

Corporate Trawlers Try to Enclose Pacific Fish

Can the privatization of West Coast fisheries be stopped?

By [David Bollier](#)

An advisory council to the National Marine Fisheries Service is seeking to privatize the rights to catch fish on the waters off of California, Oregon and Washington State. In a process dominated by big trawlers, the Pacific Fishery Management Council plans to put a cap on the number of fish that can be caught – and then give exclusive fishing rights to the large commercial trawlers known as “draggers.” The scenario would be disastrous for many coastal communities whose economies depend upon a stable supply of fish.

In an oped in today’s [Seattle Times](#), Mark Schlosberg and Ben Bowman of Food and Water Watch describe how the big corporate fishing companies are trying to keep fishing rights for themselves and prevent the emergence of a more community-friendly seafood economy.



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The proposed privatization plan will “cut coastal jobs, undermine ocean habitat-conservation efforts and heap new management costs on unaware taxpayers,” say Schlosberg and Bowman. They explain how the plan works:

Called “catch-shares,” it advocates first putting a cap on the total number of fish that can be taken and then giving the bulk of the total for free to the biggest incumbent fishing interests — in a form that can be leased for profit in perpetuity, or sold for an unearned windfall.

Economic consolidation and monopoly is the aim of the game. When a similar program was instituted

in Alaska's Bristol Bay red king crab fishery, the fishery shrank from 251 boats to just 89, and 1,150 crewmen lost their jobs within one year.

As a bulwark to the impacts of monopoly, smaller-scale fishermen, along with environmental and consumer representatives, repeatedly requested quota shares be set aside for the establishment of Community Fishing Associations. These may yet be allowed to form and buy quota. However, the council made it clear that all the initial allocation was to be funneled toward its envisioned fleet of 40 70-foot trawlers.

Never mind the environmental impacts, the job losses, or the lost revenue that could be directed to better fishery management if government itself rented the quota on fair terms to fishermen, rather than giving it away to enrich the owners of an industrial super-fleet.

Community Fishing Associations (CFAs) are a commons-based solution that would give seaside fishing communities guaranteed access to fish. The fish would not simply go to the largest corporate trawling fleets; CFAs with their own fishing rights could help local economies flourish and be more attentive to the protection of the fisheries that sustain their communities. CFAs offer a more eco-sensitive, long-term approach to allocating scarce supplies of fish than one that favors absentee corporate fleets of trawlers.

Schlosberg and Bowman call for congressional oversight to expose the conflicts-of-interest and corporate welfare involved in the current privatization scheme. They also call on the Obama administration to develop more equitable, community-friendly ways to manage the public's valuable fisheries.

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