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The US National Fish & Seafood Promotional Council (NFSPC) ran television advertising campaigns marketing a range of seafood species during the 1980s. Photo: US National Fish & Seafood Promotional Council (NFSPC)/YouTube

Is it time to revive generic seafood marketing in the US? Here's what the architect of the original campaign thinks

More than 30 years ago, Jeanne Grasso became the program manager for the original US National Fish & Seafood Promotional Council. What does she think of a new effort to revive the council?

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By [John Fiorillo](#)



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Jeanne Grasso holds a unique position in the seafood industry; she was the original program manager of the US National Fish & Seafood Promotional Council (NFSPC) when it launched in 1986.

The program, too, is unique in the annals of seafood history because it stands as the only time the US industry has had a national generic seafood marketing program.

Unearthing the promotional campaign and its success, or lack thereof, is critical right now because an effort is underway to potentially resurrect the program.

For the past two years, the Seafood Promotion Task Group* under NOAA's Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee (MAFAC) [has been looking into ways to increase US seafood consumption](#). Its exploration has centered on the revival of a national generic marketing program, and the group will deliver draft recommendations on the idea later this month to MAFAC, which plans to vote on the suggestions before sending them to the Secretary of Commerce and NOAA.

Grasso, now more than three decades removed from the original project, is still a fervent supporter.

"I think it's a great initiative. I think it's an important initiative, both for the industry and the health of people," she said.

"There were some challenges back in the old days, but I think the initiative itself and getting people to eat more seafood and fish is fantastic."

Did the original council succeed?

The Fish and Seafood Promotion Act (FSPA) was approved by Congress in 1986 during a time of rising US seafood consumption. Per capita consumption in 1986 was 15.5 pounds, the highest level since 1910 and 24 percent higher than four years before.

The FSPA provided the federal government the ability to approve and oversee individual industry seafood marketing councils for specific types of seafood commodities such as shrimp or salmon, making it similar to the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service's Commodity Act, which led to the creation of commodity marketing boards for milk, pork, avocados and peanuts.

"It was hoped that after the five-year period the industry would self-fund the marketing efforts of the council or species-specific councils. That, of course, did not happen."

But the FSPA provided one additional weapon – the ability to create an overarching national seafood marketing council to provide a unified seafood industry-wide marketing approach and message.

Approximately \$11 million (€9.7 million), or \$22.7 million (€20 million) in today's dollars -- was made available by Congress to the national council through Saltonstall-Kennedy Act funding for a period of five years.

It was hoped that after the five-year period the industry would self-fund the marketing efforts of the council or species-specific councils. That, of course, did not happen.

1989 - Eat Fish Twice A Week Ad



The marketing effort splashed across TV and print formats, led by the mustachioed cartoon "America's Official Spokesfish" that preached a simple message: Eat fish and seafood twice a week.

If that message sounds familiar, it's because it is still the rallying cry used by individual seafood companies and promotional groups to market seafood in the United States as well as in the UK. It is one of the only enduring remnants of the 1986 program, and its message is arguably as reasonable and persuasive today as it was when it was born 30 years ago.

Despite the marketing message, however, the results of the council's efforts measured strictly by government per capita seafood consumption figures seem less than stellar.

The record consumption seen in 1986 was eclipsed in 1987, when the average American ate 16.2 pounds of seafood. It's worth noting that the council in 1987 had not yet begun its marketing efforts. The Spokesfish and other marketing efforts really took hold during the last three years of the council's existence, 1989 – 1991, a period of shrinking consumption – from 15.6 pounds in '89 to 14.9 pounds in '91.

The original generic seafood marketing program launched in 1986 delivered mixed results.

While the program might not have sent consumption soaring, it did create the 'Eat fish twice a week' tag line that has endured to this day.

