

Why GAO Did This Study

Almost 11 million anglers made nearly 71 million marine recreational fishing trips in the continental United States in 2013. Pressure on many fish stocks from fishing has increased demand for quality and timely data that can be used to assess the status of various fish stocks as part of managing marine recreational fisheries. The many modes of marine recreational fishing—in which anglers fish from private boats or boats with guides, the shoreline, private property, and public docks—make collecting the data needed to effectively manage recreational fisheries both complex and challenging.

GAO was asked to review NMFS' marine recreational fisheries data collection program. This report examines (1) challenges that have been identified with the agency's data collection efforts for managing marine recreational fisheries and (2) steps the agency has taken to improve data collection and challenges that remain. GAO reviewed laws, policies, and guidance related to federal and state recreational fisheries data collection methods; reviewed NMFS and other documents on recreational fisheries data collection; and interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of federal and state recreational fisheries officials and other stakeholders, selected to provide geographic representation, among other things, to obtain their views on NMFS' data collection efforts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NMFS develop a comprehensive strategy to guide its data collection efforts. The agency agreed with GAO's recommendation.

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RECREATIONAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

The National Marine Fisheries Service Should Develop a Comprehensive Strategy to Guide Its Data Collection Efforts

What GAO Found

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) within the Department of Commerce faces several challenges related to fisheries data collection, according to reports GAO reviewed and NMFS officials and stakeholders GAO interviewed. These challenges include collecting quality recreational fishing data that are timely for managing marine recreational fisheries and communicating with stakeholders. Regarding the collection of quality data, for example, NMFS faces a challenge identifying the universe of anglers from which to collect information about their marine recreational fishing activity. NMFS relies in part on state registries to identify anglers, but some states exempt certain anglers from registering, and therefore NMFS does not have a complete list of recreational anglers. NMFS officials and other stakeholders have also identified challenges in communicating with stakeholders in collecting recreational fisheries data. For example, several stakeholders told GAO that NMFS has not always communicated with the public about its activities, creating concerns about a lack of transparency regarding NMFS' fisheries management decisions. Reflecting this challenge, in 2014, Louisiana withdrew from the federal fisheries data collection program and implemented its own program because of concerns about federal recreational fisheries data, according to a Louisiana fisheries official.

NMFS has taken several steps aimed at improving data collection to manage marine recreational fisheries and addressing challenges related to communicating with stakeholders. For example, to help improve the quality of the state data it relies on to identify the universe of anglers, NMFS made recommendations to states on improving their recreational angler databases and provided funds to the states to support data quality improvement projects, according to NMFS documents. NMFS has also taken steps to improve communication, including working with Louisiana to perform a side-by-side comparison of federal data with Louisiana's data to determine whether Louisiana's data can be used as an alternative to federal data. However, some challenges persist, including challenges in validating data the NMFS collects and communicating about upcoming NMFS initiatives. More broadly, the agency does not have a comprehensive strategy to guide its efforts to improve recreational fisheries data collection. Such a strategy is consistent with the framework of leading practices in federal strategic planning, as described in the Government Performance and Results Act Modernization Act of 2010, Office of Management and Budget guidance, and practices GAO has identified. Based on GAO's discussions with NMFS officials and review of NMFS documents, the agency has not developed a comprehensive strategy because it has been focused on other priorities such as improving its data collection methods. NMFS officials told GAO that NMFS recognizes the need to enhance its strategic planning but did not provide information about how, or whether, they plan to develop a comprehensive strategy. Without a comprehensive strategy that articulates NMFS' goals to improve data collection and methods for measuring progress toward the goals, NMFS may have difficulty ensuring that the various steps it is taking to improve data collection are prioritized so that the most important steps are undertaken first, and it may find it difficult to determine the extent to which these steps will help it address the challenges it faces.