

WRITTEN TESTIMONY  
OF  
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CHAIR  
FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

FOR AN OVERSIGHT FIELD HEARING ON  
“FISHING=JOBS: HOW STRENGTHENING AMERICA’S FISHERIES STRENGTHENS  
OUR ECONOMY”

BEFORE THE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

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The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is the agency responsible for managing fish and wildlife resources for the State of Florida. Ken Wright, Chair of FWC will address the agency’s concerns regarding assessment and management of Gulf of Mexico fisheries.

Fishing is big business in Florida. There are approximately 150,000 Floridians directly employed in fishing-related businesses—100,000 in the commercial sector and 50,000 in the recreational sector. Florida alone accounts for nearly 40% of all marine recreational fishing nationally, with \$5.7 billion in total sales from recreational fishing in 2011 and \$5.6 billion in commercial sales in 2008. Gulf of Mexico fisheries are vital to Florida’s economy. They are a main target for the recreational boating community, and are highly prized by resident and visiting anglers. The importance of Florida’s fisheries and the unprecedented pressures they face force the state’s management agencies and stakeholders to search for new, creative and sound fisheries management approaches.

While there is always controversy about the status of regulated stocks—this is the nature of fisheries management—there is ongoing concern and a lack of credibility among commercial and recreational fishers about the findings of recent stock assessments. Of even more concern to fishermen are the management decisions being mandated based on these stock assessments. By nature, fishermen are leery of increasingly restrictive regulations, but fishermen have expressed their support for past management measures including size limits, bag limits and commercial quotas, after seeing vital Gulf of Mexico stocks, such as king mackerel and red grouper, recover from historical overfishing. Today, however, fishermen are more than leery. Many are angry, some are afraid, and most are distrustful of a new “set of rules” they perceive as inflexible and without merit. They are frustrated with fishery managers and altogether skeptical of the public

process. To make matters worse, many feel that new regulations are being proposed at a time when nationally we are still suffering from the effects of the 2008 economic downturn—and the irony is not being lost on fishermen. Charter captains, party boat operators, marina owners, bait and tackle dealers, seafood wholesalers as well as recreational anglers tell FWC Commissioners about the negative impacts of what they consider over-restrictive and perhaps unnecessary management measures.

Changes to the current system are needed, especially in terms of strengthening and expanding current fisheries data collection programs. Fisheries management in the southeast United States suffers from chronic, yet well-documented, data shortages. This hampers scientists' abilities to evaluate exploited populations and managers' abilities to develop, and ensure accountability with, management measures. Required data are simply stated: accurate catch statistics, adequate biological sampling, and comprehensive population monitoring. The lack of these data adds uncertainty at all levels of scientific and management processes, which, due to requirements in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Management and Conservation Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), translates into an obligation to be increasingly conservative in management specifications. Therefore, it is highly likely that fisheries which are neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing, will nonetheless face harvest reductions and increasingly restrictive regulations.

More recreational angling trips are taken in Florida annually than any other state. In fact, the number of angling trips in Florida each year exceeds the sum total of the next highest five states combined. Therefore, concerns with recreational statistics provided through the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Program (MRFSS) are particularly relevant. The level of recreational data collection for Florida's Gulf Coast fisheries is considered inadequate to support timely and relevant stock assessments for many species. The MRFSS survey in Florida interviews approximately 45,000 anglers annually. This level of effort is nowhere near that required for a state with more than 24 million recreational angling trips each year. As a result of this under-sampling, statistics for many of the species managed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council are measured with considerable imprecision by the MRFSS, even by the program's own standards. It is extremely difficult to develop effective accountability measures that can function adequately when applied to these imprecise estimates. Timing is also an issue. Under the current survey approach, final estimates of recreational catch and effort for each calendar year are typically delayed by at least eight months.

The FWC recognizes that improving the precision of recreational statistics in Florida is not an easy task. The number of angler interviews required to enhance the precision of catch and effort estimates is enormous, likely at least 100 times the current level of effort. This reality suggests that alternative approaches are required to reliably estimate recreational fisheries statistics. The FWC believes that approaches should be developed that take advantage of many fishermen's stated willingness to report what they catch directly and to participate more fully in the data collection process. Implementing electronic or online reporting systems for recreational fishermen would improve both timeliness and sample sizes. The FWC supports efforts

underway to resolve recreational data collection issues through the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), and we hope that future programs will not only reduce uncertainty in estimates and considerably improve the timeliness of their availability, but also take advantage of current technology to address fishermen's willingness to submit information.

