

Regulators say several critical fish species have rebounded

April 15 2015, byPatrick Whittle

Several fish stocks from Maine to Florida are rebounding and are no longer subject to overfishing, federal regulators said Thursday.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration announced it is removing two stocks—the gag grouper of the Gulf of Mexico and the North Atlantic albacore—from its "overfished" list. The agency is also taking six stocks off of the "overfishing" list, including the Gulf of Maine haddock, the South Atlantic gag grouper, the western Atlantic Bluefin tuna, the snowy grouper of the South Atlantic coast and the jacks of the Gulf of Mexico. The North Atlantic albacore is now off of both lists.

NOAA considers a fish stock "overfished" when its population size is too small, and the stock is placed on the "overfishing" list when its annual catch rate is too high.

The rebounding fisheries are evidence of the impact of a 2007 law change that enacted annual catch limits, said Alan Risenhoover, director of NOAA Fisheries Office of Sustainable Fisheries. There were 41 stocks listed as subject to overfishing in 2007 and only 10 domestic and four international stocks remain on that list, he said.

"It really is a comment on our fisheries in our country. They are on a sustainable path for the long term," Risenhoover said.

Risenhoover said improved [fish stocks](#) can sometimes be subject to

higher fishing quotas. He said overfishing has dropped to "an all-time low" since 1997, when NOAA started tracking stock status.

Some environmentalists were more cautious about celebrating the rebuilt stocks. The ability to fish for Gulf of Maine haddock is tied to another key commercial species, the depleted Gulf of Maine cod, and the New England fishing industry will continue to suffer until cod are able to rebuild, said Peter Baker, who directs U.S. Oceans, Northeast for the Pew Charitable Trusts. Cod and haddock are both key sources of the fish fillets used for fish and chips.

"This report just underscores that the future of the fishery has to be how to catch these stocks that are coming back and not catch cod to the point where the biomass goes to zero," Baker said.

The report also lists three fish stocks that were rebuilt to target levels in 2014. They are the Gulf of Mexico gag grouper, Gulf of Maine/Cape Hatteras butterfish and Mid-Atlantic Coast golden tilefish.

In Venice, Florida, charter boat captain Eric White said the resurgence of the gag grouper is good news for fishing guides on the Gulf of Mexico, where the homely fish are prized by vacationing sport fishermen.

"It will probably open us up to be able to catch them more often, as opposed to just a couple months of the year," he said.

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