A brief from THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS | June 2014


Photo: Joachim S. Mueller

Timelines Work

How we rebuild our fish populations

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the nation's primary law governing U.S. ocean fisheries, is helping to rebuild valuable fish populations by using science as the foundation for decision-makers.

Timelines: A versatile tool for rebuilding

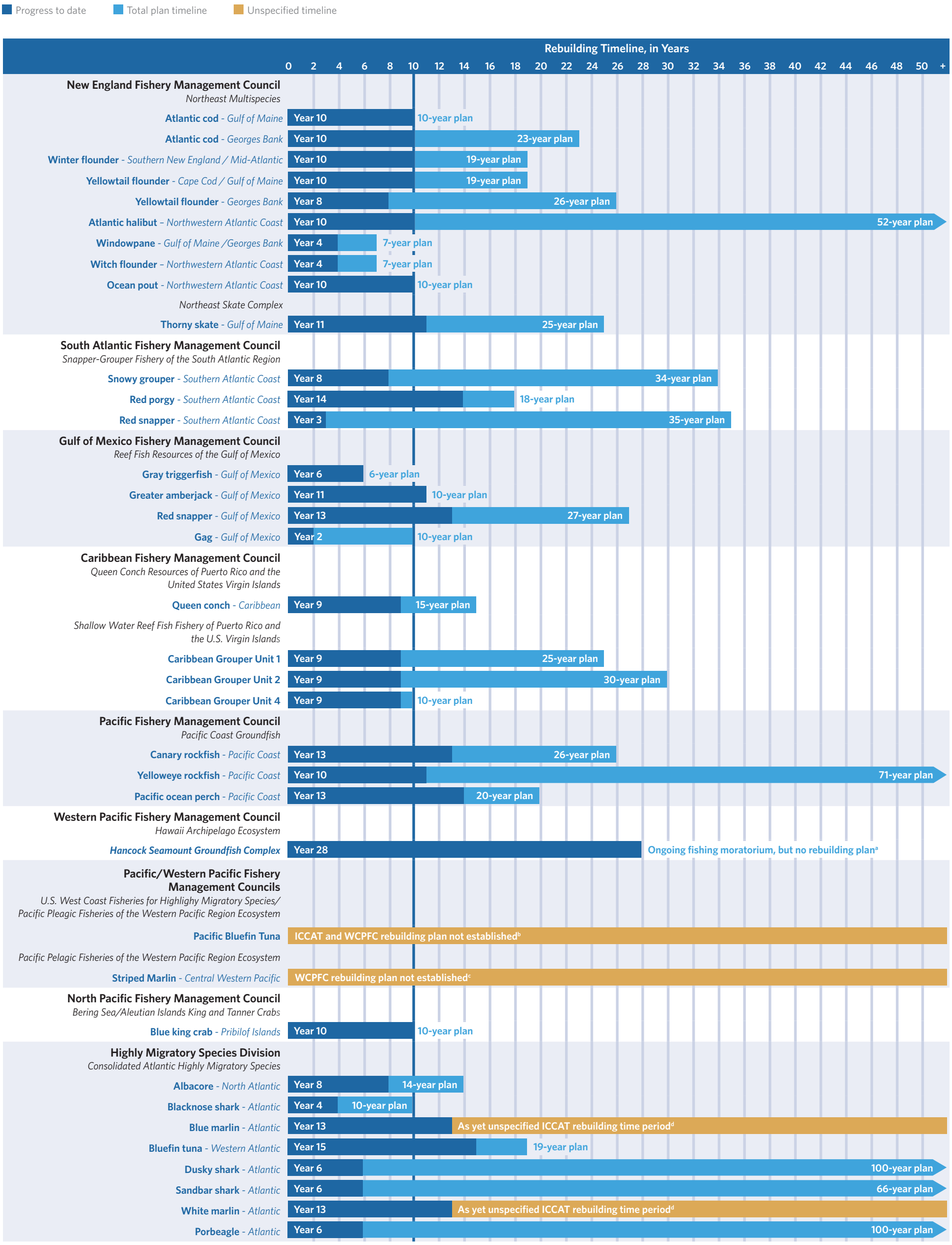
After decades of costly fishery declines resulting from mismanagement, Congress amended the Magnuson-Stevens Act in 1996 to require that the time to rebuild depleted fish populations be "as short as possible," but no more than 10 years when possible. That is twice the time scientists calculated that a majority of fish populations require for rebuilding.[1]

Some, however, have claimed that the Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that any fishery designated as overfished be completely rebuilt within 10 years. This is incorrect. The Magnuson-Stevens Act allows managers flexibility to tailor a rebuilding plan's timeline to account for biological and ecological considerations related to the depleted fish population, as well as for management measures under an international agreement in which the United States participates. In addition, flexibility exists to amend rebuilding plans when new scientific information on the status of the fish stock indicates changing conditions. Because of this, most of our nation's overfished stocks are managed under rebuilding plans that exceed 10 years. (See chart, next page.)

