The National Marine Fisheries Service and Its Predecessor Agencies, 1871-1987: An Historical Overview

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The National Marine Fisheries Service is a survivor.

Conceived in 1871 as the Commission of Fish and Fisheries, its purpose was to determine whether or not there had been any depletion of food fish in the coastal waters and lakes of the United States, and, if so, identify the causes and remedies.

This independent agency evolved into the Bureau of Fisheries in the Department of Commerce and Labor in 1911, and remained in the Department of Commerce when the two departments were separated. In 1939 it was transferred to the Department of the Interior, and the following year was merged with the Bureau of Biological Survey to form the Fish and Wildlife Service. That didn't last long, and under pressure from commercial fishing interests, Congress passed the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1955 separating the two agencies, and forming the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries. The cycle of reorganization was completed when in 1970 the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries was transferred back to the Department of Commerce under its present designation, almost 100 years after its inception.

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One of the first things undertaken by the new commission in the 1870's was a comprehensive inventory of U.S. commercial fisheries, and from that time to the present the collection of detailed statistics has been a major function of the organization. They are used by the industry to guide its business activities, and by resource managers to determine changes in abundance of fish stocks and reasons for such changes.

The first U.S. Commissioner of Fisheries, Spencer F. Baird, was an eminent scientist, and it was only natural that the new organization at an early age would embark on ocean surveys resulting in vast collections of fish from around the world. The 1,000-ton steamer *Albatross* was built in 1883 and soon was followed by the *Fish Hawk*, and both were manned by Navy personnel who made hydrographic surveys as well as biological observations and collections. Laboratories were established at Woods Hole, Mass., and Beaufort, N.C., to further the studies of marine species. University faculty members interested in marine science were invited and encouraged to participate at these facilities.

The need for replenishment of depleted stocks of fish led to the establishment of fish hatcheries and a distribution system for restocking an estimated 4 out of 5 streams and lakes in the United States. Fish culture methods were applied to marine and anadromous species as well: Hatcheries collected and incubated salmon, shad, and lobster eggs, among others. Hatcheries were built in every state in the union and the annual output of fry and fingerling fish ran to the multi-billions.

Direction of these activities from Washington, D.C., fell logically into three divisions: 1) Division of Scientific Inquiry, 2) Division of Fishery Industries, and 3) Division of Fish Culture. A fourth division was the Alaska Division where all of these functions were performed plus regulation and enforcement since Alaska, as a Territory, did not have that authority.

The central office in Washington, D.C., controlled the activities in the field. Statistical agents left the office in the spring, fanned out to the coastal and Great Lakes states, called on known fishermen and operators, and came back in the fall to work up their field notes during the winter. Sketchy and incomplete as these figures were, they did show trends.

Hatchery personnel routed their requisitions for supplies through the Division of Fish Culture where they were approved or disapproved. Biological laboratories operated in a similar manner. Finances were closely controlled and with good reason. Budgets and appropriations were relatively small and priorities required limitations. During the depression years there were furloughs, "pink slips," and pay cuts for those who stayed on, and operating programs were curtailed or eliminated.

The rank and file of the Bureau of Fisheries and its successors were Civil Service personnel qualified by education, training, and experience. The same cannot always be said of the commissioners who varied from career fisheries personnel to political appointees. Fortunately for the organization, and the industry it served, there were more of the former than the latter. During the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration and the New Deal when new Federal agencies such as

the WPA, PWA, NRA, and others were being formed and staffed with political appointees, the Bureau of Fisheries was known as an "old line agency", meaning few established positions were listed in a publication of available jobs. In 1932, the Commissioner, Henry O'Malley, who had come up through the ranks of fish culture, and the Deputy Commissioner, Dr. Lewis Radcliffe, a competent biologist, were forced out and replaced by Frank Bell and Charles E. Jackson solely because of their political connections. This leadership did not change until about the time of the transfer to the Department of the Interior and merger with the Bureau of Biological Survey. There was a question in many minds whether this leadership change was an improvement because it fell largely to those primarily interested in wildlife.

The political maneuvering of top personnel did not reach the level of division, branch chiefs and below in most cases. These career people were recruited from academic institutions, state conservation agencies, and graduating students of colleges and universities giving courses in aquatic sciences. The College of Fisheries of the University of Washington was a major supplier. All were certified by the Civil Service Commission, often after qualifying by taking day-long examinations. Many distinguished themselves with original research contributions of inestimable value to fisheries conservation and utilization.

Probably the most famous of the staff was Rachel Carson who later authored best seller "Silent Spring" and "The Sea Around Us." Others who were less well known but equally gifted are too numerous to name or to identify by their contributions in this short review.

The central office staff was small and relationships were informal. In fact, during the 1930's this was true between departmental personnel. For example each division was assigned a messenger who delivered mail and did odd jobs. The Alaska Division messenger, Fred Young, a former cook on fish distribution cars, was known to have access to everyone in the Commerce Department, ranging from other messengers to the Secretary from whom he borrowed small change which he faithfully repaid on pay day, only to start over the day after pay day. At the end of the year, he gave all his financial supporters apple and cherry pies.

