

## **FAQs on the Gulf of Maine Cod Petition Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act**

March 2015

### **Who filed the petition and what do the petitioners want?**

The Center for Biological Diversity, Greenpeace, SandyHook SeaLife Foundation and Turtle Island Restoration Network jointly filed the petition, which asks the National Marine Fisheries Service to (1) end commercial and recreational fishing for Gulf of Maine cod and (2) set the incidental catch limit at 200 metric tons, according to the rebuilding plan (2014-2024), instead of taking the Fishery Management Council's recommendation for 386 metric tons, nearly double the catch limit that would allow Gulf of Maine cod to rebuild by 2024.

### **Why does the Gulf of Maine cod stock need action under Magnuson-Stevens?**

An assessment in August 2014 found that the number of adult Gulf of Maine cod is at a historic low — just 3 percent to 4 percent of levels deemed sustainable. The continued decline means that it's more urgent now than ever to follow the rebuilding plan to reduce catch limits and provide adequate monitoring to show that catch is also being reduced.

### **How long have Gulf of Maine cod been in decline?**

Modern estimates of abundance started in 1982; since then the stock has suffered a 90 percent decline and is now at a historical low. Commercial fishing has occurred since at least the 1800s. Scientists have estimated landings between 1861 and 1870 each year were approximately 60,000 mt, which is about 150 times the proposed catch limits for next year.

### **What drove the Gulf of Maine cod to historic low levels?**

Overfishing alone can explain Gulf of Maine cod's decline in abundance. Repeated overestimates of the stock abundance have led to too-high catch quotas. Inadequate monitoring of cod catch in many different fisheries means that the government underestimates fishing mortality. Exacerbating the direct impacts from overfishing, cod may not have enough to eat, which would keep the population low. One reason is that Gulf of Maine cod also compete with humans for fish and shellfish to eat. A second possibility is that while cod themselves can survive and reproduce in a wide range of temperatures, oceanographic changes can impact parts of the food chain on which cod depend. Nevertheless, the simplest explanation for the low abundance is that catch quotas have been too high for too long.

### **How can there be so few Gulf of Maine cod if fishermen are still catching lots of them?**

Fishermen make a living by catching cod, not taking surveys of how many there are. With electronic fish finders, oceanographic information and powerful motors, fishermen have stacked the deck to increase the odds of catching fish. This makes it hard to recognize a decline in total abundance of the cod stock that scientists have observed through analyzing both scientific surveys and fishing data.

### **Is it possible for a widespread species to become extinct?**

There is a tragic record of rapid and unexpected declines of once-common and widespread species. An example of an extremely abundant species that plummeted to unforeseen extinction is the passenger pigeon. Extinct in the early 20th century, the passenger pigeon was one of the most abundant birds in the country in the late 19th century, with flocks so numerous that by some accounts they darkened the sky for up to 14 hours at a time. Today habitat loss from climate change and other human impacts compound the effects of overexploitation, especially on marine species, for which temperature regulates physiological function. There is a long and

growing list of abundant species that are undergoing precipitous declines, including many species of mollusks, pollinators, amphibians, bats, songbirds and fishes. Faulty assumptions about the resiliency of once-common species can lead to lack of timely intervention, delays in protection, further population declines, greater recovery costs, and ultimately extinction.

**How will the Magnuson-Stevens Act protect Gulf of Maine cod?**

Prohibiting Gulf of Maine cod fishing will reduce mortality on cod, allowing the existing adults to multiply and expand their habitat. Setting catch limits at a mortality that allows rebuilding within 10 years with at least a 50 percent probability ensures that short-term benefits of higher catch limits do not outweigh the long-term benefit of having a healthy Gulf of Maine cod stock.

**If enacted, would this petition permanently end fishing for Gulf of Maine cod?**

The petition is designed to recover cod to healthy, sustainable levels. Once that happens, it's possible that commercial and recreational fishing could resume.

**How will the groundfish fisheries disaster relief funds be used?**

While some New England fisheries have become highly profitable, such as Maine lobster and Atlantic sea scallop, the federal government in 2012 declared a fishery disaster in anticipation of significant decreases in catch limits in 2013 for New England groundfish stocks. As a result Congress allocated \$32.8 million to the New England groundfish fishery. An agreement between states and the federal government sends one-third directly to fishermen, one-third to states for use at their discretion, and one-third to federal and state representatives to develop a program to pay fishermen to exit the fishery (i.e. a buyout program). More information can be found at [http://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/mediacenter/2014/states\\_reach\\_consensus\\_on\\_plans\\_to\\_distribute\\_new\\_england\\_groundfish\\_disaster\\_funds.html](http://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/mediacenter/2014/states_reach_consensus_on_plans_to_distribute_new_england_groundfish_disaster_funds.html).

***For more information and full citations, please refer to the petition.***

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