

Master of the Seas?

Herbert Hoover and the Western Fisheries

Herbert Hoover has been a slippery historical figure. He has been caricatured as the savior of Belgium or the man who sicced Douglas MacArthur on the Bonus Marchers, and mythic images of him run the gamut from Great Humanitarian to bloodless misanthrope. Hoover remains a challenge to historians, however, because most Americans prefer these distortions. Politically speaking, cardboard Hoovers are more useful for lionizing or damning policies without offering much useful explanation for the actual course of events. Meanwhile, scholars divine Hoover primarily through his philosophies and context — that is, they tend to know Hoover more by what he said than by what he did and more as an exemplar of Republican ideals and policies during the 1920s than as an individual trying to wield power. It is as though words mattered more than deeds and party more than politician. This is a poor way to understand Hoover and his times. Rather than seeing him as a grand architect or a bit player, we should view him as one of many actors, all of whom were significantly constrained by institutional, social, and environmental forces. One way to recapture the complexity and contradictions of Hoover's circumstances is to examine his management of the fisheries in the western United States during his tenure as commerce secretary during the 1920s.¹

Although Hoover has been popularly portrayed as a conservation leader and champion of science, his legacy is more complex. He did try to regulate business in new ways, but his fisheries policies more often echoed those of earlier conservationists. Even so, few historians consider Hoover a Progressive conservationist.² In the historiography, *progressive* vies with *laissez-faire fundamentalist*, *associationalist*, and *proto-New Dealer*.³ His-



*Herbert Hoover, shown here on Oregon's McKenzie River in July 1953, was an avid, life-long angler. He served as honorary president of the Izaak Walton League during the 1920s and wrote *A Remedy for Disappearing Game Fishers*, published in 1930, to advocate for game fish conservation. His management of the United States Bureau of Fisheries while he was secretary of commerce gave him oversight of industrial fisheries, the complexity and contentiousness of which he never fully grasped.*

torians' lack of consensus in this regard seems less a function of indecision or partisanship than of Hoover's protean actions. The philosophies of Hoover, Congress, and the presidential administrations during the 1920s did encourage policies that deemphasized governmental regulation of industries, but environmental contingencies and industry conflicts often forced less than orthodox responses.⁴ There is no simple way to explain how Hoover actually governed based on a deductive reading of his ideals or a Republican party platform. Similarly, although Hoover's reputation as a champion of science meshes well with his image as the Great Engineer, a study of his oversight of the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries (USBF) exposes critical nuances in his conception of the proper use of science. Not all science was equal in his eyes, and the ensuing discrepancies in bureau practices, largely shaped by Hoover's engineering bias for practical and applied approaches, made for an uneven and expensive legacy of government fishery science.⁵

The effect of Hoover's policies on the western fisheries was problematic. Paralleling his efforts to fix industries that he characterized as "sick," such as bituminous coal and lumber, Hoover tried to protect fish, mold

scientific studies, and reorganize industry through an associationalist approach that sought what historian David Kennedy calls “a spontaneously mutualistic society inhabited by virtuous, public-spirited citizens.”⁶ Hoover fervently wanted to reduce the size of government, and he believed that many of its duties could be delegated to responsible members of private industry. In the fisheries, however, his efforts did not so much create new solutions as elaborate and exacerbate existing trends. Most of the policies, legislation, and treaties that he supported followed ruts that were well worn by the time he arrived in Washington, D.C.; and because he changed little, little changed in the western fisheries. Hoover did help rationalize some production and distribution sectors, but he also demoralized the USBF’s Division of Scientific Inquiry and solidified the colonial status of Alaskans. Four examples illustrate Hoover’s influence on the western fisheries: the reorganization of the industry and the USBF in 1921 and 1922, the reorientation of federal fishery science, the management of Alaska’s salmon fisheries, and the negotiation of fishery treaties that had particular relevance to Puget Sound and the Columbia River.⁷

Hoover is largely remembered for the failures of his presidency, but it is worth recalling his rise to wealth and power. Orphaned young but educated well at the Friends Pacific Academy in Newberg, Oregon, and at Stanford University, he translated his engineering skills into a fortune before turning to public service in the mid-1910s. During World War I, he used his organizational talents to feed war refugees in Europe and to rationalize wartime production at home. After the war, he assisted Woodrow Wilson’s effort to end all wars, and he was one of the few Americans to escape the Versailles Treaty negotiations with his reputation intact. Hoover’s record of success and goodwill generated admiration and political backing, and in 1920 he rode a brief wave of support as a presidential candidate. Warren Harding defeated Hoover’s hesitant bid but then offered his rival the position of commerce secretary. Commerce was not a prestigious post. It had withered for nearly two decades in the shadows of more vibrant and relevant departments, but this changed quickly after Harding granted the energetic Hoover considerable latitude to shape and implement policy. Although scholars debate Hoover’s motives for expanding the scope of the Commerce Department, they agree that he skillfully turned an obscure post into a hub of activity and influence.⁸

