



# PRESS RELEASE

## Recreational Fishing Alliance

5724 N. Route 9, New Gretna, NJ 08224

P: 888-564-6732 F: 609-294-3812

For Immediate Release  
Contact: Jim Hutchinson, Jr.

February 1, 2012  
888 564-6732

### **NOAA FISHERIES SAYS “MISSION ACCOMPLISHED” RFA Says That’s Up For Congress & Scientists To Decide**

Federal officials recently unveiled a new method for estimating how many fish are caught by the nation's recreational saltwater fishermen. While the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) remains cautiously optimistic that the improvements required by Congress will be fully incorporated into the angler data collection program sometime in the future, the initial fanfare created by the national media seems a bit disconcerting.

"RFA appreciates the work that NOAA Fisheries staff has done to implement some of the mandated improvements to the existing angler survey program in place, particularly project leader Gordon Colvin, but it's far too early to stand on deck and announce 'mission accomplished' without getting a better understanding of what's really been done or how these revised numbers will impact assessment estimates and quota monitoring," said RFA executive director Jim Donofrio.

"You certainly can't say the data has been improved if you're simply re-estimating numbers based on the same flawed data which was collected over the past 25 years, information which still relies on angler recall," he added.

In response to a phone press conference last Wednesday, several national and local news outlets reported that NOAA is now utilizing a brand new method of compiling angler data to generate overall stock assessments and monitor the annual catch by recreational fishermen. RFA points out that the driving factor motivating NOAA Fisheries to implement this program was the reauthorization of the Magnuson Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) back in 2007.

At the request of Congress, the National Research Council (NRC) of the National Academy of Sciences performed a comprehensive review of the Marine Recreational Fishing Statistical Survey, or MRFSS, a program used since 1979 to gauge overall harvest and participation trends in the recreational sector. In presenting the final [report to Congress in 2006](#), NRC committee chair Dr. Patrick Sullivan deemed MRFSS “fatally flawed,” a term which has been used by fishermen ever since when referring to the data collection system.

“Despite the complexity of the challenge and its importance for fishery management, the MRFSS staff have been severely handicapped in their efforts to implement, operate, and improve the MRFSS, including implementing the recommendations of earlier reviews,” the NRC 2006 report stated. “It is not reasonable to expect such a small staff - and one that lacks a Ph.D.-level mathematical statistician - to operate a national survey of such complexity, despite the dedication of the small staff the MRFSS does have.”

“In addition, the MRFSS is severely limited by the lack of a universal sampling frame for all saltwater anglers, a lack that is not of the MRFSS’s own making,” the report further stated, adding “To make matters even more difficult, some of the data that the MRFSS depends on are collected by states, which use a variety of data-collection and sampling protocols.”

According to Donofrio, it was Congress who led the charge and got the NRC to coordinate the 2006 review, not NOAA Fisheries as some of the media outlets have been reporting in the past several days.

“I would love to join the rest of the fishing community in celebrating good times ahead, but if the MRFSS staff is using the same effort and participation data coupled with inadequate intercept data generated over the past 33 years, then I’m not so sure that we’ve turned a corner instead of just running around in more circles,” Donofrio said.

“Congress mandated that this data collection effort was to have been completed by 2009, and I’m not convinced the job has been fully completed to this day, certainly not to the national standards established under the Magnuson-Stevens Act,” he added.

In testimony before the House Natural Resources Committee on December 1, 2011, NOAA’s Eric Schwaab admitted that his agency had failed to meet their time-specific deadline to replace the "fatally flawed" MRFSS program with a new and improved Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), acknowledging that any new processes for scientific improvement wouldn't be fully incorporated until at least 2013. Pressed by Committee member Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ) about how new hard catch limits and accountability measures could be mandated by NOAA Fisheries before meeting their own mandates to fix the soft data used compiled by random surveys, Schwaab replied by saying "certainly it's suboptimal," while referring to recreational data as "a small portion of the assessment process."

"There are two different ways in which recreational data factor into the management process, one is as a component of the assessment process, and certainly recreational effort and landings are considered by the scientific teams that make assessment decisions," Schwaab said, adding "secondly is managing, once a quota is set, the recreational component of the fishery."

RFA points to Schwaab’s Congressional testimony as an example of how recreational data is used not only to enforce recreational regulations on an annual basis, but also in terms of monitoring the overall health of the stock. “Improved angler data isn’t a small portion of the process, it’s a huge component of figuring out the total health of our coastal fisheries stock and demands more than just a press conference and a mission accomplished banner,” Donofrio added.

Legislation introduced by Rep. Pallone called the *Flexibility and Access in Rebuilding American Fisheries Act of 2011* (H.R. 3061) would make critical improvements to the way America’s fisheries are managed, including a requirement that NRC perform another comprehensive report on improvements made to the recreational fishing data collection. Currently under review by the House Natural Resources Committee, HR3061 is co-sponsored by Rep. Rob Andrews (D-NJ), Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC), Rep. Donna Christensen (D-VI), Rep. Ander Crenshaw (R-FL), Rep. Michael Grimm (R-NY), Rep. Colleen Hanabusa (D-HI), Rep. Peter King (R-NY), Rep. Frank LoBiondo (R-NJ), Rep. Tim Scott (R-SC), Rep. Steve Southerland (R-FL), Rep. John Tierney (D-MA), and Rep. Bob Turner (R-NY).

“Mr. Colvin and his staff seem to be stuck in a rut, and RFA and our allies are hoping that HR3061 will help them finally get this statistical monkey off their back,” Donofrio said. “These numbers are critically important since they ultimately drive the management of the recreational sector. The best system in my mind needs to be as accurate as possible,” Donofrio said.

“Even the nicest looking inboard at the boat show isn’t worth launching this spring without a good look inside the engine room, which is why we prefer to leave it up to Congress and the National Academy of Sciences to decide if this ship is really ready to sail,” he added.

To review the official NRC findings, visit [www.nmfs.noaa.gov/ocs/mafac/meetings/2006\\_07/docs/NRC\\_MRFSS\\_2006.pdf](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/ocs/mafac/meetings/2006_07/docs/NRC_MRFSS_2006.pdf)

To see how Congress responded, turn to page 158 of the following PDF under section 109-479n of Magnuson as it relates to Recreational Fisheries, go to [www.nero.noaa.gov/sfd/MSA\\_amended\\_20070112\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.nero.noaa.gov/sfd/MSA_amended_20070112_FINAL.pdf)

#####

*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](http://www.joinrfa.org).*