

A Vision for Managing America's Saltwater Recreational Fisheries

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The Commission on Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management

Chaired by

Johnny Morris
*Founder and CEO,
Bass Pro Shops*

Scott Deal
*President and Co-Founder,
Maverick Boats*



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Envisioning a New Future for Saltwater Fisheries Management

America's sportsmen and women are the backbone of aquatic resource conservation. For the past several decades, anglers have played a leading role in helping rebuild marine fish stocks and prevent overfishing. This is a success story of which we should all be proud.

Through federal excise taxes on fishing equipment and motorboat fuel, fishing license fees and direct donations, anglers contribute nearly \$1.5 billion annually to fund fisheries conservation and habitat restoration. Our community invests in aquatic resource conservation because we know that the future of recreational fishing directly depends on the health of fish populations and their habitat.

In the last half century, saltwater recreational fishing in the U.S. has experienced tremendous advances in the overall number of anglers, angling ethics, technology used and their overall economic impact to the nation.

The National Marine Fisheries Service¹ estimates that approximately 11 million Americans participated in saltwater fishing in 2011, spending \$27 billion on fishing tackle, equipment, and trip-related goods and services. Spending by saltwater anglers generated more than \$70 billion in economic output, supporting more than 450,000 jobs.

However, in the midst of our success in rebuilding marine fisheries and the growth in saltwater recreational fishing, the federal fisheries management system has not adapted to meet the needs of this economic and conservation powerhouse.

Recognizing that we now have an opportunity to establish a saltwater fisheries management system that incorporates the unique goals and needs of anglers, we invited a group of leaders and experts in the fisheries community to initiate a landmark process to develop a vision for saltwater recreational fishing. Throughout 2013, the Commission on Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management met to deliberate and debate strategies to improve saltwater recreational fisheries management.

The Future of Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management

The commission envisions a marine fisheries management system that conserves fishery resources, provides consistency in regulations, and produces the full range of saltwater recreational fishing's economic, social and conservation benefits for the nation.

1. National Marine Fisheries Service, 2012. Fisheries Economics of the United States, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, NOAA Tech. Memo. NMFS-F/SPO-118, 175p, 2011. <https://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st5/publication/index.html>.



We are proud to play a role in advancing the long-standing traditions of recreational fishing and boating in this country. Each time Americans go fishing and boating, they make a positive contribution to our fish, our waters and the fabric of American society. We are committed to working together to ensure the conservation of our saltwater resources so their recreational benefits are available for future generations to enjoy.

Johnny Morris
Founder and CEO, Bass Pro Shops
Chairman

Additionally, a wide range of experts and other stakeholders were invited to meet with the commission to provide information and advice on a variety of fisheries management issues. These included economists, researchers, federal and state agency administrators, environmentalists, charter captains and individual recreational anglers.

After extensive discussion and deliberation, the commission established a vision for saltwater recreational fishing and identified steps to set the foundation for a management system that addresses the needs of anglers and industry and produces the full range of economic, social and conservation benefits provided by recreational fishing.

The recommendations in this report primarily focus on the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in six key areas:

- Establishing a national policy for recreational saltwater fishing
- Adopting a revised approach to saltwater recreational fisheries management
- Allocating marine fisheries for the greatest benefit to the nation
- Creating reasonable latitude in stock rebuilding timelines
- Codifying a process for cooperative management
- Managing for the forage base



Johnny Morris (right) and his son John Paul



Scott Deal
President and Co-Founder, Maverick Boats
Chairman

Commission on Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management

- Chairman Larry McKinney, Ph.D.**, executive director, Harte Research Institute
- Tundi Agardy, Ph.D.**, founder, Sound Seas
- Lee Anderson, Ph.D.**, professor, University of Delaware
- Rip Cunningham**, former editor in chief, Salt Water Sportsman Magazine
- Ricky Gease**, executive director, Kenai River Sportfishing Association
- Ken Haddad**, former executive director, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- Rollie Schmitten**, former director, National Marine Fisheries Service

Economic, Social and Conservation Benefits of Saltwater Recreational Fishing

Recreational fishing is one of America's most enduring pastimes: an activity in which people of all ages can participate, enjoying opportunities to spend time in the outdoors with family and friends. But recreational fishing in our nation's oceans is more than a chance to create memories and strengthen our connection with nature.



