

Written Testimony

Jim Green
Gulf of Mexico Charter Fisherman, Vice President of Destin Charter Boat Association

Before the
Committee on Natural Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
on H.R. 3099: the Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Conservation Act of 2013

December 4, 2013

Chairman Fleming, Ranking Member Sablan, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Capt. Jim Green and I am honored to be here today to testify before you on H.R. 3099, the Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Conservation Act of 2013.

I am 33 years old and a lifelong resident of Destin, FL. Reef Fish Management in the Gulf of Mexico is incredibly important to me as it predicts my future. I am a second generation fisherman out of Destin. I have worked on Charter and Headboats for 25 years and have been a captain for 12 years. I manage a company that has three federally permitted vessels that carry around 15,000 anglers a year. I am a voting member of the Ad Hoc Red Snapper For-Hire Advisory Panel for the Gulf Council.

I'm speaking to you not only as a federally permitted business operator, but as the Vice President of the Destin Charter Boat Association, which represents more than 70 federally permitted vessels. The for-hire fishing industry is an established part of Florida's Gulf Coast economy, and Destin is a prime example of that. A 2014 study commissioned by the City of Destin shows that in one year, over 300,000 out-of-region tourists injected over \$90 a day into Destin's economy. More importantly for this Committee to know, of those 300,000 visitors, over 44% stated they made Florida their destination choice due to the opportunity to go fishing on charter boats. With Red Snapper being a cornerstone fishery it deserves careful management, but I don't believe that H.R. 3099 is the best way to move forward.

We can all agree that recreational red snapper management is failing. While all recreational fishermen have suffered, federally permitted businesses and our customers have borne the brunt of it. Federal seasons are steadily being reduced despite the recovering snapper stock, and for-hire fishermen have a hard time trusting the data. We had huge quota overages for years, and now have to deal with significant buffers to prevent these overages. These buffers, combined with unprecedented noncompliant state seasons, have shortened the federal season to the shortest in history. Americans who are not fortunate enough to own their own boats were almost completely shut out of the fishery this year, since federally-permitted vessels are not allowed to fish in the far more generous state water seasons. This year in Florida, state waters were open for private anglers and state guide boats for 53 days. Federally-permitted vessels had nine days.

Our industry appreciates the interest in helping recreational fishermen access a growing red snapper population, but this legislation would hurt the efforts of charter captains like me to make things better.

For-hire management must move in a new direction. A lot of the leadership in our industry has worked since 2008 to move toward a sustainable and accountable management plan for for-hire vessels only. The Gulf Council recently separated the two components of the recreational fishery – private anglers and charter for-hire vessels. The for-hire sector wants to be able to continue to work with the Council and all stakeholders to map our way forward. This bill would eliminate our ability to do so by transferring responsibility for all red snapper management out of the Council's hands.

Separating the charter and private angling sectors by itself does not solve the recreational management problem, but it gives the Council the ability to create management plans that maximize fishing opportunities, improve data collection, and prevent overharvests for each component. Because the two sectors have different needs out of the fishery, separate management plans are the only way to do this. We know that status quo management with restrictive seasons and bag limits isn't working, and we are working hard to find better approaches for our sector, including a real-time data reporting system.

The Destin Charter Boat Association, as well as many other charter captains across the Gulf, does not want to be a part of a state-based system like the one set up by H.R. 3099. We are federal permit holders and want a federal management plan. Our federal permits are for multispecies, and dealing with one set of regulations for red snapper and another set for everything else would be extremely confusing. Transferring authority for red snapper to the Gulf States Commission would also create another layer of bureaucracy to navigate through.

Giving authority for red snapper management to the states might be a solution for private anglers, but the Council is currently considering an amendment on this topic, and they are in the best position to refine the details of the plan through the process that was set up by the Magnuson-Stevens Act. I am not in a position to prescribe what is best for private anglers. But I am confident that there are ways to solve the problem of short federal seasons and untimely data for these anglers, we just need to focus on the solutions that do not hurt the other components of the fishery.

I hope that my testimony today has helped the Committee better understand the challenges facing this fishery and how we might resolve them in ways that respect all stakeholders' needs. The charter industry wants to continue to work with the Council to design a federal management plan that works for our industry. We need your support as we work to modernize data collection and also develop and test new management methods. To that end, we would like to especially thank Congressman Rob Wittman for his legislation to ensure fishermen are more involved in the data collection process (H.R. 3063) and Congressman Bradley Byrne for his bill to eliminate section 407(d) from the Magnuson Stevens Act (H.R. 4464). H.R. 4464 would give recreational fishermen more flexibility to try different management approaches that work best for us. Both of these bills would allow everyone to truly benefit from the recovery of red snapper.

I and the rest of the Destin Charter Boat Association look forward to working with the Committee and Council on these issues. Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.