

Groups rally against fishing limits

Protections for overfished stocks hurt communities, they say.

By [Ambreen Ali](#)

A conservation law is pitting the nation's coastal fishing communities against environmental groups.

Thousands of fishermen, boat captains, and shop owners from New Jersey, Florida and Alaska plan to rally on Capitol Hill next week for Congress' help.

The groups want to change the Magnuson-Stevens Act, which limits fishing for depleted stocks and requires that they be replenished within 10 years. They say lawmakers could save thousands of jobs by easing that time limit.

The fishermen are up against more than 60 environmental groups and hundreds of scientists who oppose the move, arguing it will lead to exploitation of vulnerable fish populations.

Bonnie Brady, who is helping organize the Feb. 24 [United We Fish](#) rally through the Long Island Commercial Fishing Association, said the livelihood of many coastal communities depends on relaxing the laws.

"Realistically, fish are dollars," she said. "We are asking them to be as compassionate towards the fishermen as they have been towards the fish."

Their proposal, outlined in a bill ([HR 1584](#)) introduced by Rep. Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-N.J.), is to let the Commerce Department relax the 10-year replenishing requirement on those fish stocks that are starting to rebuild.

It shouldn't matter if it takes 15 years instead of 10 to renew the fish supply, they say, especially if that helps fishermen stay in business.

"It trickles down to the communities. There are foreclosures, broken families, and ruined futures based on arbitrary science," Brady said.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), who introduced Pallone's bill ([S 1255](#)) in the Senate, also called the 10-year requirement arbitrary and the fish quotas too stringent.

"We can rebuild fishing stocks and allow for a more nuanced approach to regulations that is not overly onerous on our fishing communities," the Senator said in a statement.

The fishing groups say the time is ripe for these bills, which fall in line with President Obama's focus on jobs.

They also present an opportunity for bipartisanship. Schumer is expected to share the stage with Sen. George LeMieux (R-Fla.), a co-sponsor, during Wednesday's rally.

But the advocates acknowledge that it is an uphill battle, even with 25 co-sponsors in the House.

Environmental groups such as Defenders of Wildlife, Center for Biological Diversity, and the Audubon Naturalist Society have launched a coordinated [push](#) to stop the bills.

The Pew Environmental Group is leading the effort to preserve the conservation law.

Rather than pit fish against fishermen, the group has suggested that the government employ the communities to conduct research and recover lost equipment from the ocean.

"There are very real economic problems, but the way to address them is not to allow more fishing," said Lee Crockett, who leads Pew's Federal Fisheries Policy.

Crockett said Congress reauthorized the Magnuson-Stevens Act in 2006 precisely because a decades-long flexible approach to conservation had not worked.

He noted that the fisheries management councils that advise the Commerce Department are often comprised of local fishermen willing to make ecological sacrifices for short-term gains.

The fishing reps counter that they should have a seat at the table when their jobs are at stake.

"We're the ones that have been left out of the equation for a really long time," Brady said. "We all know what's at stake here, and it is our futures."

Ambreen Ali writes for Congress.org