

Save the Seabirds

Congress must act to protect the fish and coastal habitats that seabirds and coastal communities rely on.



Our coasts are in crisis

SEABIRDS NEED OUR HELP

Seabirds like pelicans and terns nest on our coasts and rely on ocean fish to survive. They face a number of threats including overfishing, habitat loss, and climate change. Globally, seabird populations have declined by a staggering 70 percent since the 1950s.

Birds tell us we must act. In recent years, rising ocean temperatures have made life difficult for nesting Atlantic Puffins in Maine, with only half the normal number of puffin chicks surviving to fledge from their nests in 2021. Warming ocean waters are driving away puffins' favorite food like herring, leaving many puffin parents to rely more on butterfish to feed their chicks—a fish that's too big for young puffin chicks to swallow.

THREATS TO OUR FISHERIES

Seabirds rely on small, schooling ocean fish known as forage fish to fuel their migrations throughout the hemisphere. Climate change is driving up ocean temperatures, and warmer waters are sending forage fish deeper and further offshore to find cold water—meaning seabirds must travel farther to find food.

Fishing pressure puts additional stress on seabirds and the forage fish they rely on. Forage fish like menhaden are harvested commercially and ground up to produce fertilizer, cosmetics, fish meal, and more. Without proper management, forage fish face a risk of being overfished.

To protect seabirds, fisheries, and coastal communities from climate change, Congress must:

- Update our federal fisheries law to ensure there are plenty of forage fish in the ocean for seabirds to eat, protect seabirds from getting hooked or entangled in fishing gear, and make our fisheries climate-ready.
- Protect and restore our vital estuaries ecosystem in coastal places that seabirds need to nest, rest, and forage for food.



Atlantic Puffin.

Photo: Ann Pacheco/Audubon Photography Awards

Overfishing of forage fish like anchovies and herring means less food for seabirds, whales, dolphins, and other marine life. Forage fish are also an important food source for larger, commercially important fish like tuna, and salmon. Healthy forage fish populations are critical for the commercial and recreational fishing industries as well as ecotourism.

THREATS TO OUR COASTAL ESTUARIES

Many seabirds rely on estuaries—where rivers meet the ocean—to raise their young, rest during migration, and forage for food. Estuaries include habitats like mangroves, wetlands, marshes, seagrass beds, and mud flats, which also serve as nurseries for juvenile fish.

Coastal communities rely on healthy estuaries to support local fishing and tourism economies. Over half the U.S. population lives in coastal areas, including along the shores of estuaries. Coastal recreation and tourism generate \$8-12 billion per year in the U.S., and a large proportion of that is located in estuaries.

As sea levels rise and more people move to the coast, seabirds have lost safe, healthy coastal areas to nest. Rebuilding and protecting coastal habitat like wetlands, oyster reefs, seagrass beds, and barrier islands is necessary to safeguard our natural infrastructure, buffering coastal communities and wildlife from sea-level rise, reducing flooding, and serving as our first line of defense against storms. Additionally, these coastal ecosystems absorb carbon pollution, helping the U.S. meet a goal of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

How Congress can help

THE SUSTAINING AMERICA'S FISHERIES FOR THE FUTURE ACT

This bill will reauthorize and amend the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the primary law that governs ocean fish management in U.S. federal waters.

Since 1976, this law has helped fishery managers recover 45 fish populations and ensured that overfishing is at an all-time low. Though we celebrate this success, this law does not yet recognize the important role that forage fish play in the ecosystem for seabirds and other predators. These small, ocean fish are vulnerable to overfishing, and this bill, which includes the Forage Fish Conservation Act, will ensure there are plenty in the ocean for seabirds and other marine life.

This bill will also factor climate change into fisheries management for the first time, better protect seabirds from getting hooked or entangled in fishing gear (an issue known as bycatch), and improve habitat through boosting protections for coastal areas designated as essential fish habitat.

THE RESILIENT COASTS AND ESTUARIES ACT

This bill will dedicate \$60 million per year for the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program through 2026. Since 2002, the Coastal and Estuarine Land Conservation Program has protected over 110,000 acres of coastal land.

This legislation would also provide \$47 million to add five new estuaries to the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, a system of 30 estuaries over 23 states which provide scientists, stakeholders, and lawmakers with crucial knowledge on how climate change and habitat loss are impacting our nation's coastlines.

This funding would provide critical support for Tribal, state, and local governments to protect vulnerable coastal communities and habitats from climate change.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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