

NOAA Puts On Hold Draft Rules to Prevent Overfishing

Agency to Undertake Year-Long Study of Environmental Impact of Its Much-Criticized Proposals

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Friday, January 6, 2006; A08

Federal officials yesterday put on hold a proposed revision of regulations aimed at preventing overfishing, which had been criticized by environmentalists who said they would weaken existing protections for depleted species.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said it will spend the next year gauging the environmental impact of the new guidelines -- known as National Standard 1 -- that the agency unveiled in June. During the public comment period that ended in late October, more than 250,000 people wrote the agency, and, according to NOAA spokeswoman Susan Buchanan, most of the comments were negative.

"We want to end overfishing more quickly than the current law allows. We're not reassessing or retracting our proposal at all," Buchanan said. "This will provide [the public] with another opportunity to update these regulations."

Buchanan noted that the current guidelines have not been revised in eight years and in some instances are vague, instructing officials to end overfishing "as soon as possible" after taking into account how such a policy would affect the local community, for example.

NOAA's proposal aims to guide the local and regional fishery councils that set rules to prevent overfishing and help rebuild stocks around the country. Buchanan said the administration, which had no fixed deadline for revising the current standards, would take a year to prepare an environmental impact statement on its new plan.

The guidelines introduced in the summer would, in some instances, allow continued overfishing of a depleted fish population until three years after a regional council begins drafting a recovery plan. The proposed rules also change the standards for plans, saying at the minimum they should have a 50 percent chance of achieving their recovery goals. Current technical guidelines call for such plans to have a 90 percent success rate.

In some instances, the administration's draft plan might allow more than the current 10-year timetable for rebuilding depleted fish populations. NOAA officials say this approach reflects the biological differences among fish species, but many conservationists said it is not an aggressive enough approach to recovery.

Matt Rand, director of the marine fisheries campaign at the advocacy group National Environmental Trust, said he was pleased to hear NOAA officials are reassessing their approach.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/05/AR2006010502292_pf.html

"Hopefully, taking a more conservation-minded approach is one of their New Year's resolutions," Rand said. "We thought this thing was a done deal, and we're very happy to see the administration going back to the drawing board on the proposal."

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