Saltwater recreational fishing has a \$70 billion impact on our nation's economy, supporting 454,000 jobs. Marinas, grocery stores, restaurants, motels, lodges, tackle shops, boat dealerships, clothing manufacturers, gas stations and a host of other businesses and entities benefit from the dollars spent by recreational anglers in pursuit of their sport. Coastal communities throughout the country depend - in some cases, exclusively - on recreational fishing for their livelihoods.

Whether they access the fishery in their own boat, fish from the shoreline, beach or pier, or hire a charter captain, America's 11 million saltwater anglers are looking for opportunities to have quality experiences on the water. For some, that means catching the fish of a lifetime only to release it for the next angler to catch. Others hope to bring home some of their catch to share with family and friends. For most, fishing represents an opportunity to strengthen relationships with family, friends and colleagues. For all anglers, fishing provides a chance to experience a special connection with our marine environment, gain a better appreciation for our country's natural resources, and practice the conservation ethic that is integral to the sporting community.

Economic Impact of Saltwater Recreational Fishing

| State | Saltwater Anglers | Jobs | Sales (in thousands) |
|----------------|-------------------|--------|-------------------------|
| Alabama | 907,000 | 8,867 | 819,340 |
| Alaska | 286,000 | 4,250 | 483,000 |
| California | 1,045,000 | 10,111 | 1,430,919 |
| Connecticut | 518,000 | 1,190 | 156,415 |
| Delaware | 318,000 | 1,403 | 132,223 |
| Florida | 4,878,000 | 98,355 | 11,826,000 |
| Georgia | 355,000 | 3,217 | 344,794 |
| Hawaii | 87,000 | 2,861 | 310,782 |
| Louisiana | 959,000 | 17,808 | 2,062,048 |
| Maine | 198,000 | 1,197 | 118,336 |
| Maryland | 836,000 | 6,466 | 724,394 |
| Massachusetts | 897,000 | 6,550 | 799,558 |
| Mississippi | 268,000 | 1,383 | 120,644 |
| New Hampshire | 96,000 | 441 | 47,999 |
| New Jersey | 1,067,000 | 12,818 | 1,841,343 |
| New York | 561,000 | 3,094 | 398,881 |
| North Carolina | 1,499,000 | 15,831 | 1,622,060 |
| Oregon | 217,000 | 2,799 | 308,602 |
| Rhode Island | 296,000 | 1,940 | 208,021 |
| South Carolina | 478,000 | 3,303 | 306,678 |
| Texas | 708,903* | 13,332 | 1,644,672 |
| Virginia | 892,000 | 9,454 | 969,571 |
| Washington | 321,000 | 5,093 | 653,972 |

Source: *Fisheries Economics of the United States*, NOAA Fisheries, 2011.

*The Marine Recreational Information Program does not collect participation (number of anglers) data for Texas. Therefore, estimate for Texas is from Southwick Associates, "The 2011 Economic Benefits of Sportfishing in Texas," 2013.



Without recreational fishing, fisheries conservation would virtually cease to exist. Through federal excise taxes on fishing equipment and motorboat fuel, fishing license fees and direct donations, anglers contribute nearly \$1.5 billion annually to fund fisheries conservation and habitat restoration. These contributions drive the most successful conservation and fisheries restoration program in the world.

Anglers not only pay for conservation through license fees and excise taxes, they also support conservation work by volunteering for

habitat creation and restoration projects in all 50 states. As citizen scientists, they actively participate in fish tagging and tracking programs, monitor water quality, and collect other environmental data valuable to fisheries managers across the country. Anglers have spearheaded state and national programs that promote best practices among



anglers to reduce fish mortality, including catch-and-release techniques and the use of circle hooks and barotrauma-reduction devices to reduce hook-and-release mortality.

Recreational fishing is founded on conservation, sustainability and opportunity. Saltwater anglers and the recreational fishing industry they support are critical to conservation and a healthy economic environment for all Americans.



