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## Cover Story

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### PLUNDERING THE PACIFIC

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Editor of [Cascadia Times](#)

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### How to speak "fisheries"

The Pacific Fishery Management Council is based in Portland, but meets every few months in cookie-cutter hotels up and down the West Coast. Their meetings can last a whole week, though to the novice even one session can seem like an eternity.

They are open to the public, though few people not connected in some way to the fishing industry ever attend.

Perhaps this is because attending is rarely convenient. At a recent meeting of the North Pacific Council in Anchorage, an agenda item of interest to conservation groups was scheduled for Friday. Or Monday. Or Tuesday. So be prepared to stay the whole week.

The agenda, of course, requires much more than a third-graders' understanding, if not patience. Those who seek a chance to comment on a damaged coral ecosystem will not easily discern from the printed agenda when it might come up. If it ever does. Coral is essential to rockfish ecosystems, but rarely discussed at council meetings.

The biggest barrier, however, is language. At a council meeting, you are likely to hear something like, "The oy is less than the msy in the fmp for the dst, says the ssc."

What this means is that some fish are going to be caught. But you can be fluent in 18 languages and still not have a clue.

Public access to council meetings is a serious issue, says Mark Powell of the Ocean Conservancy. He's been attending them for years as a conservation advocate. He's found that council members will listen "semi-politely, and make snide comments and ignore you."

Citizens shouldn't let the jargon, the agendas and the pro-industry bias discourage them from attending and participating, Powell says.

If you want to influence a decision, or even file a lawsuit if you don't like a decision, you have to make comments on the record.

And it's ok to make them in plain old English.

### Glossary

**Bycatch:** Fish and other living creatures which are accidentally caught, not sold or kept for personal use, and usually thrown overboard, dead or dying.

**Essential Fish Habitat:** Waters and sea floor necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding or growth to maturity. Federal law requires fishery councils to develop plans to protect these areas.

**Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ):** An area extending from the seaward boundaries of coastal states (3 nautical miles, in most cases) to 200 miles off the coast of the United States. Within this area, the United States claims and exercises sovereign rights and exclusive fishery management authority over all fish and all Continental Shelf fishery resources.

**Fishery:**

1. One or more stocks of fish which can be treated as a unit, and are identified on the basis of geographical, scientific, technical, recreational, and economic characteristics.
2. Any fishing for such stocks.

**Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act:** The 1976 law (amended in 1996) that governs U.S. fisheries. Congress is considering a bill to revise the law.

**NOAA Fisheries:** Formerly the National Marine Fisheries Service, this federal agency has two jobs: promoting fisheries, and protecting ocean species from the fisheries it promotes.

**Maximum Sustainable Yield:** The largest long-term average catch or yield that can be caught under prevailing ecological and environmental conditions. Conservationists say the concept leads to unsustainable fishing.

**Optimum Yield:** As defined by the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the optimum yield is "the amount of fish which will provide the greatest overall benefit to the Nation," taking into account the need for food, the local economy and the health of the stocks.

**Overfishing:** The rate or level of fishing mortality that jeopardizes the capacity of a fishery to produce the maximum sustainable yield on a continuing basis.

**Overfished:** A stock of fish that has been depleted to the point where fishing can no longer be sustained. In the Pacific region, stocks that dip below 25 percent of their historical abundance are considered overfished. The North Pacific council, however, has refused to define at what level a stock is overfished. For most stocks no one knows whether they've been overfished or not. The studies have not been done.