



20 QUESTIONS: Dockside catch surveys by fisheries officials are one method of calculating recreational take.

Feet to the Fire

Revamped data collection means more accurate fisheries management nationwide. **BY RIP CUNNINGHAM**

THERE HAS BEEN AN AWFUL LOT OF ATTENTION focused on the National Marine Fisheries Service's efforts to put in place a national registry of salt water anglers. Those who like to put a negative spin on it call it a federal salt water fishing license. What this interpretation overlooks is that this new data collection program can provide valuable information that will play an important role in the future of recreational fishing, which is changing as we speak.

For as many years as I have been involved in fisheries issues, recreational interests have been saying — no, screaming — that the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistical Survey was not properly measuring the recreational catch and that it should not be used as a management tool. Everyone agrees it was never designed as a management tool, but since it was the only game in town, it morphed into one of the measurements that managers have been using. Many felt this was a problem, and it appears they were correct.

Well, be careful what you ask for because all of our screaming got NMFS to hire the National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council in 2005 to conduct an independent review of NMFS recreational data collection programs. Early in 2006, the NRC released its findings and announced that the MRFSS had some serious problems and basically needed to be rebuilt from the foundation up. So out of the ashes has risen a new phoenix, which is called the Marine Recreational

Information Program, and like it or not, MRIP will determine our fate for the foreseeable future. The salt water registry is only one part of this program, but both are now federal mandates.

One of the problems is that a starting point needs to be determined — a stake in the sand, so to speak. In order to have annual catch limits, there has to be an allocation of fish to recreational anglers. If there has been a problem with the data collection in the past, how do we make a fair and equitable estimate of what the catch has been? MRIP will not be fully operational for a few years, so we are going to have to rely on MRFSS data. Some, like Capt. Frank Blount, owner of the Frances Fleet out of Pt. Judith, Rhode Island, think that the catch estimates are extremely low. Others feel that catches have been overestimated by bias in the data collection. The problem is that they might all be correct, depending on the species. The existing data will be used to make the initial allocations, and that

should leave a lot of recreational anglers wondering what the real numbers are.

So now, according to federal law, our collective feet will be held to the fire, even though the only data that will be used to decide how much we can catch in the future has been determined to be problematic. That is a major reason we need to have the MRIP program on line as soon as possible. Once MRIP is operational, there will have to be some mechanism to revisit these first allocations, since they might be way off the mark. It should also be stated that since the data could be off in either direction, recreational anglers could see drastic cuts as well as increases, but changing allocations either way will not be easy.

The new MRIP initiative will coordinate data collection from the for-hire surveys, the highly migratory surveys and private-angler surveys. It will use the salt water anglers registry to do a better job of surveying actual fishermen. The new data collection system will also

gather more information on released fish to help determine our overall impact. We all like to think that every released fish survives, but some do not. All of this means that managers should have a better handle on the recreational impact on our resources, which should lead to better management, better access and a better understanding of how important strong marine resources are

to U.S. citizens.

Some might think that we are better off operating quietly in the shadows, but we are way past that time. Recreational anglers are part of the system, and now we have to demand the best data collection program to make sure that we get our fair share. MRIP is a very good start, and let's face it — you gotta love the name. ~

Why all the Fuss?

WHY ARE ALL THESE NEW DATA COLLECTION EFFORTS AND SURVEYS NECESSARY? Because the recently reauthorized Magnuson Stevens Act mandates that recreational fisheries will be managed in a way that they never have been before. The Act now requires all recreational fisheries to have annual catch limits, which will have to be in place by 2010 or 2011, depending on the status of the individual stocks. Currently, recreational anglers have been managed with target catch limits. If limits were exceeded, there were no penalties, but adjustments were made in bag limits, size limits and seasons for subsequent years. In the future there will be accountability measures, which might mean that overages have to be paid back. It is possible that these overages could shut down fishing for individual species. One such threat looming on the horizon is with summer flounder or fluke.