When Hoover turned his attention to fisheries, he did so with some personal interest. He was a passionate angler and would soon become an

honorary president of the newly formed Izaak Walton League. As commerce secretary, however, he oversaw very different forms of fishing through his administration of the USBF. The bureau had a precarious relationship with the industrial fisheries because it was responsible both for regulating the industry and for promoting commercial fishing. At best, the USBF's ability to balance its contradictory duties had been wanting, and it had never succeeded at relieving tensions within the fractious and troubled industry. American fishers and fish processors were divided into factions and plagued by unpredictable fortunes. Problems such as rivalries between ethnic groups and between those who used different types of gear were age-old, but intense capitalization and habitat damage had made matters worse in recent decades. By the time Hoover assumed office, several major western fisheries, including Pacific salmon and Pacific halibut, appeared to be hurtling toward collapse. Hoover concluded that the fisheries were another sick industry in desperate need of rationalization, and his first response was to rely on stated Republican policies.⁹

One of Hoover's primary tasks as commerce secretary was to redefine relations between government and business. Even before his appointment, he had told western canners that he wanted to work closely with industry leaders to develop the Pacific fisheries. Hoover wanted to reduce destructive competition; but rather than impose rules from above as Progressive reformers had done during the previous two decades, he organized a series of producer conferences to encourage the development of common goals and voluntary cooperation. One of his first conferences brought together fishers, canners, and industrialists from the Atlantic and Gulf states to discuss pollution problems on Chesapeake Bay. Hoover wanted to address growing problems with the destruction of fishing grounds and cut-throat competition. He planned to invite western fishery interests to the meeting, but he finally gave up the idea because the resulting crowd would have been unwieldy. As it was, the meeting was long on words and short on answers.¹⁰

Hoover sought to reduce waste through cooperative programs. By persuading industries surrounding Chesapeake Bay to reduce pollution voluntarily, for example, he hoped to increase productivity; by convincing fishers and canners to refrain from destructive competition, he hoped to ensure the survival of all. In the long run, this associational relationship between industry and the state would, he hoped, lead to effective self-regulation, thus reducing the need for the kinds of intrusive governmental structures that had emerged during the Progressive era. Hoover worked vigorously to cultivate new voluntary associations, but he also promoted

such existing organizations as the Association for the Pacific Fisheries (APA), a Seattle-based group that included most major packers in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska.¹¹

Hoover's promotion of the APA highlighted an important qualification to his efforts. By the time he arrived in Washington, D.C., eastern fishers and industrialists had been vacillating between cooperative and adversarial solutions to fisheries issues for more than a century, and western canners had been trying to achieve horizontal integration since the 1880s. In neither case did the industrial fishery enjoy much success, and there was much reason to doubt Hoover's ability to change this cycle of failure, given that his policies were hardly innovative. What made his tenure distinctive at such moments was not a new approach but, rather, his inclination to defer almost reflexively to industry, especially to the wishes of large canners and packers.¹²

Hoover also tried to rationalize industrial production. In the early 1920s, he created the Division of Simplified Practice (DSP) to encourage or coerce sick industries into using more efficient procedures. DSP staff fostered scientific efficiency in the workplace and standardization across markets. Their sworn enemy was redundancy, and its elimination would make production more efficient and profitable and products less expensive. Eliminating redundancy would also allow consumers to compare choices more easily. The fisheries were one of DSP's targets. DSP staff consulted with canners and packers to standardize preservation techniques and to reduce a dizzying array of can sizes. With DSP's encouragement, the industry finally settled on two can sizes by the mid-1920s, thus offering consumers safer products and comparable options.¹³

Secretary Hoover quickly established a congenial relationship with industry representatives. He preached efficiency like an evangelical, and the industrial chorus shouted with zeal. Fishers, canners, and pundits sent Hoover a steady stream of gifts, encouragement, and requests. Pacific canners inundated his office with fresh salmon and, of course, free advice on the industry and the USBF. The manager of the *Fishing Gazette* offered a list of participants for the 1921 fishery conference that featured the names of presidents of all the major canning and packing corporations, while the publisher of *Pacific Fisherman* regularly contributed advice about managing the western fisheries. Other correspondents requested favors or complained of unethical competitors. Hoover cajoled industry figures into following his suggestions, and they responded in kind. The result was less an imposition of policy than a contested conversation among federal agents