There were other interesting stories and oddities of the 1930's. Division chiefs' office furniture included brass spittoons (faithfully polished by the messengers) while lesser lights rated wooden spittoons. When the so-called French cradle phones became available they were in short supply and went to the "front offices," causing some hard feelings although phone use was limited; long-distance calls had to be approved by the Chief Clerk of the Bureau. Despite these controls, there was an ease to getting things done administratively.

It was in the middle 1930's that the Division of Fishery Industries expanded beyond the mere collection of statistics. Economic studies were undertaken and technological research included studies ranging from nutritional values of fish and methods of preservation to care of fishing gear. New biological laboratories were established to further studies of shad, oysters, haddock, shrimp, salmon and other species of commercial importance. With the construction of high dams on the Columbia River, there commenced a long study on methods of passing anadromous fish to upriver spawning grounds and returning the seaward migrants to the ocean.

Then came World War II. Key personnel with military reserve commissions were called to active duty. Those left were assigned duties in the Office of Coordinator of Fisheries where the major effort was to obtain for the fishing industry equipment, supplies, and manpower to enable maximum production of seafood with a minimum of critical materials and labor. This was the Fish and Wildlife Service contribution to the war effort from 1941 to 1945. Apparently the Service was more or less in a caretaker status during that time.

In the first decade after the war, direction of the Fish and Wildlife Service was primarily guided by wildlife specialists, although the Deputy Commissioner of the Bureau of Fisheries did carry over in that capacity. Nevertheless, the emphasis and concern was for migratory waterfowl, the establishment of wildlife refuges, and predator and rodent control. Never-the-less, progress was made in marine fisheries research, development, and services. New biological laboratories were established and research programs were expanded; exploratory fishing sought new sources of supply; more efficient fishing gear was developed; and the collection of statistics was expanded to include daily market news reports of landings and their values at major ports.

With passage of the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1955 and the separation of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries from the sport fish and wildlife activities, direction reverted to fisheries specialists—biologists, technologists, and administrators with years of experience. Representatives of the fishing industry referred to this as the end of the "dickey bird regime." In this shuffle of activities the Division of Fish Culture remained with the wildlife activities, as did those activities of the Division of Fishery Biology dealing with sport fishing.

A new enthusiasm and vitality resulted from this experienced leadership. The importance of the goals of the Bureau were emphasized when President John F. Kennedy said that "the sea around us represents one of our most important but least understood and almost wholly underdeveloped areas for extending our resource base . . . salt and fresh water fisheries are among our most important but far from fully developed reservoirs of protein foods." A comprehensive plan for overcoming these deficiencies was published in 1963 under the title "Trident" (BCF, 1963). Although never fully implemented by the budget process, it guided activities for the next decade. These multiple activities since 1957 have been coordinated through regional offices, making for closer cooperation with state conservation agencies and the fishing industry.

Prior to World War II, it was often asserted that more international conflicts resulted from disputes over fishing rights than any other cause. The National Marine Fisheries Service, and its predecessor agencies throughout the years, has provided technical advice and assistance in the formulation of foreign fishing policy. Efforts in this field began in 1911 with the Fur Seal Treaty between the

United States, Great Britain, Japan, and Russia. The United States is now a party to nine international fishery treaties designed to conserve specific resources. Without these treaties and the investigations and controls they provide, some of these resources might be near extinction.

In 1970, a Federal government reorganization plan was implemented by Presidential order changing the name of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries to the National Marine Fisheries Service and transferring it to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the U.S. Department of Commerce. Along with this name change came the responsibility for marine recreational fisheries.

The National Marine Fisheries Service entered into a new era with the passage of the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1976. New authorities and responsibilities were added for the conservation, development and management of marine recreational and commercial fisheries. The Act provides for the Federal management of marine fisheries in the exclusive economic zone that extends from territorial waters seaward 200 miles. The purposes of the Act are to:

1) Conserve and manage the fishery resources of the coast of the United States.

2) Support and encourage the implementation and enforcement of international fishery agreements for the conservation and management of highly migratory species, and to encourage the negotiation and implementation of additional such agreements as necessary.

3) Promote domestic commercial and recreational fishing under sound conservation and management principles.

4) Provide for the preparation and implementation of fishery management plans which will achieve and maintain, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield from each fishery.

5) Establish Regional Fishery Management Councils to prepare, monitor, and revise fishery management plans.

6) Encourage the development by the U.S. fishing industry of fish and shellfish which are underutilized or not utilized by U.S. fishermen.

Fishery management plans have now been developed and implemented for most species currently in need of conservation. The National Marine Fisheries Service regional offices and centers have major roles in the fishery management process. The Regional Directors serve as voting members of the Fishery Management Councils, and the Center Directors provide the primary data base used for fishery management plans and management regimes in the exclusive economic zone.

The original objectives for which NMFS and the predecessor organizations were formed in 1871 have been modified somewhat and expanded to meet today's needs, but basically they are still in effect.

Literature Cited

BCF. 1963. Trident [research, development, services], a long range report of the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries. U.S. Dep. Int., Fish. Wildl. Serv., Bur. Commer. Fish., Circ. 149, 113 p.