The final requirement for expanding and strengthening this region's data collection programs is fisheries independent monitoring of resources, essentially the information that is provided by scientific surveys of fish and their habitats. There is no comprehensive monitoring program for the fisheries resources of the Gulf of Mexico, a fact that directly contributes to the large number of stocks in the region for which overfishing status is unknown. Scientific monitoring provides information for stock assessments that is proven to greatly reduce uncertainty. Data from these surveys allows analysts to separate out changes due to fishing from those caused by natural factors. In addition, scientific surveys provide a means of evaluating resources in areas that are closed to fishing, and generate more comprehensive information that is critical to future ecosystem-based fisheries management efforts. The FWC has long supported implementation of a comprehensive survey program in the region, and believes it is critical that such a program provide thorough spatial and temporal coverage. Some progress has been made by the development of an eastern Gulf of Mexico fishery-independent survey that FWC conducts in cooperation with the NOAA Southeast Fisheries Science Center. The geographic scope of this survey, however, is limited and not suitable for properly addressing fishery-independent data needs for stocks with broader ranges.

The importance of a comprehensive fishery-independent monitoring program to the future success of fisheries management in the Gulf of Mexico cannot be overstated. Data generated from these types of surveys allow managers to be proactive, and stand in stark contrast to the retrospective, quota-based management of the present day. Today, stock assessments for Gulf fisheries rely mostly—and in some cases exclusively—on data from the fisheries themselves. As a result, these assessments are only feasible when fishery data is available. Restrictive regulations or fisheries closures reduce or eliminate the information stream informing the stock assessments. In these situations, data generated by independent scientific surveys becomes absolutely critical. Due to the lack of scientific surveys, recent management closures in the South Atlantic and those due to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico created periods during which little or no fishery data were available for future stock assessments.

Also of great concern are the recent budget cuts by NOAA to the Inter-Jurisdictional Fisheries program (IJF), one of the oldest cooperative state/federal assessment and management efforts in the country. IJF is the only such program in which the states determine management priorities through planning and research efforts for inshore and nearshore species, such as spotted seatrout, striped mullet, blue crabs, and oysters. In the Gulf of Mexico, these nearshore species comprise the majority of the commercial and recreational harvest, resulting in significant social and economic benefits to the Gulf states and the nation. IJF is the cornerstone of the fishery

management programs for the states and has provided the support for long-term databases for shrimp and juvenile finfish in the Gulf of Mexico, which would otherwise not be available. In recent years, it has provided for regional planning efforts, by states, to manage nearshore resources in a manner consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Act. In essence, the IJF has provided a critical linkage between federal and state fisheries management plans and needs to be reinstated at full funding levels.

While the Florida-based concerns are vitally important, we must also make the point that the Southeast Region of the United States, including the jurisdictions of the South Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean Fishery Management Councils, has historically not been funded at levels needed to provide data and stock assessments on a timely, comprehensive basis. The NOAA Southeast Fisheries Science Center has the unenviable task of providing scientific support for three separate Councils and dozens of species. When asked about this discrepancy, the FWC has been told that the Southeast Region has “boutique” fisheries that are not worth as much as commercial fisheries in other parts of the country, thus not warranting increased funding to the area for needed assessments and data collection. The FWC argues that the people involved in fisheries in the Southeast, many of which have a large recreational component, deserve the level of data collection and assessment processes afforded in other parts of the county, especially in light of the stringent timelines and requirements in the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

In summary, state and federal agencies are all spread very thin. Data collection systems, however, need to be revamped to get more active participation by fishermen and more timely data for stock assessments. The Southeast region needs to be recognized at the same levels as other parts of the country and funded at similar levels. We should have the ability to collect the basic information on the numerous species in the Southeast region as well as hire additional stock assessment scientists to support more timely and a larger number of assessments. These requests would help the fisheries management be more predictable and forward thinking. Fishermen would benefit greatly from this data and this type of management. We realize that the funding challenges are considerable, but these critical needs must be addressed now. Implementing priority program enhancements should be combined with appropriate adjustments to management timelines to allow more flexibility in achieving healthy stocks without imposing undue burdens on fishermen. The FWC has dealt with the fisheries challenges of the past and we are prepared to continue to work hard to successfully implement the level of well-informed and credible fishery management that the people of Florida rightfully deserve.

In closing, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission would like to thank the House Natural Resources Committee for holding this important hearing in Panama City, home of Representative Steve Southerland, and we greatly appreciate the Committee’s interest in the effective management of marine fisheries in Florida and the southeast.