



Arctic fishing boat off Greenland (Photo: Flickr, by ScottMT)

Just as it did with [krill in the Pacific](#), NMFS has gotten ahead of the curve in regulating potential new commercial fisheries in the U.S. arctic. Global warming, by reducing the extent of sea ice, promises to open new areas to fishing vessels. At the same time, changing ocean temperatures and currents are expected to affect the distribution and abundance of fish stocks in ways that are not easily predictable. Its clear that there will be pressures on the newly available resources, but its not clear just what those resources will be, or how resilient they will be to fishing pressure. So NMFS, on the recommendation of the North Pacific Fishery Management Council, [has prospectively prohibited](#) “commercial harvests of all fish resources of the Arctic Management Area until sufficient information is available to support the sustainable management of a commercial fishery.” Historically, regulators have typically been several steps behind fishers, stepping in only when a stock had been severely over-exploited, or conflicts had developed between those competing for the catch. At that point, established economic interests, understandably, push hard against strong constraints. It should be much easier to prevent overfishing in the first place than to reverse it once it occurs. By preventing an Arctic “fish rush,” this rule is a step toward such a truly precautionary fisheries management. As information accumulates, the Council and NMFS can decide whether fishing would be sustainable, and under what conditions. The L.A. Times’ [Greenspace blog suggests](#) that this action by the U.S. may be the first step toward an international moratorium on new arctic fisheries.