The fishing industry was chronically divided by cultural and industrial issues. Fishers such as the Norwegians pictured here in Astoria, probably in the 1920s, were often pitted against other communities of Finns, Magyars, Russians, Asians, and Native Americans. At other times, gillnetters vied against fishweel and trap owners, seiners, trollers, and anglers.

and fishing industry representatives in which no one completely dominated discussions or outcomes.¹⁴

Hoover's response to labor issues in the canning industry is an example of the fluid nature of policy formation in the Commerce Department during his tenure. He maintained an open door for canners, but fishers and cannery workers received a cooler response. Hoover and his assistants replied to canners' letters in friendly if noncommittal tones, but when the secretary of the Columbia River Fishermen's Protective Union requested attention to gillnetters' complaints, an assistant replied curtly that the union would be treated like any other interest. In fact, some players were more equal than others, yet no single individual dictated policy. In 1923, for example, Alaskans complained that canners based in San Francisco,

Portland, and Seattle practiced discriminatory hiring, preferring Asian laborers from the states over local residents. Hoover responded by pleading with the National Cannery Association to defuse the issue by employing more locals at equal rates, and the major cannery in the Pacific fisheries reluctantly complied after more prodding. Labor was served, but only because Hoover's cordial relationship with cannery allowed him to persuade them that it was in their political and economic interests to alter hiring practices.¹⁵

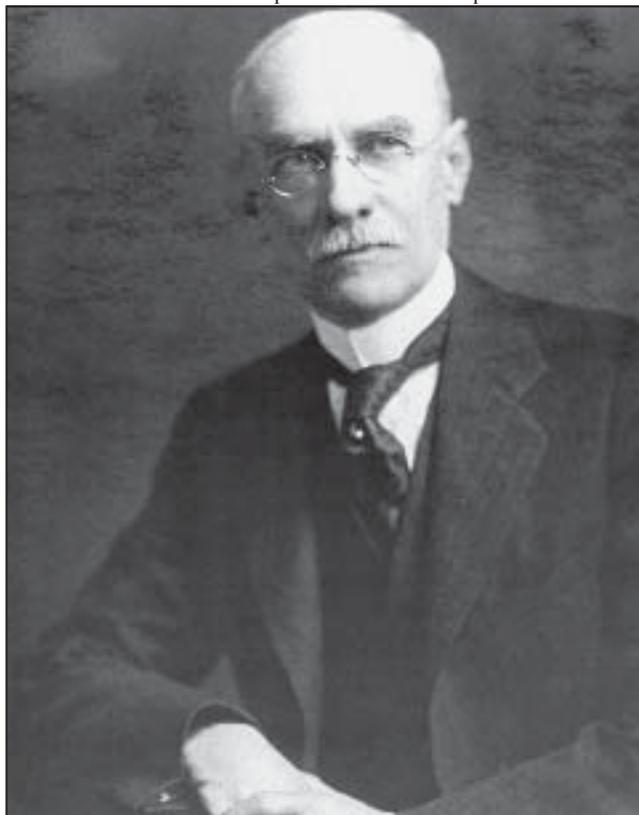
The principles Hoover preached for reorganizing the fishery industry extended to his own operations. Upon entering office, he rapidly reduced the Commerce Department's staff from 18,249 to 13,005. He also cut its budget by \$4 million. Press releases framed the changes in market terms: "Inadequate salaries paid Government employees had acted as a bar to greater efficiency in the department." In modern parlance, he downsized. Justifying cuts at the USBF, Hoover explained that "the Bureau is in essence a business concern rather than one for the development of pure science." The reorganization produced a trimmer, less costly bureaucracy but one that was also far less capable of accomplishing its duties.¹⁶

