

# Big Brother or Big Improvement?



**YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD ABOUT THE PROPOSAL** being floated around by the National Marine Fisheries Service regarding the possibility of mandatory national registration

of recreational anglers. Many people see this as yet another unwarranted governmental intrusion into our lives or as another excuse for increased taxation, but the issue is more complicated than that.

The National Research Council recommended such a registry after studying the methods used by NMFS to sample recreational fishing effort and finding them seriously flawed. The Marine Recreational Fishing Statistics Survey created in the 1970s has been the primary tool for gauging catch and effort rates of recreational fishermen. The MRFSS utilized a combination of boat ramp and dock intercepts in which researchers asked anglers face-to-face about their catch, and a random telephone survey of homes in coastal areas.

The telephone survey caused problems because it was never guaranteed that surveyors would reach an actual fisherman. Then, those reached by telephone were allowed to report catch statistics and numbers of trips from memory, leading to unreliable reports. The MRFSS produced some astounding-

ly bad estimates of recreational catch, but they were all that was available and therefore served by default as the primary source of recreational data in important decisions.

The NRC recommended a new survey system, and the recent reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act included the creation of the new Marine Recreational Information Program. To make MRIP substantially more accurate than its predecessor, officials came up with the concept of national registration. In every state that currently lacks a salt-water fishing license, anglers will be required to register with the federal government.

If your state already has a state salt-water fishing license, you will be exempt from national registration because your state will share its information with the feds. The point is that managers will finally have a useful database made up of actual anglers whom they can poll for catch and effort data.

Having accurate data input into the fishery-management system should lead to better decisions on the output side of the process. I'm not naïve enough to believe that better management will automatically come our way. But without good data showing what we really catch, managers operate blind. We can't afford that, and neither can the fish. We should all support the national registration concept and cooperate with it fully. To find out more, visit [st.nmfs.noaa.gov/mrip](http://st.nmfs.noaa.gov/mrip).

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