License fees, taxes paid on fishing equipment and donations to conservation organizations made by anglers pay for a host of habitat restoration and creation projects throughout the U.S.

The Current State of Saltwater Recreational Fishing Management

Our ocean resources are used for many commercial and recreational purposes. Despite its large constituency and major economic impact, when critical regulatory or management decisions are made, the recreational saltwater fishing community often doesn't get due consideration. This is particularly true regarding federal marine waters, which, in most parts of the country, extend from three to 200 miles offshore.

The three factors contributing to the inadequate management of federal marine fisheries for recreational fishing are

- The laws that govern federal marine fisheries are primarily designed for and focused on commercial fishing.
- The federal agency tasked with managing marine fisheries has commercial fishing as its primary focus.
- We do not have a national policy for saltwater recreational fishing.

Federal law is focused primarily on commercial fishing

In the 1960s, foreign fishing fleets began fishing in waters off the U.S. coast for high market value fish and shellfish. Due to a desire to both conserve these valuable stocks from overfishing and promote and develop domestic commercial interests, Sen. Warren G. Magnuson of Washington State led the passage of the 1976 Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The act established a U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone, or EEZ, from three to 200 miles offshore and established eight regional fisheries management councils to develop management plans for marine fisheries in their individual regions. These actions were extraordinarily effective, and within a decade U.S. commercial interests had replaced foreign fishing fleets in the EEZ.

While the act was successful in keeping foreign fleets out of U.S. waters, many marine fish stocks were at low levels, prompting legislative changes to better ensure the fisheries' sustainability. Led by Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska, in 1996 the act was amended with provisions to end overfishing and protect important fish habitats. This became the



Federal fisheries management and the law that governs it have been focused almost entirely on commercial fishing.

1996 Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). The Magnuson-Stevens Act was again reauthorized in 2006, which added strict deadlines to end overfishing and called for annual catch limits to be put in place for all fisheries by a certain date.

While the Magnuson-Stevens Act has produced a demonstrable improvement in fish stocks, we now need to manage that success in a way that fully develops saltwater recreational fishing's economic, social and conservation benefits to our nation. Because it is a fundamentally different activity than commercial fishing, recreational fishing requires different management approaches.

From a management perspective, the Magnuson-Stevens Act relies on limited entry and catch share programs, along with fixed quotas that can be managed in real time. While these approaches



Saltwater anglers are fishing waters their fathers and grandfathers only dreamed about thanks to advances in boat designs, fuel-efficient engines and marine electronics.

work for the commercial sector where relatively few vessels are focused on maximum sustainable yield, recreational fisheries are enjoyed by millions of individuals with diverse goals. Some try to catch fish for food, while others simply want to have fun catching and releasing fish and enjoy their time outdoors. What recreational anglers want and need is wide-ranging, dependable access to healthy and abundant fish stocks.

In its defense, when the Fishery Conservation and Management Act was originally passed in 1976, saltwater recreational fishing was in its infancy. The ensuing decades have witnessed a significant growth in coastal communities and an interest in recreational saltwater fishing spurred on by tremendous changes in recreational boat designs, engines, electronics and other fishing gear technologies.

Current laws and policies governing saltwater recreational fishing have not kept pace with the evolution of recreational saltwater fishing, its growing popularity and its economic impact. This impact is equal to or greater than the commercial

industry in terms of number of jobs provided and total economic benefits, while accounting for only a fraction of overall landings.

A federal agency focused primarily on commercial fishing

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), under the auspices of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and ultimately the Department of Commerce, is the federal agency responsible for fisheries management in federal waters. Given its mandated commercial focus, the fact that the NMFS has not embraced fisheries management practices that also meet the unique goals, needs and motivations of recreational anglers should come as no surprise. While the NMFS has made great strides in recent years in improving communication and interaction with the recreational fishing community, much work remains to be done to effectively integrate recreational fishing into its policies and procedures.

