



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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ASMFC VOTES FOR SCUP ALLOCATION ANALYSIS RFA Notes Study Could Take Years, Where Recreational Porgy Access Needed Now

In a joint meeting of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) with members of the Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council (MAFMC), a motion was approved to analyze the social and economic impacts of the current allocation of scup (porgy). As it currently stands, the commercial sector receives 78% of the annual porgy quota while the recreational community gets a scant 22% of the total annual harvest. The joint MAFMC/ASMFC decision made yesterday in Charleston, SC could ultimately lead to porgy reallocation measures in the next 2 to 3 years.

While the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) is thrilled that representatives voted to analyze the current porgy allocations, the group warns that allocation alone is not necessarily the cure for access problems within the recreational community.

“An allocation battle with the commercial sector is not the RFA’s top priority, especially when the real issue is with poor data within the recreational fishery and the current manner in which it is utilized,” said Capt. Adam Nowalsky, chairman of the RFA-NJ chapter who attended yesterday’s South Carolina hearing and cautioned anglers not to be too optimistic at the vote. “They could reallocate 100% of the fishery to recreational anglers tomorrow and we could still be in the same situation as we’re in today in terms of limited recreational access.”

Once total landings are set and distributed to the fishing community in terms of shared allocation of the fishery, the commercial sector is managed by hard landings brought back to port, where recreational harvest is monitored using the Marine Recreational Fishing Statistical Surveys (MRFSS) which are based on random sampling methods. The RFA points out that MRFSS was deemed “fatally flawed” several years ago in a review by the National Research Council, and was supposed to have been supplanted by a new program as of the 2009 fishing season.

“Congress mandated that this new harvest methodology was to have been implemented last season, but once again our community is still being hampered by bad science, two full seasons after the federal law called for it to have been replaced,” said RFA Executive Director Jim Donofrio. “While the RFA supports measures that would improve access for the recreational sector, the reallocation of scup is not a silver bullet for addressing this ongoing management train wreck,” he added.

Donofrio said an allocation battle between the commercial and recreational sector will be a long road, and that even if minimally successful against a “stacked deck” at the Council level, it could take up to 3 years to decide. “The recreational business community does not have another two seasons of denied access to wait out this management storm,” Donofrio said. “We’ve made attempts before to readdress allocation issues with other important Mid Atlantic fisheries like summer flounder, only to see it fail by a single vote.”

RFA points to the fact that the MAFMC had recently been given the authority to increase overall porgy harvest for 2011 by over 50%, but by a slim majority of votes the Council chose to disregard the scientific recommendation for next season, leaving MRFSS data wholly responsible for helping set the annual harvest amounts for recreational anglers.

“At a time when recreational fishermen should be able to enjoy the same liberalization of the fishery that commercial fishermen are seeing, we’re still being denied access because of a broken system of federal management mechanisms,” Nowalsky said. “Despite a fairly significant increase in quota for next season, because our flawed recreational data shows an increase in harvest this season, we’re going to ultimately see tighter regulations in years ahead, no matter the allocation numbers show.”

The primary reason why the imbalanced porgy allocation has become such a hot button issue of late according to Nowalsky is because anglers see growing annual quotas with very little in return in terms of easing restrictions on seasonal limits. “The fact that stock populations of a number of species are at historic highs yet recreational access in terms of size, season and bag are at historic lows is indicative of a serious problem,” Nowalsky said.

“Our recreational community needs to understand that the root of the problem is not necessarily the total allocation, but instead it’s bad management mechanisms using fatally flawed data. The tools managers have may have worked for saving the fish, but they are failing at helping save the fishermen once stocks have been fully rebuilt,” Nowalsky added.

Donofrio called the allocation argument just another small band-aid on a gaping federal fisheries wound. “Quotas are going up, while recreational access to coastal fisheries is being restricted, and the councils have no real way of addressing the serious issues affecting fisheries management.”

“While another extended socioeconomic impact study of recreational versus commercial fisheries may be helpful in the future, the continued failure to address the problem here and now is what’s killing our industry today,” Donofrio said. “We need to give managers the flexibility to run our fisheries based on access and conservation, and our recreational fishing industry doesn’t have the time to wait.”

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The Recreational Fishing Alliance is a national, grassroots political action organization representing recreational fishermen and the recreational fishing industry on marine fisheries issues. RFA's Mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine, boat and tackle industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation's saltwater fisheries. For more information, call 888-JOIN-RFA or visit www.joinrfa.org.