Source: NOAA Fisheries



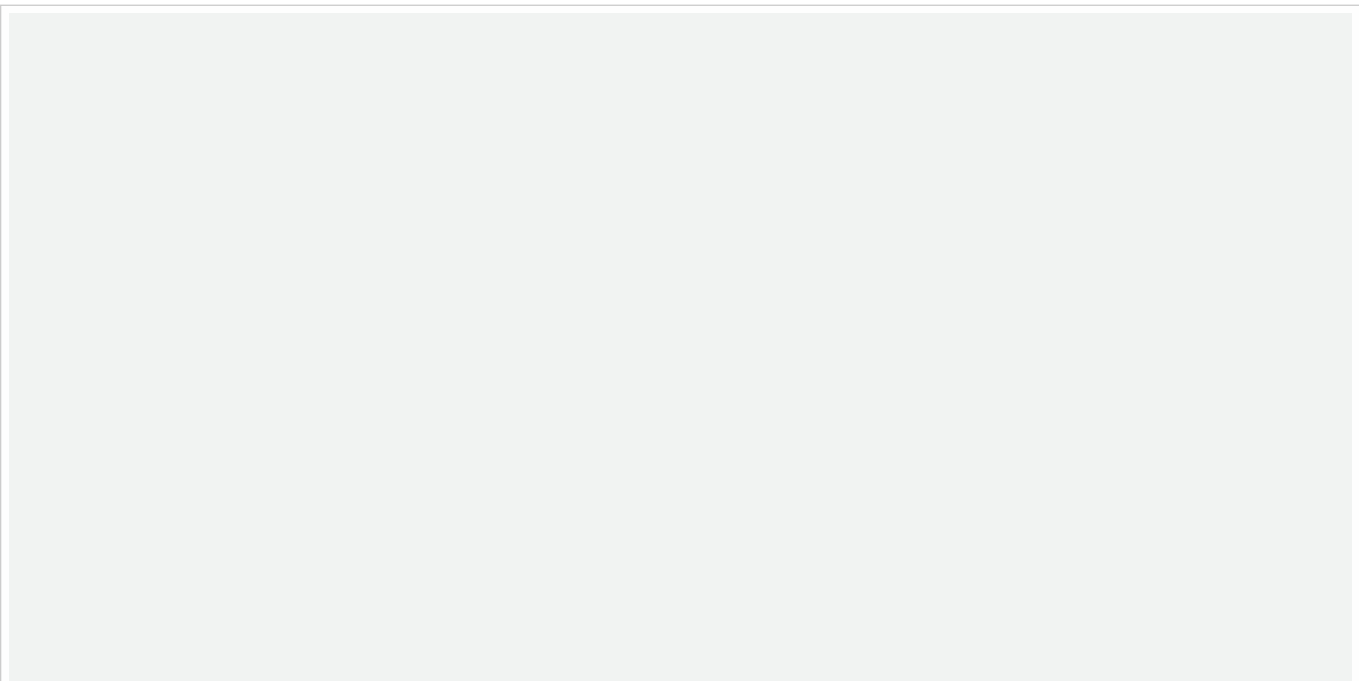
 A Flourish chart

For those who have long opposed generic seafood marketing efforts, this falloff in consumption indicated the program didn't deliver the desired results, but Grasso sees some nuance.

"I don't know that it's very easy to quantify when you have a relatively small budget to run a program nationally," said Grasso.

"Would we like to think that we increased awareness? Absolutely. Does awareness lead to consumption? I think it is safe to say that ultimately, yes it will lead to an increase in consumption if there's a sustained program over a period of years, but can you say this \$11 million resulted in a half-pound increase in consumption in the three years it ran? I'm not sure you can do that."

From a per capita consumption perspective, not a lot has changed from 30 years ago. [Consumption in 2018, the most recent year of government figures, was 16.1 pounds per person.](#) The edible fish supply, meaning the total of US-produced and imported seafood consumed in the US market, was 12.8 billion pounds in 2018, about 20 percent more than the 10.5 billion pounds of supply in 1987, when there were more than 70 million fewer people in the United States.