The rationale behind the reorganization was significant because Hoover also wanted to replace USBF Commissioner Hugh M. Smith. The commissioner held a singular post with direct authority over the entire bureau and answered directly to the secretary of commerce. It was an immensely influential position. By 1921, Smith had built a long, highly respected career with the USBF. He had been hired in 1885 as a laborer, and his medical background had helped him rise to director of the Division of Scientific Inquiry and then to commissioner in 1913. For the next nine years, he steered the USBF on a steady though unspectacular course. Perhaps his most important achievement, an effort begun while he was director of the Division of Scientific Inquiry but expanded dramatically while he was commissioner, was building an academically oriented science program. Smith managed several major research projects, including a series of studies on fish histology, a fish-tagging program to map the life history of Pacific salmon, and a statistical analysis of hatchery efficacy. Although important for its contributions to basic science on fish and technology, the research was not popular with the fishery industry. Each study challenged common beliefs about fish behavior and the power of technology to solve fishery problems. When Hoover became commerce secretary, he insisted that government-funded scientific research demonstrate economic

utility to justify the public expense. Hoover's bias toward applied and practical approaches to science would mean the end of Smith's science program, significant changes in the research being conducted by several important scientists, and the termination of Smith's career.¹⁷

The change of presidential administrations in 1921 opened the door to Smith's critics. Industry leaders fired fusillades at the USBF, especially at Smith's science program. Cannerymen complained that the bureau spent too much on "abstract scientific research" and too little on hatcheries. One eastern congressman accused Smith of diverting money from hatcheries so that "a lot of scientific pamphlets and works might be compiled and distributed." In fact, only 3 percent of the USBF budget went to the Division of Scientific Inquiry in 1920, but Hoover concluded that Smith "had outlived his usefulness." Rather than directly confront him, however, Hoover let Smith wither under external pressure. By the end of 1921, Smith had had enough. His resignation letter to President Harding noted tersely that his separation came after "thirty-six years of continuous service beginning at the lowest grade." There was little love lost between the two men, and it took five months for the president to reply with an equally stilted acceptance of Smith's resignation.¹⁸

The way in which Smith was replaced underscores a tendency among Americans to oversimplify politics. Some contemporaries accused Hoover of dismissing Smith for the sake of patronage and, in the process, sully the USBF. Hoover denied the charges, but his correspondence at the time



Hugh M. Smith, shown here in about 1935, resigned as commissioner of the USBF because of Hoover's insistence that all scientific inquiry in the bureau be driven by its practical applications.



The Clackamas River Station was the first federal fish hatchery in the Pacific Northwest. Originally located a mile below Carver, Oregon, the hatchery was moved downstream, just south of Clackamas, in the 1890s. The Clackamas site was the first stop in Henry O'Malley's long career in the Bureau of Fisheries, which he led as commissioner beginning in 1922.

suggests a more complicated reality. During the year-long assault on Smith, many nominations of “good Republicans” to replace the commissioner had crossed Hoover’s desk. He received the suggestions noncommittally, and party concerns were never an overt criteria in his appointment strategy. More salient were two other factors that, in a broader sense, *were* political. One was Hoover’s desire to appease Pacific canners by appointing a “Western man” with working knowledge of Alaska; the other was his emphasis on the business aspects of the bureau. Hoover argued that the position of commissioner required “a man of really unusual business ability,” one with “large executive and financial ability and experience.” He questioned one candidate with impeccable scientific credentials about his “business abilities and [how] he would be in developing the commercial side of our fisheries.” While he may not have indulged in party patronage, Hoover had politicized the appointment process by shifting the job’s focus from science to business.¹⁹

Henry O'Malley fit Hoover's criteria perfectly. Much like Smith, O'Malley was a career bureau man. Starting as a menial worker at Oregon's old Clackamas Hatchery, O'Malley rose to hatchery superintendent and then director of the USBF's Pacific Division. Along the way, he developed a strong rapport with industry representatives, eventually locating the division offices in Seattle's Smith Building, home to the headquarters of most of the major fish companies in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. When Hoover announced the appointment, he cited O'Malley's "active [work with] local commercial clubs" and turned the new commissioner's experience with salmon hatcheries into a tortured claim that he had "long been a leader in the application of scientific research to the fisheries." O'Malley had it all. As an internal hire, he helped deflect patronage charges; as a westerner, he satisfied industry demands; and as a hatchery man, he could claim the mantle of science. Unlike Hugh Smith, Henry O'Malley favored applied science and calmed industry anxieties about USBF policies.²⁰

O'Malley's appointment reinvigorated the utilitarian trend in fishery management. Hoover told a Seattle business group: "We have only to preserve and increase the supplies of our fish by moderate restraint and scientific propagation." This statement mirrored Hoover's ideas on government and science, but little of what he said was new. As early as 1875, the first U.S. commissioner of fish and fisheries, Spencer Fullerton Baird, had told Oregonians that "instead of the passage of protective laws which cannot be enforced except at very great expense and with much ill feeling, measures [should] be taken . . . for the immediate erection of a hatching establishment on the Columbia river." Fifty years of declining runs and two research projects on Pacific salmon during Hugh Smith's tenure had cast considerable doubt on such promises. Hoover nevertheless insisted that those who opposed his policies were "malign forces" practicing "demagogic politics . . . coincident . . . with selfish interest." At such moments, Hoover seemed to be willing science and public opinion into agreement with his ideals, and he had little patience for anyone or anything that contradicted him.²¹