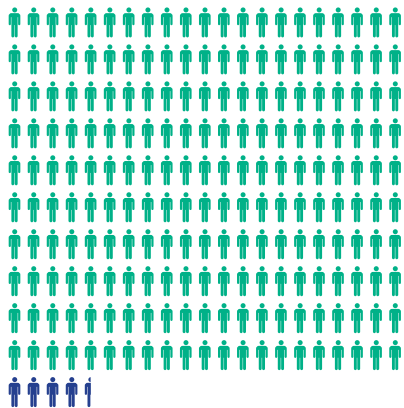


Marine fish such as red drum and snook are very successfully managed by state fisheries agencies.

Many state natural resource agencies, especially those in the South, recognize the benefits of a vibrant recreational fishing community and have managed to promote it while conserving their saltwater resources. Striped bass, red drum, black drum, summer flounder, sheepshead, snook, spotted seatrout and tarpon are examples of successfully managed state fisheries that sufficiently meet the needs of recreational anglers while providing extensive economic benefits to their state and the national economies.

Many coastal states have adopted management models that are well tuned for their particular saltwater fisheries. These models conserve fishery resources, provide multi-year consistency in regulations and allow for ample public access. However, these approaches have not yet been embraced by the NMFS, which is a significant contributing factor to the current dilemma in saltwater recreational fisheries management.

Jobs per 100,000 pounds landed in the United States, 2011



All Recreation: 210 All Commercial: 4.5

For every 100,000 pounds of fish landed there were 210 recreational fishing jobs compared to 4.5 jobs in the commercial fishing industry.

Fisheries Economics of the United States, 2011. NOAA Fisheries.

Lack of a national policy for recreational fishing

For the past several decades, the recreational fishing community has helped lead the charge toward building a management system that controls commercial exploitation to effectively sustain healthy fisheries resources.

This was a natural focus of anglers, policymakers and resource managers because commercial fishing accounts for the vast majority of finfish harvest and



Tomo Balaguer, 123rf

has been the primary contributor to over-exploitation. While the road to ending overfishing has been a challenge and many sacrifices have been made, Americans now have a solid foundation of healthy fisheries resources that benefit the entire nation.

However, the federal system to control commercial fisheries exploitation is largely inappropriate for managing recreational fishing. The solution is to develop a national policy for saltwater recreational fishing that builds upon our current fisheries management system but acknowledges that a new and distinctive path forward is needed for recreational fishing.

This report addresses the three primary contributing factors that have led to deficient federal saltwater fisheries management by identifying a clear vision for saltwater recreational fisheries management and recommending key policy changes to establish the foundation for a national saltwater recreational fishing policy.

The work to implement a national policy for recreational fishing will take a collective effort in which all segments of the recreational fishing community will need to come together and engage with fisheries managers, policymakers and other stakeholders to advance a unified vision.

Commission on Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management Recommendations

The Commission on Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management's recommendations are largely focused on the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The commission recognizes the need to extend these efforts beyond just the law's reauthorization to bring about a cultural shift within the National Marine Fisheries Service, which administers the law, to ensure that the values of recreational fishing are recognized throughout all relevant aspects of the agency's operations.

Strong fisheries conservation and management are the foundation for the recommendations in this report. Policy makers, resource managers, industry people and anglers must continue to advocate for a saltwater fisheries management system that conserves our fishery resources, provides consistency in regulations, and produces the full range of saltwater recreational fishing's economic, social and conservation benefits for the nation. Ensuring the health and sustainability of our fisheries resources is the primary concern of the recreational fishing community.

The following recommendations present a positive vision to build upon our recent fisheries management successes in a way that benefits conservation, the economy and the public.

Establishing a national policy for recreational fishing

Recreational fishing is currently addressed in an inconsistent fashion by NMFS. The only section of the Magnuson-Stevens Act that relates to promoting recreational fishing focuses specifically on catch and release practices, which, while an important component of many recreational fisheries, hardly encompass the entirety of the recreational fishing experience.

In the late 1980s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established a national recreational fisheries policy for the U.S. Department of Interior² that outlined the agency's goals and strategies for primarily freshwater recreational fishing on federal lands. The policy called for federal and partner resources



to be coordinated and organized to advance recreational fishing and fisheries conservation. Because the NMFS has no such policy, the impacts have not been felt within the saltwater recreational fishing community.

