

Testimony of
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House Natural Resources Subcommittee
on
Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment here today, and thanks especially to Congressman Jeff Miller for introducing the Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Conservation Act which is of critical importance to recreational anglers in the Gulf of Mexico. My name is David Cresson and I am the president and CEO of the Louisiana Chapter of Coastal Conservation Association. CCA is the largest marine resource conservation group of its kind in the nation, with more than 120,000 members, almost all of whom are recreational anglers.

In 2013, the governors of four Gulf states, including Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal, sent a joint letter to the U.S. House and Senate leadership in which they labeled federal fisheries management of red snapper “irretrievably broken” and called for its management to be transferred to a coordinated Gulf states partnership. The letter was a powerful declaration that the people of the Gulf Coast have lost faith in federal fisheries management and for good reason. This legislation is a perfect opportunity to restore some of that faith.

Saltwater recreational angling in the Gulf of Mexico is a huge business and a critical engine for coastal communities. It drives billions of dollars in economic activity each year, providing substantial benefits to the economy at the local, regional, and national levels. And yet, it was not until just this year that NOAA Fisheries began the long process of developing a national recreational fisheries policy to manage it. Historically, the agency has regarded recreational fishing as an after-thought and has attempted to manage anglers with the same tools that were developed exclusively to manage industrial fishing operations.

It hasn't worked.

The federal management system is characterized by hard quotas and annual catch limits based on infrequent stock assessments and notoriously questionable recreational harvest data. It is a rigid management system designed to manage a relatively few commercial harvesters; not one that is conducive to creating robust recreational fisheries that are pursued by an extremely diverse population.

In 2014, the red snapper season in federal waters was nine days and that was set against a red snapper population that many marine scientists believe is the healthiest it has ever been. In many places in the Gulf, it is not uncommon to hear anglers say that it is impossible to get a bait past the red snapper to catch anything else.

And yet, federal law has created a management regime in which as the fish become larger and more abundant, recreational anglers are penalized with shorter and shorter seasons because the recreational quota is caught more quickly. Conversely, using those same tools, if management was not working and the stock was deteriorating, recreational seasons would be extended and fishing opportunity increased because it would take longer to catch the quota.

As it stands today, federal management is a confusing spiral of uncertain regulations and greater mistrust in a management system that anglers increasingly see as punitive rather than constructive.

Compounding the problem, NOAA Fisheries has embraced catch share programs to reward businesses that are able to count their catch to the pound. More than 50 percent of the entire red snapper fishery is already privately held by less than 400 individual commercial fishermen, and indications are that another 20 percent could be given to charter/for-hire businesses. These shares have been given away for free and the shareholders are allowed to fish year-round until their personal quota is caught. This, at a time when recreational anglers on their own boats face single-

digit seasons on a booming stock of fish. It is no wonder that anglers believe they are unwelcome visitors in the federal fisheries management process.

Conversely, four of the five marine recreational fisheries that provide the greatest overall benefit to the nation - speckled trout, redfish, striped bass and bluefish - are inshore species that are managed by the states. The fifth, dolphin, is managed by the federal system but is a predominantly recreational species.

The states have succeeded because their fisheries management systems fit the data they have available and they have made the investments to obtain current information to apply to that management. With current information in hand, state managers have more flexibility to adjust fishing rates and seasons to reflect current conditions. Whereas the federal system imposes on millions of anglers a quota system designed for several hundred, the states have made the investments to allow fishing opportunity to go up and down with the health of the stock, while staying within an allowable mortality rate.

State-based fishery management has proven to be far more effective for recreational fisheries, and has engineered some of the greatest marine conservation victories in the country. The states have a strong track record of managing their fishery resources in order to achieve the right balance between sustainability and quality fishing opportunities. The Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Conservation Act would put proven state-based management approaches to work and solve this problem for millions of recreational anglers along the entire Gulf Coast.