Hoover's ability to define federal fishery policy was one thing, but implementing it was quite another; and the western fisheries were persistently resistant to unilateral policies. Hoover's ability to influence events in California, Oregon, and Washington was limited both by constitutional constraints on federal rule in state waters, a power that states jealously guarded, and by environmental contingencies and industry rivalries. Federal management

in the West was thus an exercise in contestation and compromise, and the USBF was restricted to conducting research and operating a few hatcheries, much as it had for fifty years.²²

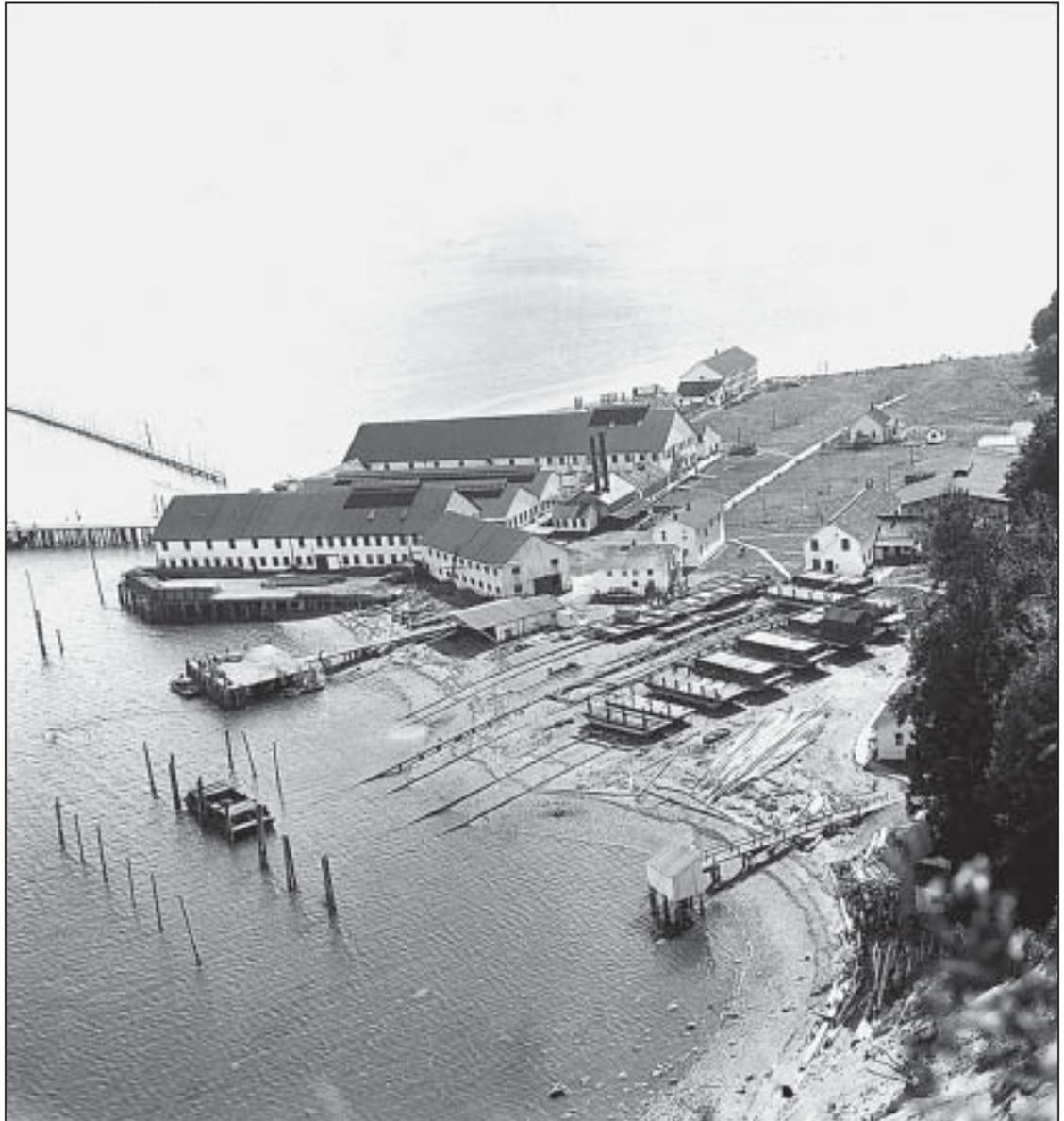
Even the Alaskan industry, where the USBF had its greatest influence, could test Hoover's faith in associationalism. Alaska was still a federal territory in the 1920s, and the USBF not only oversaw research and propagation but also acted as the primary fisheries manager. These were unwieldy duties. On the one hand, the bureau had to conduct research and conserve fish; on the other, it had to promote consumption. To make matters worse, the USBF pursued these contradictory agendas under deteriorating fishery conditions. By the early 1920s, salmon harvests had peaked and then plummeted because of overharvesting, degraded habitats, and glutted markets. A change in ocean climate was likely the most important factor in the collapse of salmon runs in 1918, but no one at the time understood that. Instead, managers fixated on fishers. In similar situations of over-competition, Hoover had arranged industry conferences to develop agreements for self-regulation, but the Alaskan fisheries stymied such tactics. Strong packer associations already existed, yet over-capitalization was chronic. Much to his dismay, Hoover discovered that the opposite of irrational individualism could be irrational associationalism.²³

