



A THRIVING FISHING FUTURE

Navigating Toward Healthier Oceans and
More Productive Fisheries



STRENGTHENING BYCATCH PROVISIONS

Sorting the catch Credit: NOAA

THE ISSUE

“Bycatch” describes marine life that fishermen incidentally catch while harvesting a target species. They then discard the unwanted catch (often dead or dying). Bycatch continues to be a persistent problem in fisheries across the United States. It is more than just waste—bycatch can have significant ecological, social, and economic consequences as well.

In federal fisheries, bycatch often comprises species that fall outside of regional fishery management councils’ management plans or authority. Forage fish and marine protected species (e.g., marine mammals, seabirds, and sea turtles) are often bycatch. In many cases, bycatch in one fishery is a target species in another. In these instances, bycatch can directly limit harvest opportunities for another directed fishery and destabilize communities that depend on fishing.

Currently, National Standard 9 (NS 9) requires that managers minimize bycatch to the “extent practicable.” The qualifying language for this requirement is broad, leaving a high degree of discretion and subjectivity in reducing bycatch.

Bycatch (and mortality) rates are often determined by the gear fishermen use and how they use it. Lower bycatch rates can be achieved with gear and fishing techniques that better discriminate between target and non-target species, or release bycatch with low levels of mortality. Fisheries using indiscriminate gear have higher rates of bycatch and mortality, thereby producing significant ecological and management costs compared to more selective ways of fishing. Fishermen are often reluctant to switch gear or fishing techniques, however, because of the associated cost and effort, among other factors.

Accountability and reporting guidelines for bycatch vary from fishery to fishery, and many fisheries suffer from unobserved bycatch rates and poor bycatch data, which leads to significant uncertainty in stock assessments.



Fisheries observer
checks a catch

Credit: NOAA



Reducing bycatch critical to the future of halibut fishing

Credit: Alaska Longline Fishermen's Association



Researchers studying fishing techniques that improve selectivity and reduce bycatch

Credit: NOAA

THE NETWORK'S POSITION

Congress must implement concrete steps to reduce bycatch and to prioritize and promote directed fisheries over bycatch uses. Congress must also improve monitoring and transparency of bycatch in all fisheries. Bycatch reductions should promote ecosystem health, protect historic directed fisheries and provide socioeconomic opportunity for fishery dependent communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

- Address the ambiguity associated with the phrase “to the extent practicable” in NS 9 by specifying that the standard is meant to drive improvements in current fishing practices that result in bycatch reductions *beyond levels that have been achieved in the past or levels that will cause little or no economic harm.*
- Prioritize and promote traditional directed fisheries over bycatch uses.
- Improve monitoring and reporting systems to better quantify bycatch.
- Incentivize selective gear and facilitate gear conversion.
- Establish effective seafood traceability requirements in all fishery management plans.
- Direct regional fishery management councils to consider full retention requirements for species with high catch mortality rates.
- Direct NOAA Fisheries to work with the regional councils and stakeholders to establish community-based solutions, such as quota banks, to reduce bycatch.
- Standardize the definition of bycatch: fish which are harvested in a fishery, but which are not sold or kept for personal use, *and which includes fish historically allocated to another fishery*, economic discards and regulatory discards. “Bycatch” does not include fish released alive under a recreational catch and release fishery management program.

For more information, please visit: www.conservefish.org/bycatch/