Recommendation

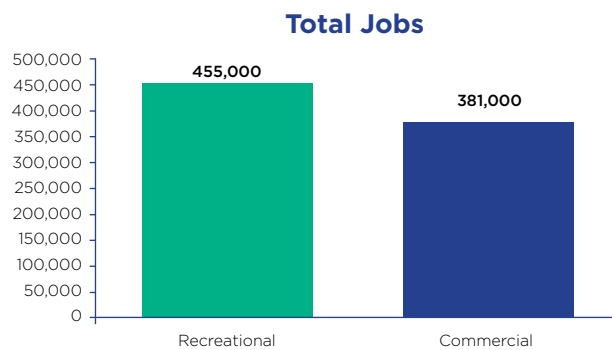
The Magnuson-Stevens Act should include a provision for the creation of a national saltwater recreational fishing policy that identifies goals and strategies for recreational fisheries management at the local, state and national levels. The NMFS has made progress in recent years in elevating the importance of recreational fishing within the agency, including hosting a national recreational fishing summit, establishing national and regional action agendas and creating new agency positions focused on recreational fishing policies. Future progress would be significantly advanced through the establishment of a comprehensive national policy defining and coordinating efforts throughout the federal government, focusing primarily on the NMFS, to advance saltwater recreational fishing.

2. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Recreational Fisheries Policy of the U.S. Department of the Interior, 1989. http://www.fws.gov/policy/a1npi89_25.pdf.

Adopting a revised approach to saltwater recreational fisheries management

Recreational and commercial fishing are fundamentally different activities that require different management approaches. Currently, federal fisheries managers set catch limits for recreational and commercial fishing at or near maximum sustainable yield. While this may be an ideal management strategy for commercial fishing, where harvesting the maximum biomass is desired, it is not an effective management tool for saltwater recreational fishing. Recreational anglers are more focused on abundance and size, structure of the fisheries, and opportunities to get out on the water. Fulfilling these needs is an important economic contributor to coastal communities and the nation.

Total Jobs from Recreational and Commercial Fishing in the United States, 2011



In 2011, there were 455,000 jobs related to recreational fishing compared to 381,000 for commercial fishing.

Fisheries Economics of the United States, 2011. NOAA Fisheries.



Recommendation

The NMFS should manage recreational fisheries based on long-term harvest rates, not strictly on poundage-based quotas. This strategy has been successfully used by fisheries managers in the Atlantic striped bass fishery, which is the most sought-after saltwater recreational fishery in the nation. By managing the recreational sector based on harvest rate as opposed to a poundage-based quota, managers have been able to provide predictability in regulations while also sustaining a healthy population. While the Magnuson-Stevens Act does not prohibit such an approach, it should specifically direct the NMFS and regional councils to consider alternative strategies to commercial management for appropriate recreationally valuable fisheries.



Red snapper, like this one caught in the Gulf of Mexico, are being allocated to recreational and commercial fishermen based on outdated harvest data.

Allocating marine fisheries for the greatest benefit to the nation

For many mixed-sector fisheries, (i.e., those sought by both the commercial and recreational sectors), allocations of harvestable quota for each sector are based on decisions in fisheries management plans written decades ago.

In its current language, the Magnuson-Stevens Act³ calls for allocations to be:

- Fair and equitable to all such fishermen
- Reasonably calculated to promote conservation
- Carried out in such a manner that no particular individual, corporation or other entity acquires an excessive share of such privileges

However, because no formalized process exists to prompt the regional fishery management councils toward reallocation, and because allocation discussions have been historically contentious, fisheries managers lack the necessary incentives to reexamine allocations regardless of how outdated and/or inequitable they may be.

Recommendation

The Magnuson-Stevens Act should require the NMFS, in conjunction with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), to develop guidelines and criteria that the regional fishery management councils must consider for allocation of all mixed sector fisheries. The allocation decisions must consider conservation and socioeconomic output. To help provide necessary information for managers to consider, the NMFS must enhance its existing economic program for mixed sector fisheries. The Magnuson-Stevens Act also should require that the regional fishery management councils develop procedures for allocation reviews and adjustments based on those guidelines to occur at regular intervals.