Hoover's responses to Alaskan problems revealed the fluidity of conservation politics in the early 1920s. He began typically, by calling an industry conference that led to congressional hearings on how to save Alaska's salmon. When the hearings ended in contentious stalemate, Hoover reluctantly resorted to draconian measures and asked the president to designate fishery reservations over 40 percent of Alaska's coast. The reservations imposed a moratorium on new operations, and Hoover threatened additional measures if the industry did not cooperate. The reservations were immensely unpopular in Alaska, creating de facto monopolies for companies already on the ground. Hoover was willing to accept the distasteful situation in the short run because his long-term goal was passage of the White Bill, a conservation measure named after Wallace White, a Republican from Maine who chaired the House Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries. In 1923, Hoover sent a USBF employee to Alaska to lobby for the White Bill; and that summer Hoover, Harding, and several congressmen ventured to Alaska for local hearings. The trip was a political tour de force. Although Alaskans were highly critical of the bill, Hoover and two Republicans from Washington state — Lindley Hadley in the House and Wesley Jones in the Senate — crafted hearings that helped push it through Congress in early 1924. Upon its passage,

President Calvin Coolidge rescinded the fishery reservations at Hoover's request.²⁴

The creation of fishery reservations and the passage of the White Act were major milestones in conservation history. For the first time, Congress had intruded into the fine details of regulating fishing and mandating spawning goals. The Commerce Department gained power to set seasons, restrict gear, and delimit fishing. Through Hoover's efforts, the White Act wedded science to the state in true Progressive fashion. Unfortunately, it also failed. By concentrating power in Washington, D.C., the act enhanced the industry's substantial influence on fishery management while further disenfranchising territorial residents. Hoover's good intentions backfired when Alaskans disregarded laws that they had no part in creating and canners pushed Congress to raise harvest limits. The measures of the White Act produced chimeric conservation even as the legislation reinforced Alaska's colonial status.²⁵ This was not what Hoover had intended. He protested repeatedly that his primary concern was "to preserve the future livelihood of the fishermen and this great food supply to the American people," yet his overweening faith in rational economic behavior led him to ignore critics and to favor policies that benefited corporations over smallholders. Hoover's telescoped view of conservation, which ignored all social issues, produced conditions exactly opposite of what he desired.²⁶

Although conditions in Alaska foundered, Hoover was more successful on the international front. As commerce secretary, he vigorously supported U.S. commercial interests overseas, especially in the rubber and coffee industries, but he also defended fisheries interests from foreign competition. Soon after he took the cabinet position, Alaskan canners requested his help in stemming the flow of fish caught in American waters to Canadian canners in Prince Rupert, British Columbia. Blocked from the interior by mountains and an international boundary, Alaskans had long depended on ocean shipping to transport goods to market. By the 1920s, however, canneries in southeastern Alaska could no longer compete with those in nearby Canada. Prince Rupert was the railhead for the Canadian National Railways, a publicly subsidized system with better transportation rates than the Pacific steamship lines. British Columbians could thus outbid Alaskans for salmon and then undersell them in eastern markets. In response, American canners asked Hoover to support higher tariffs on imported fish. He readily complied by endorsing legislation to that effect.²⁷



Point Roberts, a tiny spit of land that juts southward from British Columbia into Washington, was a sore spot in fishing-rights battles between Canada and the United States. Canneries such as the one shown here in about 1918 had been diverting more than half of the Fraser River sockeye runs before they reached Canadian fishers, and negotiators had been trying to reach an accord for decades by the time Herbert Hoover became involved in negotiations during the 1920s. Like previous administrators, Hoover wanted to reach an agreement, but his consistent support of industry and state interests in this matter perpetuated the stalemate throughout his years as commerce secretary and then president. Not until 1937 did the two nations finally sign a treaty.

