



New study conducted by the National Academy of Sciences highlights opportunities to improve recreational fishing data and management while reaffirming the importance of the existing federal survey program.

Background

In 2018, Congress passed the *Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act of 2018*¹ (the Modern Fish Act), which focused on recreational fishing and addressing existing challenges in recreational data collection and management. The legislation directed the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a study to help improve accuracy and timeliness of data for management of recreational fisheries with annual catch limits. The study was meant to explore how NOAA’s Marine Recreational Information Program, or MRIP, can best meet management needs consistent with the core conservation standards of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, our nation’s landmark fishery management law.

The NAS study released this week² in prepublication form focuses on two main areas: (1) Optimizing the use of data for in-season management and (2) Alternative management strategies for recreational fisheries. The study highlighted many inherent challenges to collecting accurate, precise, and timely data for recreational fisheries that are persistent across surveys. The study noted that MRIP covers nearly 90% of all U.S. marine recreational fishing trips, and the data produced are critically important for management.

Key Takeaways

1. The study found that in conjunction with MRIP, supplemental surveys can provide a number of benefits to inform timely catch estimates and made the following recommendations:

- Calibration among state surveys and MRIP should continue and differences should be determined and clearly communicated, and
- MRIP should consider sharing raw data with state partners in conjunction with Regional Interstate Fishery Commission programs to inform timely catch estimates.

¹ Public Law No. 115-405.

² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2021. *Data and Management Strategies for Recreational Fisheries with Annual Catch Limits*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26185>.

2. The study explores the use of alternative management strategies for recreational fisheries with ACLs. Recreational fishing is responsible for a significant proportion of landings in many of our federal fisheries. To better understand the data needs to ensure sustainable fisheries, the study's suggestions and conclusions include:

- Piloting the use of tags for rarely caught species,
- Implementing private angler license, endorsement, or permit programs focused on identifying the subset of licensed anglers that target Council-managed species, and
- Exploring the potential of mandatory electronic catch reporting.

3. The study reaffirms, consistent with the Modern Fish Act, that all management measures must adhere to science-based annual catch limits and accountability measures.

- Annual catch limits, or ACLs, are a cornerstone of successful management under the Magnuson-Stevens Act.
- Congress recognized in the Modern Fish Act that commercial and recreational fishing differ in some important ways, and that management measures can be tailored to meet the needs of recreational fisheries.
- The recommendations contained in the NAS study will improve the application of ACLs to recreational fisheries to ensure long-term viability of our ocean fisheries and the communities that depend on them.

4. The NAS study recognizes the value of having supplementary sources of data that can provide benefits and improve estimates produced when used in concert with existing MRIP data.

- The study is also clear on the risk of reducing the consistency and comparability of catch estimates and spurring user conflicts if these supplemental surveys are not calibrated and coordinated.
- The study thus endorses calibration of data produced by different surveys and underscores the importance of NOAA's MRIP program and federally funded data streams to ensure accuracy and usefulness of data in management.

What comes next?

With the completion of this study, the next step per Modern Fish Act Section 202 is that the Secretary of Commerce must submit to Congress recommendations on how to improve the program to meet management needs and suggest strategic management approaches.