Rebuilding plans are working

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service, or NOAA Fisheries, reports that 34 once-depleted fish stocks have been rebuilt since 2000.[2] This is a significant step forward for ocean conservation, fishermen, and coastal communities. Thanks in part to these healthier fish populations, commercial fishermen now are landing more fish, and recreational fishing is creating jobs. NOAA Fisheries estimates that in 2012, U.S. commercial fishermen landed 9.6 billion pounds of seafood with a value of $5.1 billion—the second-highest results in both categories over the past decade. In addition, the agency reports that jobs supported by recreational fishing increased 12 percent between 2010 and 2011 and that recreational fishing supported roughly 364,000 jobs in 2011. [3]

Rebuilding Plans for the 36 Commercially and Recreationally Important Populations Known to Be Overfished



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, "Status of Stocks 2013: Annual Report to Congress on the Status of U.S. Fisheries" April 29, 2014, http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/fisheries_eco/status_of_fisheries/status_updates.html.

a This stock complex does not have a formal time period for rebuilding. The fishery in the U.S. exclusive economic zone has been closed under sequential 6-year moratoriums since the inception of the fishery management plan in 1986. Fishing for bottomfish and seamount groundfish at the seamounts was prohibited in December 2010 until the stock is rebuilt. These measures are considered a de facto rebuilding plan.

b A domestic rebuilding plan will not be developed for Pacific bluefin tuna because the overfishing and overfished status is due to excessive international fishing pressure, and current international measures will not end overfishing or rebuild the stock. Internationally, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission manage this stock.

c A domestic rebuilding plan will not be developed for striped marlins because the overfishing and overfished status is due to excessive international fishing pressure, and current international measures will not end overfishing or rebuild the stock. Internationally, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission manages this stock, and new measures may be proposed in 2014.

d An international rebuilding plan for overfished North Atlantic blue and white marlins was adopted in 2000 by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, or ICCAT. While this rebuilding program does not satisfy all the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, NOAA is continuing to work domestically to monitor the fisheries and promote conservation.

10-YEAR TARGET

Since 1996, the law has set 10 years as a target rebuilding period for overfished populations. More than half of current rebuilding plans exceed the 10-year timeline because of reasonable exceptions already in the law.

Despite how far we have come and the progress we are making, some members of Congress are putting forth proposals and introducing legislation that would allow for greater "flexibility" in current requirements to rebuild depleted fish populations. This includes creating a long list of broad loopholes that could indefinitely extend or eliminate timelines for rebuilding these stocks.

The rebuilding requirement is a key conservation provision of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. In a September 2013 assessment of rebuilding programs, the National Research Council concluded that the current rebuilding approach has "demonstrated successes in identifying and rebuilding overfished stocks" and noted that "the rebuilding time frame provides a guide for setting target fishing mortality rates for rebuilding and creates an incentive to avoid delays in initiating rebuilding plans, which would otherwise require more severe management responses."[4]

Congress should reject any proposals that could undermine the success of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, including delays in rebuilding our nation's fish populations to healthy levels. We should build upon the existing, successful provisions in the law, and further our commitment to science-based management by incorporating ecosystem considerations into fisheries management.

Endnotes

1 Carl Safina et al., "U.S. Ocean Fish Recovery: Staying the Course," *Science* 309:5735, 708 (July 29, 2005), www.sciencemag.org/content/309/5735/707.full.

2 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, "Rebuilt Stocks (34)—as of December 31, 2013," http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/fisheries_eco/status_of_fisheries/archive/2013/fourth/maprebuiltstockscy_q4_2013.pdf.

3 Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act Reauthorization: Hearing, Day 1, before the Comm. on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives, 113th Cong. (2014) (statement of Samuel D. Rauch III, deputy assistant administrator for the National Marine Fisheries Service), http://www.legislative.noaa.gov/Testimony/Rauch020414.pdf.

4 National Research Council, *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Fish Stock Rebuilding Plans in the United States* (Washington: National Academies Press, 2014), 7.

Contact: Ted Morton, director, U.S. oceans, federal **Email:** wmorton@pewtrusts.org **Project website:** endoverfishing.org