Creating reasonable latitude in stock rebuilding timelines

The Magnuson-Stevens Act currently states that the timeline for ending overfishing and rebuilding fisheries “be as short as possible” and “not exceed 10 years,” with a few limited exceptions to allow for longer timeframes. While some stocks can be rebuilt in 10 years or less, others require longer generation times, or factors unrelated to fishing pressure may prohibit rebuilding in 10 years or less.

Echoing the concerns raised by stakeholders and many of the regional fishery management councils, a report by the prestigious and nonpartisan National Academy of Sciences concluded that the 10-year rebuilding provision should be revised to



3. 16USC1801 Sec. 301(a)(4)

4. National Research Council, Evaluating the Effectiveness of Fish Stock Rebuilding Plans in the United States, 2013. http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=18488.



Beth Swanson, 123rf.

Healthy stocks of forage fish, like these mullet, are vital for healthy and sustainable recreational fishing.

provide greater flexibility than is currently allowed under the law.⁴ Instead of having a fixed deadline for stocks to be rebuilt, the NAS recommended that the regional councils and fisheries managers set lower harvest rates that would allow fish stocks to recover gradually while diminishing socioeconomic impacts.

Recommendation

The commission supports the National Academy of Science's recommendations to provide the regional councils and fisheries managers greater latitude to rebuild fish stocks in a timely and reasonable manner.

Codifying a process for cooperative management

Cooperative management, where fisheries are managed jointly between the NMFS and individual states or interstate fisheries management commissions, is currently an option for fisheries management. By integrating research and management expertise, cooperative management can more successfully help meet fisheries management goals. However, the concept is not fully utilized because of a lack of guidance regarding options and processes to help determine if this is an appropriate management approach.

Recommendation

The regional councils should be required to develop a process to determine on a stock-by-stock basis which management entities are most appropriate and capable of successfully managing the stock. This requirement should provide guidance for determining the most appropriate management structure.

Managing for the forage base

The fisheries management system in the U.S. has historically concentrated on achieving maximum sustainable yield from individual fisheries and is slowly moving toward multispecies management or ecosystem-based fishery management. For the recreational fishing community, ecosystem-based fishery management includes conserving the forage base – the suite of fish that provide much of the food resource for important recreational fish species. Forage fish must be managed to provide enough food resources for healthy recreational fish species. Currently, very few forage fish are considered in fishery management plans, meaning that potential impacts on these critical components of the ecosystem are not considered or controlled.

Recommendation

Fisheries managers should better incorporate forage base management to provide optimal health, reproduction and growth in important predator fish stocks. The NMFS and regional councils should identify the most significant forage fish for every fish stock currently being managed and determine whether or not the identified forage fish should be managed.



Conclusion

The Commission on Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management recommends that the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act include the following elements:

- A national policy for recreational fishing
- A revised approach to saltwater recreational fisheries management that promotes both conservation and access
- Allocation of marine fisheries for the greatest benefit to the nation
- Reasonable latitude in stock rebuilding timelines
- A process for cooperative management
- Managing for the forage base

The commission strongly believes that now is the time to begin this important, critical work. The commission’s recommendations provide the steps needed to improve the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries

Conservation and Management Act in a manner that finally addresses the needs of the saltwater recreational fishing community.

The commission recognizes the need for strengthening old and creating new partnerships to improve science, economic data and information sharing in fisheries management. The commission strongly advocates for the need to focus on habitat, water quality and environmental challenges that recreational anglers and all citizens will confront in the years ahead. In addition, federal and state fisheries management agencies should make it a priority to inform the public about anglers’ contributions to conservation.

Finally, saltwater anglers must continue to support and advocate for a strong conservation ethic within our community. Anglers were among the first to set the example as stewards of the outdoors. Anglers need to continue that legacy to assure a future for anglers today and for generations to come.



The Following Organizations Contributed to this Report



Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

1660 L St. N.W., Suite 208
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 639-TRCP(8727)
Fax: (202) 639-8728
cmacaluso@trcp.org