



# PRESS RELEASE

## Recreational Fishing Alliance

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### **RFA-SC Members React to Red Snapper Closure Petition Shows Need for Flexibility in Fisheries Management**

Charleston, SC – In response to the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council's (SAFMC) decision to close the red snapper fishery, a groundswell of grassroots support has united the recreational and commercial fishing communities, two distinct groups that are often on opposite sides of the fisheries management spectrum. At issue to Southeast coastal fishermen is the use of arbitrary rebuilding timeframes and NOAA Fisheries' refusal to use all available science in fisheries management decisions.

"A few of us in South Carolina have tried to build consensus with members of our local commercial industry, seafood industry, insurance industry, and recreational fishermen to stop the red snapper interim rule shutdown and Amendment 17," said Wes Covington, a recreational angler out of Norway, SC. "We also have some longer-term goals and ideas developed, such as a snapper/grouper tagging program, an aquaculture restocking program, and expansion of offshore habitat to benefit our fish stocks."

In March, the SAFMC recommended that NMFS ban the red snapper fishery temporarily while a new management plan was created. A full ban on the fishery is expected to become law as early as June in order to meet the standards set forth by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), the federal fisheries law which was revised as recently as 2006 to include rigid "overfishing" requirements. According to MSA, if best available science shows that a stock is overfished, the council must develop a fishery management plan to end overfishing immediately and rebuild affected stocks to maximum sustainable yield, not to exceed 10 years.

"In the long term, the current approach of fisheries management through restrictions alone is 'old-school' and brilliantly designed to fail by those who want it to," said Charleston angler Jason Ward. "While fishermen support and understand that restrictions on size limits and bag limits are a necessary part of fisheries management, it cannot be the only tool," Ward said.

The point that many fishermen and scientists are arguing is that the "best available science" used by fisheries managers has proven to be woefully inaccurate. According to the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA), recent research study conducted by Dr. Robert Shipp and Dr. Steve Bortone, experts in the field of red snapper population dynamics, revealed the overall stock that of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico is far more robust than the assessments coming out of NMFS, and have been on the increase since 1995.

"We know of no instance in the history of fisheries management where the stocks may be greater than virgin levels, but the constraints on harvest continue to be more stringent," Dr. Shipp said in his report, which goes on to recount the socioeconomic importance of red snapper to both commercial and recreational fishermen and the negative economic impact that will result from ratcheting down unnecessarily on these fisheries as mandated by MSA.

“The situation with red snapper clearly illustrates the need for flexibility to manage rebuilding and rebuilt stocks, something the RFA has been saying all along,” said Jim Donofrio, Executive Director of the national sportfishing organization. “To impose such economic hardships on coastal economies based on arbitrary deadlines and outdated abundance estimates when the stocks are actually at abundance levels never seen before is inexcusable,” Donofrio added.

“They have regulated most of the boats out,” said Joey Prochazka of the Ladson-based fishing tackle manufacturer, Z-Man Fishing Products, and also a member of the RFA national Executive Board. “Our local head boats are dropping like flies. We are down to two operating head boats in the entire state of South Carolina.”

Donofrio said a new bill introduced before the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress and co-sponsored by Rep. Henry Brown, Jr. (R-SC), the *Flexibility in Rebuilding American Fisheries Act of 2009 (HR 1584)*, would address many of the restrictive and arbitrary measures included in MSA, and would grant fisheries managers some flexibility to manage fish stocks, while keeping fishing communities and local fisheries healthy and sustainable for future generations. “Fixing this problem with Magnuson is long overdue and it’s about time more groups get on board and petition Congress to provide the flexibility that even experienced fishery scientists and managers like Dr. Shipp are calling for,” Donofrio said. “We welcome the debate on this issue in front of both Houses of Congress with the proponents of these restrictions,” he said.

As an RFA member, Covington has helped organize an online petition of concerned citizens negatively affected by the emergency closure of the red snapper fishery. The petition states “We have heard and testified on numerous occasions at public hearings that the numbers and sizes of red snapper catches have improved, and this does not coincide with the NMFS stock assessments.” As of April 20, more than 1,500 names were registered at [www.petitiononline.com/4ourARS/petition.html](http://www.petitiononline.com/4ourARS/petition.html), with signees agreeing that “the current red snapper stock assessment does not reflect the current stock conditions and the emergency interim rule closure should not go into effect.”

“If the government truly cares about a sustainable fishery then they should look at all available options and not just ones that support knee-jerk closures and further amendments to their short sighted models,” Ward said, while adding “these types of amendments show a lack of genuine innovation and a lack of concern for the much larger economic impact.”

“We have been fighting this battle for two years and it just seems to get worse,” added Prochazka.

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