

How to save our fisheries

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From Pensacola to Key West to Jacksonville, Florida's bountiful fisheries support local businesses worth billions of dollars to the state economy. Tourists flock to beachside restaurants to enjoy our famous seafood specialties. The teeming ocean waters draw millions of sportsmen seeking world-class angling.

But outdated fishing rules are exhausting these ocean resources and putting the prosperity they create at risk. Fortunately, the incoming Obama administration can quickly solve the problem with "catch shares," which are demonstrated to improve fishing, bolster related businesses and help the ocean environment.

Floridians who pay attention to fishing know that current rules are not working. Long season closures intended to limit the number of fish caught, instead result in a destructive race-for-fish when fishing is allowed. When seasons are open, seafood suppliers are swamped with more fish than they can handle. Then post-season scarcity pushes them to buy inferior imports to meet customer demand. Charter captains can be left turning away customers during peak tourist seasons. Size limit regulations force fishermen to throw millions of fish overboard dead and uncounted.

The good news is that we can solve the problem quickly. I recently participated in a bipartisan working group of elected officials, scientists, economists and business leaders led by former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt and former U.S. Rep. Jim Greenwood, R-Pa. In a report titled "Oceans of Abundance," the group recommends widespread adoption of "catch shares," a fishery management tool that divides the scientifically set catch limit among fishermen and gives them the flexibility to determine how and when to catch their allotment of fish.

Catch shares are a powerful means of ending overfishing and stimulating coastal economies. This is backed up by recent research published in the journals *Science* and *Nature* that shows catch shares can stop, and even reverse, the collapse of fisheries while increasing the number of fish that can be caught. The recommendations are also supported by long-term catch share successes in New Zealand, Iceland, Canada and Alaska.

"Oceans of Abundance" urges the new administration and Congress to ensure that all federal fisheries consider catch shares by 2012 and implement them in at least half of those fisheries by 2016. It requests that regulators receive the resources they need to implement catch shares, and that science be improved to set accurate catch limits. Finally, it suggests that a fund be established to help communities make the transition.

Florida is fortunate that it already benefits from a successful catch share in the Gulf of Mexico — one of only a handful across the nation. The program, called individual fishing quotas (IFQs), was implemented for commercially caught red snapper almost two years ago. Right away, the season extended from a few months to year-round. Preliminary data from the National Marine Fisheries Service indicates that dockside prices improved and far fewer fish are wasted. And fishermen report safer fishing and significantly lower harvesting costs.

This success should be enjoyed by all of Florida's fisheries. Commercial fishermen and regulators are working to expand the red snapper IFQ program to include grouper and tilefish by 2010. Implementing additional catch shares for the gulf's other fisheries, including amberjack and vermillion snapper, and the South Atlantic Coast's snapper and grouper fisheries, will help end overfishing and economic decline.

The incoming administration and Congress face great challenges. But it is within their reach to quickly restore Florida's fisheries, coastal communities and the ocean environment. The cost of implementing catch shares is far outweighed by the benefits of healthy fisheries and strong coastal businesses. With the right leadership and resources, we can solve a decades-old problem within a few short years. We have much to lose through delay and inaction, and much more to gain by giving new life to our state's fishing heritage.

Connie Mack represented Florida in the U.S. Senate for 12 years before retiring in 2001. Before this, he was a member of the House of Representatives for three terms representing Southwest Florida. He is a senior policy adviser at the international law firm of King & Spalding, LLP. Learn more about the Oceans of Abundance report at www.OceansOfAbundance.org.