



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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RFA WELCOMES NATIONAL GROUPS TO THE FISHERIES REFORM DEBATE Coalition Joins RFA Call For Management Flexibility & Reform

According to a release from a national tackle group, legislation introduced by Sen. Bill Nelson (D-FL) would amend federal fisheries law to “give federal marine fisheries managers the time, resources and direction necessary to address the chronic deficiencies in data collection and science.” The legislation attempts to address the current fisheries management crisis by amending the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act (MSA), which the trade group calls “urgent given 2010 and 2011 MSA deadlines.” The Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) points out that the national tackle group’s statement that “a legislative remedy” is the only given option to deal with today’s federal coastal fisheries is welcome news for coastal fishing communities who’ve rallied for federal fisheries reform since at least 2005.

“With this acknowledgement that there are serious deficiencies in MSA, we’re hopeful we can get the senator to support the broader effort in Washington already underway to build support for the Flexibility in Rebuilding American Fisheries Act,” said Jim Donofrio, RFA’s Executive Director. He added that current bills to amend the federal fisheries law already boast support of nearly 40 federal bipartisan members of the U.S. House and Senate.

“We thank the senator for this attempt to address some of these federal management failures destroying our local fishing communities and we’re hopeful that we can get his support for the broader effort by those federal legislators who’ve sponsored the flexibility bills despite opposition by anti-access groups,” Donofrio said, while adding the RFA is continuing to review Sen. Nelson’s bill to see how it would impact overall Magnuson reform. “The grassroots community has some concerns with the way the bill is written, specifically how it seems to provide some leverage for individual states to get into the catch share game to meet some of the matching fund components, while also giving more power to the federal fisheries service to make broader use of their emergency power,” Donofrio said. “The last thing our community needs now is NMFS using more of their discretion to implement emergency closures,” he said.

In 2006, the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act (MSA) was passed in the Senate by "unanimous consent" and signed into law by then President G.W. Bush soon after in 2007. The act of unanimous consent on the floor of the Senate officially sets aside rules of procedure so as to expedite proceedings, and the bill’s quick Senate passage helped to memorialize Sen. Ted Stevens in the naming of our federal fisheries law before his departure from office. According to the RFA, such action also facilitated the rapid progression of poorly worded federal fisheries law without any debate on the floor. During the reauthorization debate occurring as early as 2005, the RFA had been extremely vocal in opposition to "time-specific" deadlines and arbitrary, non-scientific provisions contained within MSA.

“The inflexibility of the fisheries law to respond to an ever-changing marine ecosystem coupled with grossly inadequate management information systems within the federal fisheries service has contributed to a major industry collapse,” Donofrio said, adding there are very few in the fishing community who would disagree that the management regime created by MSA is badly broken and eliminating recreational fishing opportunities and jobs every day. “Fishermen are fed up, they have been for years,” he said. In response, RFA has openly supported and lobbied for passage of the Flexibility in Rebuilding American Fisheries Act, legislation which first introduced in 2007 by Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ).

“It should be clear to all what’s happened to our fishing communities the past 5 years,” said Donofrio, adding “thankfully, Congressman Pallone had the vision to put a Magnuson reform bill in place before the presidential signature was even dry back in 2007.”

Donofrio said former assistant administrator of fisheries for the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Dr. William Hogarth, had first warned of pending problems back in 2007 when the Pallone bill was first introduced. “Dr. Hogarth told the fishing community that these changes to MSA would lead to a management train wreck in 2010, and here we are, right on schedule,” Donofrio said. He explained that new language in the reauthorization included insertion of rigid, inflexible rebuilding deadlines, the use of annual catch limits and accountability measures, along with a new statutory definition of ‘overfishing’ which has contributed to draconian management efforts on important recreational species like red snapper, summer flounder and black sea bass.

“We did not support the language then, and we’ve been pretty vocal about what actually needs to be done to fix the problem ever since,” Donofrio added. Although numerous groups supported and praised the new MSA and questioned the RFA’s criticism of its most damaging provisions, RFA is happy to see some of these same groups join in the call for reform. In 2009, the legislative effort to amend MSA picked up additional support when Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) sponsored a Senate version of the aptly named Flexibility in Rebuilding American Fisheries Act. The House bill (HR1584) currently boasts 33 co-sponsors, while the Senate bill (S1255) has four additional co-sponsors. “We know the management system imposed by the MSA does not yield the most productive use of marine resources, and the flexibility bill will help address that problem,” he said.

In February, the Flexibility in Rebuilding American Fisheries Act gathered additional support in DC when 5,000 American fishermen rallied at Upper Senate Park near the Capitol in support for federal fisheries reform. Rally attendees and organizers argued that strict enforcement of the MSA provisions has led to rapidly expanding denial of public access to both rebuilt and rebuilding fisheries, making it clear to the majority of anglers and fishing organizations that the federal fisheries law must be fixed. RFA says rally participants from Florida have since put heavy pressure on Sen. Nelson to support efforts to amend the law through support of the Schumer bill.

Efforts by some national sportfishing groups to block MSA reform in the past prompted RFA’s Managing Director, Jim Hutchinson, Jr. to add, “Our grassroots coalition helped bring national attention to our fisheries problems with the February rally, and now we’re hopeful that the money which was previously spent to block our efforts to instill flexibility in fisheries management might be redirected to a common cause of creating a management system that allows for enhanced recreational fishing opportunities and sustainable recreational fishing communities. Our local business owners trying to eke out a living deserve that much.”

Donofrio hopes this is another step toward getting federal fisheries law reform movement going now to help improve access for all of America’s coastal fishermen before the year is out. “The support of these other national groups marks what we hope is an end to the strong criticism they have leveled at RFA as we’ve attacked faulty science and the opportunities stolen from the recreational fishing community because of it. We are optimistic that this represents another step toward fixing the fatal flaws of the MSA,” he added.

Pew Environment Group was quick to levy opposition to the Nelson bill, which Donofrio believes is mostly a smokescreen. “To end most overfishing situations, all you have to do is extend the rebuilding timelines for improving stocks,” Donofrio said, a key point with the Pallone/Schumer legislation. “Put an end to overfishing and a few dozen showroom environmentalists will find themselves on the unemployment line.”

“All Pew did here was toss a match into a garbage can to distract attention from RFA’s bonfire,” 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.