

**SEA GRANT**

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In recent years we have heard a great deal about overfished stocks and there is reason to be concerned particularly at the international level. However, the casual observer may have been left with the impression that U.S. fish stocks are in dire straits and there is little hope for their future.

The NOAA, National Marine Fisheries Service report on the status of fisheries for 2005 paints a more positive picture than some might expect. Scientists determined population levels for 206 fish stocks and multi-species groupings. Of these, 152 (74%) were not overfished. The harvest rates for 237 stocks suggested that 192 stocks (81%) were not currently subject to over fishing.

The distinction between overfished and overfishing is a subtle one but it is worth further explanation. When a fish stock is said to be overfished, the stock has been reduced to a point where it can no longer produce the desired harvest. In simpler terms, a stock is overfished when the number or pounds of fish falls below an agreed upon level.

Overfishing, on the other hand, refers to the rate of fishing. Overfishing is said to be occurring when fish are being harvested at a rate that will lead to unacceptable declines in the stock. Overfishing leads to a stock being declared overfished. Overfishing is also occurring when the rate of fishing would not lead to recovery of a stock in a specified time frame. In this case, a stock may be recovering but not fast enough to meet the predetermined goal.

Looking back at the status of fish stocks, 74% of the stocks are at or above the level that will produce the desired harvest. Over 80% are being harvested at a safe rate that will sustain or

rebuild the populations. More importantly, the remaining stocks that are overfished or under going overfishing are required to have fishery management plans that describe how and when overfishing will be ended and when the stocks will no longer be considered overfished.

The picture is not perfect though. There are a large number of stocks whose status is not known. Most are of little commercial or recreational importance but are certainly important parts of marine ecosystems. Also, not every fishery management plan is guaranteed to reach its goal. Fishery managers must deal with less than perfect information about fish stocks while balancing the immediate socio-economic costs of reducing the rate of fishing with the longer term benefits of rebuilding over-harvested stocks.