



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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RFA Calls On Moratorium On Recreational Closures

Galloway, NJ - In a letter this week to Florida Sen. Bill Nelson, the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) has called for an immediate moratorium on any closures to the recreational harvest of red snapper until better scientific analysis can be conducted.

“The socioeconomic importance of recreational fishing demands that the management of our nation’s marine resources successfully balances the needs of the marine industry, access for anglers and long-term conservation objectives for the resource,” said Jim Donofrio, Executive Director of the RFA. “The current management of red snapper in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico has failed.”

Donofrio explains that the on-water observations from anglers throughout the southeastern U.S. indicate that red snapper are more abundant today than at any time in the past 25 years, in waters varying from 30- to 240-foot depths. Yet despite the abundance of available resource, an overly restrictive management process continues to deny public access due primarily to a defective data collection method.

“Much of the information used to make today’s restrictive decisions comes from a recreational data collection program deemed by the National Research Council as ‘fatally flawed’ and ‘inappropriate for management purposes,’” Donofrio said. The RFA points out that SEDAR (*SouthEast Data, Assessment, and Review*), the process used for the assessment of red snapper and other species, currently uses “outdated modeling approaches” and fisheries independent monitoring programs that greatly underestimate stock size, particularly for species that associate with hard bottom features as evidenced recently in a paper by noted red snapper expert Dr. Bob Shipp.

In his letter to Sen. Nelson, Donofrio wrote “RFA is requesting that you appeal to the Obama administration to suspend recreational closures for snapper and grouper until the primary recreational data collection program can be improved to such a level appropriate for management purposes and necessary advancements to the SEDAR process can be made.”

The RFA is asking legislators to consider a two-pronged approach to work on behalf of coastal communities, addressing the immediate moratorium on recreational closures, while simultaneously urging support of a Senate bill to fix the Magnuson Stevens Act (MSA). “Recent amendments to the our nation’s primary fishery management law, P.L. 109-479, (MSA) are prompting unprecedented restrictive regulations in many of the most important recreational fisheries in the Gulf and South Atlantic,” Donofrio continued. “RFA contends MSA can be amended to allow a balance of conservation and access at the same time. RFA is supporting Representative Frank Pallone’s bill, HR 1584, because it would achieve this critical and necessary balance.”

HR 1584 is co-sponsored in the House by 16 other bi-partisan coastal legislators, including Florida Republican Ginny Brown-Waite and Florida Democrat Allen Boyd.

“We believe this bill is the first step to opening the door for debate,” said Donofrio, adding “we’re confident that moving forward with this legislation will give outside fishery professionals the opportunity to have an open debate before your Committee with those in the environmental community who are opposed to basing MSA on real marine science.”

In April, the Pew Environment Group launched a massive lobbying effort in Washington DC to defeat *the Flexibility in Rebuilding American Fisheries Act of 2009*, spearheading a letter on behalf of 44 conservation groups that included Pew funding recipients like the Marine Fish Conservation Network, Oceana, the Ocean Conservancy and Defenders of Wildlife. Where recreational fishermen are noting first-hand accounts and citing new scientific studies like Dr. Shipp’s which point to greater populations of red snapper, the Pew letter calls these pleas from anglers “discredited arguments” for changing the federal fisheries law.

“The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires that depleted fish populations be rebuilt as quickly as biologically possible,” said Lee Crockett, director of Federal Fisheries Policy at the Pew Environment Group. “But shortsightedness and political pressure has kept too many fish populations from reaching healthy, sustainable levels.

Donofrio argues that the true “shortsightedness” comes from efforts to rebuild all marine fish stocks to historic levels simultaneously and within rigid, arbitrary timeframes, which the RFA calls reckless, unrealistic and without regard for coastal communities and recreational fishermen. “Many anti-fishing environmental groups who have lobbied against our efforts want to see the waters off of Florida in a condition more pristine than when Ponce de Leon sailed the coast, regardless of the negative impact on fishing businesses and coastal economies,” Donofrio said in his letter to Sen. Nelson.

“This is not a reality. It is patently unfair to hold the recreational fishing industry to an unrealistic standard not expected by any other industry in the US,” he added.

More than 150 groups, organizations and businesses have come out in opposition to the Pew efforts, and have signed on with the RFA in building support for HR 1584. Florida-based fishing groups calling for a limited flexibility amendment to MSA include the Cooperative of Gulf Fishermen, Destin Charter Boat Association, Fishing Rights Alliance, Indian River Charter Boat Association, Marco Island Charter Captains Association, Panama City Boatmen Association, Pensacola Charterboat Association and the South Atlantic Charterboat Association. National groups lending support include National Association of Charterboat Operators and the Marine Retailers Association of America. The full list can be found at www.joinrfa.org/Press/FlexibilitySupporters_040909.pdf.

“RFA is concerned that in the span of a few short years, we’ll lose too many anglers and too many businesses, while giving up far too many rights as Americans,” Donofrio summarized in his letter to Sen. Nelson. “We hope you are able to engage this issue and provide the anglers and fishing businesses of Florida some much needed assistance.”

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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. The RFA 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.