Jeanne Grasso holds a unique position in the seafood industry; she was the original program manager of the US National Fish & Seafood Promotional Council (NFSPC) when it launched in 1986. Photo: BlankRome

Can it work this time?

Clearly the MAFAC task force has its work cut out for it. Generic marketing by its name conflicts with a hallmark of seafood – its diversity of species. Although there are easy ways to give each species its due in a generic marketing campaign, Grasso said it will be a challenge, just as it was 30 years ago.

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“How you do that is going to be a challenge because there are so many types of fish and seafood. And while we can say we should do it generically, there is not a generic fish,” said Grasso.

Still, the original promotional council ran commercials (*see above*) that did a good job of shining a light on different species.

[Click here to see a copy of The Spokesfish Monthly newsletter from 1991.](#)

“You’ll see it mentions numerous different varieties,” Grasso noted. “If you look at the point-of-purchase materials, we had the cookbooks, we would give recipes for a wide variety of fish and seafood.”

A new national promotional council, were it created, would have one weapon its predecessor did not – the Internet, or more precisely, social media.

Even without a national campaign, groups such as the Seafood Nutrition Partnership, Dish on Fish, Seafish and others have staked out space in social media and have attracted a following of consumers hungry for seafood recipes, purchasing tips and information on the health benefits of seafood.

MAFAC FINDINGS AND PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Support the** US seafood community to collectively conduct education, research, and marketing to increase US seafood consumption, improve the health of the American people, and provide a return on investment to the US seafood industry;
- **Focus on** US seafood as a whole, and not at the species-specific level, and include both wild-capture fisheries and aquaculture;
- **Should provide** the following resources and services to the industry:
 - Unified voice and messaging
 - Market research
 - Marketing, promotion, and education
 - US seafood brand
- **Operated by** an industry council comprised of diverse expertise in line with the mission;
- **Funded by** Congress;
- **Administrative oversight** by NOAA Fisheries;

The MAFAC task group will also need to navigate the tricky question of how much a national program might cost and how will it get the industry to pay for it. The \$11 million spent in the first go around of the national program won’t even come close to what it will cost today.

The regional Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI), for example, will spend over \$17 million (€14.9 million) next year just by itself.

Realistically, the cost for a national program would likely need to be in the range of some other commodity marketing boards assessment on producers. The dairy council, for example, took in over \$330 million (€290.6 million) in assessments in 2018 to spend on marketing, but it is at the high end. Avocado producers were assessed \$48 million (€42 million) in 2018, and the results of that group’s national marketing efforts are held up as a model of success.

“I think it makes an industry-funded national council much more challenging because are the higher-end species going to pay more of an assessment?” said Grasso, who is now a partner at the maritime law firm Balnk Rome.

“Are the lower-end species going to be exempted out? And how are you going to work that collection effort?”

The program will also have to figure out a way to co-exist with and not compete with ASMI and other regional and species-specific marketing councils already operating. Early indications are, however, that a new national program could be structured to amplify and support the work being done by regional and species-specific marketing boards.

As daunting as the funding challenge is, Grasso said she still sees a path through.

“I can almost see a national council with species-specific sub councils, and you would hope the producers would see the benefit of both, increasing consumption across the board will help me,” she said.

Whether the latest effort by MAFAC will go anywhere remains to be seen, but Grasso holds out hope that the promotional effort she helped nurture from infancy and the simple message it created could somehow be brought back to life and tweaked to succeed in this age of social media.

“I thought the message we had, eat seafood twice a week, was a simple message. I’ve got friends now who are still resonating with that message. I would like to see that same program tweaked and moved forward. I think it would benefit the industry as a whole.”

[This is not the same task force being created under President Donald Trump’s May 7, 2020 executive order to boost US seafood independence. \(Copyright\)](#)*

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