An economic nationalist in this case, Hoover was an internationalist in others. He contributed to negotiations on two fishery treaties between the United States and Canada, both of which attempted to settle disputes that preceded his tenure as commerce secretary. The first involved the Canadian and American fishers who competed for Pacific halibut on the high seas, an area ostensibly beyond either nation's control. Negotiations were amicable in this instance, because Pacific halibut stocks had declined rapidly after 1910 and all sides conceded the need to restrict fishing and to protect brood stocks. The Senate had rejected a 1918 treaty due to tariff and interstate jealousies, but a less complex, more corporate-friendly treaty sailed through in 1924. The second dispute involved a contentious, transnational fishery focused on Fraser River sockeye runs. During each decade since 1890, tentative agreements had collapsed due to opposition from fishers, Washington state legislators, and various congressional delegations. Negotiations stalled repeatedly as well during Hoover's tenure as secretary and then president, and not until 1937 did the Senate ratify an agreement. Even then, Congress delayed enforcement until the mid-1940s by insisting that extensive scientific research be undertaken before the governing authority could impose restrictions.²⁸

Hoover's role in the negotiations flowed from his associationalist impulses, and he encouraged both industry cooperation and useful science. For the halibut treaty, he relayed to the treaty commissioners industry concerns about a need for regulation. For the sockeye negotiations, he forwarded pleas from fishery observers and then followed up on their requests. In 1923, he ordered the USBF to survey the opinions of those who were part of the fishing industry in Puget Sound and found opposition to a treaty but support for further research. Hoover and O'Malley followed popular sentiment by launching two research programs. The first studied halibut and was directed by the International Fisheries Commission, which had been created by the 1924 Halibut Convention. The following year, the USBF, the Biological Board of Canada, and provincial and state fish commissions in British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and California formed the International Pacific Salmon Investigation Federation (IPSIF) to address regional fishery problems. While the IPSIF had no regulatory powers, it did conduct research in British Columbia and Alaska that led to important insights about the relative efficacy of natural and hatchery reproduction.²⁹

Treaty-making lured Hoover into areas more appropriately the province of the State Department, yet his presence was less a usurpation of

power than a logical extension of his duty to boost American commerce. Unfortunately for both Hoover and the western fisheries, his activities sometimes created more problems than they solved. Supporting American business universally was self-defeating, and environmental diplomacy forced an about-face on USBF research. Hoover's many causes within Commerce, although perhaps logical when pursued in isolation, eventually led to contradictory agendas. Dams were a case in point. On one hand, Hoover fought vigorous, often unpopular and nasty battles against overfishing; on the other, he supported efforts to build major dams on western streams, including Grand Coulee Dam, which closed off more than one thousand miles of spawning grounds. He reconciled these inimical policies by promoting research on technologies that would mitigate deleterious effects. Fish ladders, irrigation screens, and hatcheries became the order of the day. Dams went in, ladders and screens went up, and hatcheries issued salmon, but runs still declined. In the end, Hoover's Commerce Department operated at cross-purposes. Contrary to his hopes, deregulated progress could not be sustained across all fronts, and fish and fishers usually suffered.³⁰

International activities also exposed flaws in Hoover's attitude toward science. The establishment of the International Fisheries Commission and the IPSIF seemed decisive steps toward a scientific foundation for fishery management, yet both demonstrated the impoverishment of government science in the 1920s. Hoover valued science, but his insistence that research produce economically useful results actually restricted the course of research during his Commerce Department years. Studies that Hoover categorized as useless science included much of the research performed under Hugh Smith's direction. Charles Greene's studies on salmon physiology — which were crucial to understanding basic questions about fish biology but did not have obvious managerial application — and Willis Rich's statistical analysis of fish culture — which cast doubt on hatchery boosters' claims of success — were quickly and quietly ended. Under Henry O'Malley's direction, Greene, Rich, and other leading researchers were instructed instead to pursue projects with clear and immediate utilitarian value: counting fish, mapping migrations, and refining fish ladders and irrigation screens. Although such studies helped fishery managers better understand where salmon migrated and how many survived, the managers remained unable to explain why, nor were their records on harvests and participation systematic enough to resolve fundamental questions about the intensity of fishing or the health of harvested stocks during a period of rapid capitalization and declining fortunes.³¹

Courtesy of the author



The area along the U.S.-Canadian border that was the site of fishing rights battles.

