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*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## Bush Aims for Market Approach to Fishing

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By Juliet Eilperin

Everyone agrees that the nation's fisheries management system needs an overhaul. The question is how.

Yesterday the Bush administration took a stab at the problem, sending legislation to Capitol Hill that would create a free-market approach to regulating commercial fishing and revamp the way the government treats depleted fish stocks. Its plan would also collect more scientific and economic data on commercial and recreational fishing.

"Fixing our fisheries is one of the highest priorities for the president," said James L. Connaughton, who chairs the White House Council on Environmental Quality. "There's now a strong consensus to get serious once and for all about this."

The administration's bill would be the biggest change in fisheries management in a decade. It aims to double by 2010 the number of "dedicated access privileges" programs, which allocate shares of each fishery to individual fishermen, who can then buy and sell their shares. In Alaska, for example, fishermen are granted a portion of the allowed halibut catch and can trade these quotas among themselves; in most U.S. fisheries, regulators govern the annual catch by limiting how many days fishermen operate and how much they collect each trip.

The system has been popular among many Alaska fishermen. Mark Lundsten, a Seattle-based fisheries consultant who caught halibut and black cod for 27 years in Alaska, said the region's market-based rules made halibut fishing "sensibly sustainable" because fishermen could meet their quota over a longer period of time rather than rushing to catch fish in foul weather.

In 1994, the year before Alaska switched to a free-market system, regulators shrank the halibut season to 72 hours to curb overfishing.

Alaska set up a catch share program for halibut in 1995. But the next year, Congress imposed a moratorium on other states setting up such a system. This ban expired in 2001, and now several regional fishing councils, overseeing stocks ranging from grouper in the Southeast to Pacific groundfish, hope to adopt programs similar to Alaska's.

But the move to give fishermen private property rights to a public resource, along with the administration's overfishing plan, angered many environmentalists who say Bush's proposal does not do enough to protect overexploited fish stocks.

Lee Crockett, executive director of the Marine Fish Conservation Network, said management councils are planning to adopt market-based systems, such as the Gulf of Mexico's red snapper fishery, in areas that are overfished. If regulators accommodate every red snapper fisherman, he said, it will be impossible to restore the ecosystem's health.

"You're locking in this stuff, and good luck trying to change it," Crockett said. "Congress needs to have further standards in place to make sure these management tools work right."

But the Environmental Defense Fund's David H. Festa said catch shares give industry an economic incentive to protect fisheries.

"It's probably the single largest change we can make that will advance conservation," he said. "This is a messy process, but it's going forward."

The administration's proposed rules would halt overfishing two years after adopting a management plan, as opposed to the current law's vague exhortation to "prevent overfishing." That, too, has sparked debate among ocean advocates. Sarah Chasis of the Natural Resources Defense Council said the rule could allow overfishing of a depleted stock to continue for five or six years, because regional councils take so long to adopt new management plans.

But Bill Hogarth, who directs the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service, said the agency has limited overfishing to "make it time-certain. That's a big deal."

Marine Conservation Alliance Executive Director David Benton, who represents Alaska's groundfish and shellfish industry, lauded the plan's call for more scientific data but questioned why it did not limit the total fish catch to what scientists say is biologically sustainable. "In some places it's a good first step," he said. "There's a lot of work that needs to be done."

Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) is drafting his own fisheries bill along with panel Democrats and hopes to take up both proposals next month.

Fishermen in Kodiak, Alaska, home to the largest commercial fishing fleet in the state, are given shares of each fishery, which they can then buy and sell.

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