

WRITTEN TESTIMONY BY
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
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Introduction:

Thank you Chairman Hastings, Representative Southerland and members of the House Natural Resources Committee for the opportunity to speak before all of Congress today from at home within my own district on behalf of ‘fishing and jobs.’

I’m Capt. Tom Adams, owner and operator of Mexico Beach Charters and chairman of the Forgotten Coast chapter of the Recreational Fishing Alliance¹ (RFA). I’ve been fishing both coasts of Florida since 1959, moved to Mexico Beach about a decade ago, and have been operating a charter business here for the last several years.

I’m sure when a lot of people in Washington DC think of Florida fishing they think of fancy gamefish like bonefish, sailfish or tarpon. Florida is a world class destination for these types of ‘catch and release’ targets I’ll give you that – but here in this region, on the Gulf of Mexico, red snapper is critical to the health and prosperity of our coastal fishing businesses and our coastal economies in general. People love to book charters to catch a couple of red snapper – but the majority of those customers in this area, who spend hard-earned money at the hotels and in the gift shops and local stores, they like to eat a couple of red snapper too!

I don’t know how it was 100 years ago, but I do know what it was like 30 or 40 years ago. I can also tell you that in just the past six years alone, I’ve seen more red snapper out there in the Gulf of Mexico than any time in this captain’s memory. When I first started fishing for red snapper, here out of Mexico Beach, we fished for them deep – you always had to drop lines down to the bottom to hook up with a fish or two. These fish are so plentiful today that they’re spread out throughout the water column, from surface to bottom – red snapper are so thick at times that you can’t get a bait down to the bottom for grouper.

¹ RFA is a national 501(c)(4) non-profit political action organization whose mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation’s marine fisheries. The RFA represents individual recreational fishermen, recreational fishing boat manufacturers, party and charter boat owners and operators, bait and tackle businesses, marina operators, and other businesses dependent on recreational fishing.

Sure, this is good news for the fish. A lot of folks who don't fish and who don't really care about what happens to our local fishermen in Mexico Beach and Panama City will tell you this is good news for everyone; I can tell you that if you want fish populations to explode, all you have to do is stop people from fishing, that's easy. What's harder is coming up with a way that we can sensibly fish on these populations as they continue to grow – and that's what those same 'non-fishing' people don't want to talk about honestly with the American people.

All the captains I talk to have seen a great number of red snapper, a growing population. As the population increased and during a time of an eight-month red snapper season in the Gulf, something happened which has forced us to suddenly cut back to a 40-day season. Everyone at this hearing knows what changed – it was a federal fisheries law which was originally created to help American fishermen, but as reauthorized by Congress in 2006 is now destroying our Gulf fishing communities and our economies.

During the past 2 seasons alone, my business as a charter boat captain has been cut in half. Red snapper season was cut by 70%, triggerfish have been shutdown, gag grouper days cut in half, now I hear the same rumors about vermillion snapper as well. What's ended up happening to our community is that our tourist season for visiting anglers has also shrunk with the decreasing opportunities to fish, and that means lost jobs.

Instead of having a longer, more sensible season, local captains are now pushing themselves to extremes, fishing every single day during a 40-day season, rain or shine. This is what they call 'derby fishing' where you have to fish every possible chance during that 40-day window to make up for lost revenues from the other 325 days of the year where our anglers could reasonably be fishing sustainably for red snapper.

Of course, the same groups who pushed us into this corner by supporting the reauthorization of Magnuson back in 2006 with all the rigid new definitions, requirements and arbitrary deadlines, are dangling another carrot in front of us today to help stop the derby – the new sector separation schemes and 'individual catch shares' for Gulf of Mexico fisheries is not an answer, it's an agenda, and it will forever change the face of our local community in a way that is not at all what's good for Florida fishermen.

The Need for Deadline Flexibility

We need some 'flexibility' in our federal fisheries law...there are no deadlines in nature; the last thing we need is to mandate unnatural timelines for rebuilding fisheries. If fish stocks are growing on a positive trend, why should we be shutting down seasons and denying fishermen the opportunity to fish the Gulf of Mexico? All for the sake of building stocks faster? Fisheries management should be more reasonable, and fisheries managers should be given the ability to manage within reason, for the sake of both fish and the fishermen.