Federal scientists' ignorance of such matters eventually forced Hoover to rethink institutional priorities. During the mid-1920s, the USBF was regularly embarrassed at international forums when its experts were exposed as poorly prepared compared to researchers from other nations. International efforts broke down repeatedly due to American scientific ignorance even on basic issues about contested resources. Agreements on halibut, salmon, and mackerel harvests all stumbled during this period because of poor documentation of harvests by USBF researchers. By 1927, Hoover had to concede that the USBF research program needed a major overhaul. He agreed to increase the Division of Scientific Inquiry's budget, and he instructed the agency to recruit new, academically trained scientists by offering salaries commensurate with those at American universities. Dismissed as a frivolous expenditure in 1921, basic scientific research once again became a priority. Only if we overlook his first six years in office, however, can we judge Secretary Hoover an unambiguous supporter of science.³²

Herbert Hoover had a lasting influence on the western fisheries, but there is no easy or concise way to characterize his actions. As he did elsewhere in the Commerce Department, Hoover devoted great energy to the USBF, stewarding industry relations with policies that mirrored his and his party's pragmatic, utilitarian ideals. Hoover's distrust of state intervention fostered cooperative ties between the USBF and industry, yet this approach often merely extended the status quo. Conversely, his desire for conservation produced innovative, centralized responses to problems in Alaska, but to see him as a "forgotten Progressive," as Joan Hoff Wilson claims, makes as much sense as to pigeonhole him as an associationalist, as Ellis Hawley argues.³³ In the fisheries, scientific research, technological mitigation, and hesitant regulation did not begin with the Progressive era but had been guiding principles of federal management since the U.S. Commission on Fish and Fisheries was established in 1871. The associational relations with Pacific canners were nearly as old. Under Hoover, the old and the new mixed in novel ways. His policies neither wholly succeeded nor completely failed, but they did shape fishery management in Alaska Territory until statehood in 1959, and the problematic treaties he supported continue to influence fisheries management on the northeast Pacific to this day.³⁴

This ambivalent assessment of Hoover stems partly from his inconsistent policies and complicated contests. Hoover tried to apply a stable philosophy of governance, but orthodoxy failed in the fisheries. With canners, fishers, politicians, scientists, and nature all shaping events, there were too many contingencies for Hoover to dictate policy. Like earlier administrators, he navigated a turbulent course while being buffeted from all sides. He began with doctrinaire policies, but he lacked the power to enforce his will and the technological solutions to ameliorate unintended consequences. He deferred to Congress many times and concentrated on international diplomacy, but in at least one case he descended into a bitter, shockingly personal feud in order to impose his will.³⁵ Moreover, confident in the payoff of utilitarian science, he ordered a fundamental restructuring of the USBF's science program that he sustained through most of his tenure as commerce secretary. By the time he ran for president in 1928, however, Hoover had re-embraced Hugh Smith's approach to science, and he could only hope for clearer answers in the future. Hoover had no more mastered his ship of state as commerce secretary than he would as president.

The more carefully we assess Hoover, the less viable cardboard caricatures seem, because no single adjective adequately captures his legacy. He could be driven by lofty principles, but he did not always follow them. Occasionally he achieved great things, but more often he fell far short. He tried to serve the public, but his faith in market rationality inspired policies that often benefited only the wealthiest, most powerful interests. We are left, then, with a historical figure of many dimensions. By presenting a more complicated picture, the western fisheries also reveal shortcomings in the scholarly historiography of Hoover. An adequate understanding of Hoover cannot be based solely on his political philosophies or affiliations. His fishery policies were no more a reflection of generic approaches to governance than the 1920s were a sharp break in conservation history.³⁶ The course of fishery management did shift under Republican rule, and Hoover was a principal force in those shifts, but the comfortable labels mask as much as they reveal. *Progressive, laissez-faire fundamentalist, associationalist, and proto-New Dealer* take us only so far. To gauge Hoover fairly, the history of western fisheries suggests, we need to see him as more dynamic, less orthodox, and ultimately less in control than either his admirers or his critics have suggested.

Notes

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