutions identified in this report. The Committee represented the diversity of members of AFFTA itself, from manufacturers to guides, to media to conservation organizations. Committee members volunteered their time and talents to this project, and we gratefully acknowledge their contributions.

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

(in alphabetical order):

- Brent Bauer – Umpqua Feather Merchants; Science and Policy Committee Chair for AFFTA
- Tom Bie – The Drake
- Lucas Bissett – Low Tide Charters; Government Affairs Chair for AFFTA
- Ben Bulis – AFFTA CEO & President
- John Gale – Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
- Mark Harbaugh – Patagonia (retired)
- John McMurray – One Cast Charters; American Saltwater Guides Association
- Regan Nelson – AFFTA Conservation Director
- Tom Sadler – Marine Fish Conservation Network
- Abbie Schuster – Kismet Outfitters
- Matt Smythe – AFFTA Communications Director

At the core of this report is the assembly of a blue ribbon panel of scientists, advocates and fisheries managers--experts that provided deep-dive presentations and ongoing discussions with Steering

Committee members. Their willingness to share their time and expertise with us is the only reason we were able to produce this report. It should be noted that all content and the policy recommendations in this report are AFFTA and AFF's alone, and have not been endorsed or otherwise approved by the Blue Ribbon Panel members. We thank them profusely for their contributions.

BLUE RIBBON PANELISTS

(in alphabetical order):

- Dr. Aaron Adams – Bonefish & Tarpon Trust
- Bill Bakke – Salmon Advocate (retired)
- Kurt Beardslee – Wild Fish Conservancy
- Captain Rick Bellevance – Priority Charters
- Dr. Richard Cody – NOAA Fisheries Office of Science & Technology
- Dr. Stephen Crooks – Silvestrum Climate Associates
- Marianne Cufone, Esq. – Loyola University College of Law; Recirculating Farms Coalition
- Dr. Andy Danylchuk – University of Massachusetts, Amherst; AFFTA Science & Policy Committee
- Jean Flemma – Ocean Defense Initiative, Urban Ocean Lab
- Dr. Nick Gayeski – Wild Fish Conservancy
- Dr. Jamie Geiger – USFWS Assistant Regional Director and ASMFC Commission member (retired)
- Emma Helvorsen – Wild Fish Conservancy
- John McMurray – Mid-Atlantic Regional Fishery Management Council 3-term member
- David Moskowitz – The Conservation Angler
- Corey Ridings – Ocean Conservancy
- Dr. Lisa Suatoni – Yale University Law Clinic; Natural Resources Defense Council
- Kate Wing – KW Consulting
- Charles Witek – Author, One Angler's Voyage

Access the full report



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Tomorrow's Fish