To better explain our current situation here in the Gulf with regard to the inflexibility of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, it's important to look to other regions where similar issues occurred in the past. During the reauthorization debate in the House back in 2006, Congress approved a three-year deadline extension on the summer flounder rebuilding period to help fishermen in the

Mid Atlantic region deal with a looming crisis there. By giving the fishing community three additional years to fish towards the final rebuilding target without threat of complete closure or a 75% cutback in season, the stock was still allowed to rebuild.

There were no negative biological consequences resultant of this extension, yet the fishermen and industry were given the opportunity to modestly continue fishing on the stock, which had increased to the highest level in recorded history after this flexibility extension was granted by Congress. Fishermen on all coasts of the U.S. and all fisheries under federal jurisdiction should have the option of rebuilding timeframe extensions when the certain criteria are met to ensure the continued health of the stock. In the summer flounder fishery, the extension proved to be a successful use of common sense in fisheries management. All fisheries should be afforded this common sense.

The Need For Improved Science and Data Collection

We also need better science and data collection. These shortened seasons and sudden closures are based on recreational data collection called “fatally flawed” by the National Research Council back in 2006, which is when Congress mandated that these recreational harvest surveys be replaced by 2009. Earlier this year, NOAA Fisheries said they’d accomplished their mission – well, if that’s true, let’s let the National Research Council decide through another comprehensive analysis of NOAA’s work, to ensure that it’s truly the best available science. No scientific effort should be considered the “best” without “peer review.”

Responsible, efficient fishery management can only be achieved when the information used by decision makers is of the highest quality. The Magnuson-Stevens Act contains a national standard which mandates that management measures be based on the best available science. All too often, the information contains gaps and deficiencies which ultimately lessens the confidence in the data and negatively impacts fishermen through lower quotas. This information can only be called the best available science because it is only available science due to a close door culture at NOAA which prevents any outside information that challenges ‘their’ science.

Amendments included during the reauthorization debate in 2006 placed even greater demands that the quality of data be exceedingly high. The implementation of annual catch limits and accountability measures directly hurts fishermen when the data is less than perfect. Achieving such high quality data requires significant investment in both money and resources. NOAA has failed to make that investment and fishermen suffer.

When fishery information is poor, managers assign a specific level of uncertainty to the information under the widely adopted precautionary approach. Specific to the recreational fisheries, fish available to anglers are limited by both scientific uncertainty and management uncertainty. When combined, this uncertainty lowers the overall recreational harvest limit producing shorter seasons and more restrictive regulations. Of additional concern, when such regulations are imposed, mortality associated with harvest is simply converted to mortality associated with discards resulting in a wasteful management approach that serves no benefit.

In recent years, NOAA has allocated millions of dollars towards the implementation of catch shares programs at the expense of efforts which would improve stock assessments, lower

uncertainty and provide more fish to anglers. Catch shares do not improve stock assessments or reduce uncertainty; they are a management tool with the primary objective of reducing capacity in a fishery. High quality stock assessments are expensive and demand significant commitment from this administration. NOAA needs to stop diverting money to catch shares and restore funding to cooperative research and other programs that directly improve and contribute to fishery stock assessments.

The Need to Protect Both Fish & Fishermen

Finally, we do need the Commerce Department's help in untangling this bureaucracy created by Magnuson. New annual catch limits and accountability measures like 'catch shares' and recreational harvest payback – it all sounds good, but if the best available science is still “fatally flawed” and research stock assessments don't use sound data, then what are we left with? Congress needs to step in on this one...if the government isn't going to meet their commitment to fishermen, then Congress needs to draw a line in Magnuson to allow the Department of Commerce to help protect the fishermen.

Magnuson was originally intended to support a robust domestic fishing industry in the United States. What it lacks today is a proper balance between commerce and conservation. I'm grateful that leaders from the House Natural Resources Committee have taken considerable time and effort to hold this field hearing today, it's a great opportunity for our Gulf fishing community.

We're not an industry that's looking for handouts – we're only asking for a hand, to protect our coastal heritage and traditions while fostering sustainable Gulf fisheries for generations to come.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to discuss the importance of recreational fishing in Florida, and especially the Gulf of Mexico here along our Forgotten Coast. It's an honor to have key Members of Congress and the distinguished Chairman of this Committee in our district today. I would be happy to work with Committee members and sponsors of various fisheries legislation on any follow-up questions you may today or at any other time.