THE PEW ENVIRONMENT GROUP

The Hidden Cost of Overfishing to Commercial Fishermen

A 2009 snapshot of lost revenues

JULY 2011

Summary

Background

Ocean fish are a vital renewable resource, providing food, employment and recreation to people around the world. They are also integral to healthy ecosystems and global biodiversity. Unfortunately, overfishing—taking fish faster than they can reproduce—has caused dramatic declines in fish populations in the United States and elsewhere. Years of overfishing have depleted more than 20 percent of the commercially and recreationally important ocean fish in the United States—including some species of cod, flounder, snapper and grouper.

Overfishing also affects those who fish for a living. Chronic overfishing over years or even decades hurts fishing communities and forces fisheries managers to take steps to restore depleted populations, including reducing catch levels. On the other hand, when fish populations are healthy and fish are caught at sustainable levels, catch and potential sales rise.

The Hidden Cost of Overfishing to Commercial Fishermen[1] analyzes the impact of chronic overfishing by calculating the revenue lost by commercial fishermen targeting depleted fish populations in 2009 in three U.S. regions: New England, the South Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico.

The cost of overfishing

» Commercial fishermen in New England, the South Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico lost a combined $164.2 million in 2009.

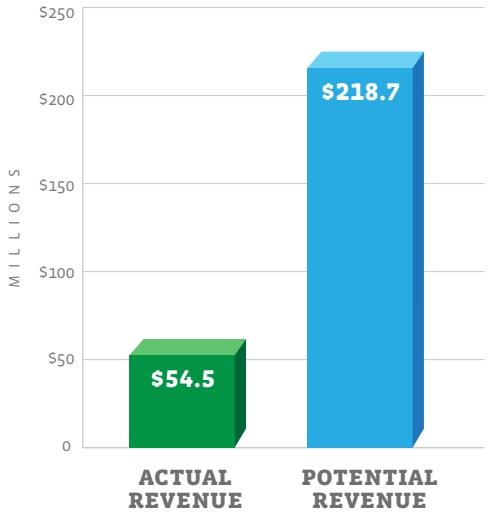
» Commercial fishermen in these three regions realized just 25 percent of the potential value that healthy fish populations would have provided.

» Rebuilt fish populations would not only provide additional revenues to fishermen, but also additional value to fishing-related businesses, recreational fishing and overall ecosystem health.

Findings

Based on this analysis, commercial fishermen in New England, the South Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico lost a combined **$164.2 million in 2009, catching only about 25 percent** of the fish they could have if populations of the overfished species they targeted had been at healthy levels that year.

The losses calculated in this report are just a small slice of the total cost of overfishing, because they include only direct impacts to the commercial fishermen who target these depleted species in a single year. The analysis does not account for the related losses to the rest of the commercial fishing industry (e.g., fish processing, retail seafood sales),



[1] This study was conducted by Ecotrust, a nonprofit organization that is one of the leading providers of marine social and economic knowledge, tools, synthesis and applications.

losses incurred in the recreational sector and negative impacts on overall ecosystem health. But even this conservative estimate of the cost of overfishing bolsters the need to quickly end this practice and rebuild depleted fish populations to healthy levels. Failure to conserve fish populations that underpin fishermen and the fishing economy will perpetuate future losses. But implementing firm catch limits, based on science, that end and prevent overfishing will benefit fishermen for generations.

Photo: NOAA

Methodology

This study examined 20 depleted (called overfished by fisheries managers) fish populations and calculated the revenue lost in 2009 to commercial fishermen due to low catch. It subtracted the amount of fish caught that year from the amount that federal scientists projected could have been sustainably caught, if the populations had been at healthy levels. This difference in catch was then multiplied by the average dockside price of the fish in 2009 to determine the lost revenue for each fish species that year. The lost revenues for each species were then summed to determine the overall cost of overfishing in just one year in these three regions.

To view the full report, go to **www.PewEnvironment.org/costofoverfishing**.

For further information, please contact:
Lee R. Crockett, *Director, Federal Fisheries Policy*
Pew Environment Group | 202-552-2065 | lcrockett@pewtrusts.org | www.PewEnvironment.org