



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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NEW PEW PANEL CLAIMS TO HELP ANGLERS RFA Believes Committee Only Helps Bureaucrats Ignore Congressional Mandates

An email sent recently to members of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) from the Senior Policy Analyst from Pew Charitable Trusts Campaign to End Overfishing in the Southeast shows a disturbing alliance between members of the preservationist community and those from the “fish first” conservation set. Together, the union is being touted as a recreational fishing coalition, although to some angling groups that appears to be a bogus claim.

Pew’s Chad Hanson writes “I wanted to provide an update on a collaborative effort between recreational fishing and conservation organizations to examine and recommend alternative methods for improving recreational data collection programs in the US.” According to Hanson, a group of fisheries experts, including members of the Gulf Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) were invited to a private workshop to discuss improving the timeliness and accuracy of recreational fishing data.

Hanson says a full report highlighting their self-described Blue Ribbon Panel recommendations is now being finalized and will be issued publicly sometime in September. The Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) received an advance copy of the workshop synopsis, and believes recreational fishermen in America shouldn’t hold their breath waiting for any earth-shattering news.

“When the world’s top scientists participated in a National Research Council review of the angling data collection methods about 6 years ago, NOAA Fisheries was given very clear direction in how to fix the recreational harvest surveys,” said RFA Executive Director, Jim Donofrio. “Congress told NOAA specifically how to fix the data and they told them when to do it.” Donofrio said despite the specific NRC instructions, NOAA has failed to address the “fatally flawed” data.

“We don’t need more committees, we need federal action,” Donofrio said. RFA said conservation groups could have saved a lot of time and effort by simply reviewing the information and research items under section 401 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. “Every time a new self-proclaimed ‘blue ribbon’ task force is formed, it just gives federal bureaucrats breathing room to sit back on their office chairs and shuffle more papers around instead of meeting the requirements of our federal fisheries law.”

According to the synopsis issued by Pew, the newly formed “Blue Ribbon Panel” was organized and facilitated by the Pew-funded Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) based on a recommendation from an ad-hoc group of marine conservation and recreational fishing organizations known as the ‘Fish Collaborative.’ “We’re not sure exactly who makes up this Fish Collaborative, but when you look at the co-chairs selected to oversee the panel findings, I don’t see how the recreational fishing community is being represented.”

Pew said TRCP’s self-titled Blue Ribbon Panel was facilitated by Beltway insider and former CNN Producer George Cooper, with the three co-chairs drawn from within the ambiguous Fish Collaborative comprised of Pew’s Hanson, Doug Rader of Environmental Defense Fund, and Dick Brame of the Coastal Conservation Association.

“Saltwater anglers have spent years arguing with stubborn conservationists about our own onwater observations and the deficiencies with their coveted science, but to no avail,” said Jim Hutchinson, Jr., Managing Director of the RFA. “Now, nearly six years after the NRC memorialized the data as flawed, these same beltway insiders are forming new alliances with the very groups who’ve helped lead the charge for marine reserves, fisheries closures and resource privatization through catch shares, which is really hard to comprehend,” Hutchinson added.

Hutchinson said groups with a mission only to protect fish typically ignore pleas from the fishermen themselves. “They’re quick to punish anglers when they believe we’re harvesting too many fish, but they’re not as receptive to hearing our real-time opinions concerning the health of the resource.” Hutchinson said Mid-Atlantic stocks like summer flounder, black sea bass and porgy are healthier than at any time in recorded management history, while even the red snapper population theories have been publicly called out into question.

“If any of the usual suspects really cared about the interests of our local fishing communities, they’d be calling out NOAA fisheries for failing to meet their congressionally mandated deadlines to fix the data,” said Donofrio, adding “and they’d do it with as much passion as they display when they call on fishermen to meet arbitrary rebuilding deadlines.”

At the behest of Congress, the NRC convened in 2004/2005 to review the Marine Recreational Fishing Statistical Survey (MRFSS) used by NOAA Fisheries to estimate fishing effort and catch data in the recreational sector. Their official report blasted the methodology of surveying anglers based on random telephone contacts, while recommending “*the development of and subsequent sampling from a comprehensive national saltwater angler registry.*” When the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act was reauthorized by Congress in 2006 and signed into law by the President in 2007, it required the Secretary of Commerce to establish a national saltwater registry program which meets the recommendations of the NRC panel of experts.

“Magnuson required a new survey program be completed as of 2009 using registered angler contact information, increased numbers of dockside intercepts, vessel trip reports from charter vessels, and even requiring a weather-corrective factor for applying to angler catch and effort estimates,” said Donofrio. “In 2010, this new MRIP program has not implemented, a clear violation of federal law by our very own federal government,” he said.

According to the synopsis issued by Hanson, Pew’s new panel of experts will be making new recommendations to “help NOAA take a step forward from what is currently utilized for recreational data (namely MRIP).” RFA believes that looking into the future is always a good thing, but using past performance as a guide, the Pew Charitable Trusts is no ally for today’s recreational fishermen.

“The lobbying arm of Pew helped rewrite the federal law to ratchet down limits on our coastal anglers, they’ve openly lobbied for a system of catch shares, they’ve pushed for marine protected areas and they’ve actively led the ideological war against our coastal fishing communities, why on earth would any so-called fishing advocate bed down with these wolves,” asked Donofrio. “These conservation groups are doing nothing but providing cover for bureaucrats, while hijacking fisheries management away from seasoned professionals,” he added.

According to the RFA, some of the same representative groups working on private panels have also supported national efforts to punish the recreational sector using currently the same flawed data. “Last week the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council became the first to approve recreational accountability measures when annual catch limits are exceeded,” Hutchinson said. “I don’t believe you can have recreational paybacks based on bad data, but once again these conservation groups are first in line to greet our anglers with the belt,” he said.

“Our community is being asked to pay research set-asides to fund data collection, we’re even raising funds for trawl surveys and statistical models,” noted Donofrio. “It’s time to stop covering for the bureaucrats with panels and summits while allowing the recreational fishing community to continually take all the heat.”

According to Donofrio, members of the angling community contributed money towards updated benchmark assessments through the Save the Summer Flounder Fishery Fund in 2008, which led to a dynamic new modeling approach to looking at that Mid-Atlantic fishery. “Ironically, these self-described blue ribbon groups have contributed nothing but criticism to efforts by our fishing communities to fix the science,” Donofrio said.

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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.