

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 28, 2013

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

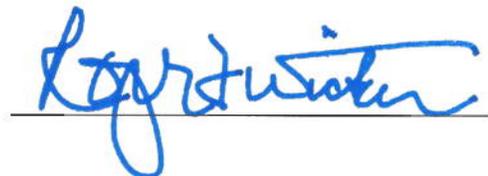
We are writing to request a study on issues related to fishery stock assessments conducted by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) within the Department of Commerce. As you know, stock assessments are the biological evaluation of the status of fish stocks. These assessments provide official estimates in key areas, such as the size of the stock's population, the size of the spawning population, and fish mortality. Importantly, stock assessments form the scientific basis used by regional fishery management councils and are a vital first step towards proper fishery management. For example, regional councils use stock assessments and other indicators of biological productivity to recommend to NMFS a maximum, or total allowable catch, in a particular fishery—typically for a year.

It has come to our attention that NOAA may not be placing a high enough priority on conducting robust, peer-reviewed stock assessments on fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico and in the South Atlantic. This lack of empirical data forces fishery council managers and their Scientific and Statistical Committees, who establish total allowable catch, to rely on what the councils have referred to in Congressional testimony as “flawed” and incomplete science.

Because of the importance of ensuring accurate stock assessments for the health of our nation's ecosystems as well as the vitality of our fishing communities, we would like for your office to examine: (1) the frequency with which NMFS conducts stock assessments; (2) the amount of federal resources spent annually on such assessments; (3) how NMFS determines which assessments to undertake and the frequency for doing so, including the relative costs and benefits considered when committing resources to improving stock assessments and prioritizing them; (4) the extent of discrepancies, if any, in the number and frequency of stock assessments conducted across regions of the country; (5) what resources are necessary to adequately sustain regular collection of information for fishery stock assessments; and (6) the various options for involving stakeholders in gathering valid fishery data directly supportive of regional council fisheries management decision-making and what gaps, if any, could be filled by guided stakeholder input.

As your work proceeds, please keep our staff advised of your progress. If you have any questions regarding this request please contact Sara Decker at (202) 224-3041. Thank you for your prompt attention to this request.

Respectfully,



Paul Cohen

Jeff Jensen

David Vitter

Richard Shelby

Max Baucus

Kay R. Hagan