



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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New Study Confirms RFA's Claims on Red Snapper Abundance

Galloway, NJ - A new study released by Dr. Robert Shipp and Dr. Steve Bortone reveals that the Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper stock may be at a higher level of abundance than estimated by National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Their work suggests that a significant portion of the fish population remains unaccounted through traditional abundance surveys, explaining that red snapper are actually thriving due to the marked habitat improvements seen through highly successful artificial reef programs and more than 5,000 oil rigs. The findings challenge the current status of overfished and overfishing for red snapper.

"The Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) and our Gulf of Mexico members were among the first to bring this issue of undercounted red snapper to the attention of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council years ago," said Jim Donofrio, Executive Director of the RFA. "Ironically, the RFA was criticized by conservation groups who refused to support the claims by actual fishermen, and instead chose to go along with the flawed NMFS assessment. We are encouraged that these groups now recognize what we have for so long."

It is thought that red snapper, particularly age 2 fish, are limited to available habitat and prior to 1950 very little natural hard bottom features were available in the Gulf. Man-made hard bottom deployed since that time has created thousands of square miles of new habitat, allowing the population to expand beyond the traditional red snapper range and making the stock more productive. Much of this new habitat is not sampled by NMFS, which the new study says creates a chronic underestimation of stock size.

"Pure and simple, this illustrates the need for flexibility in rebuilding and fisheries management, something the RFA has been saying all along," Donofrio said. "Recreational anglers are being denied access to this important fishery based on outdated abundance estimates."

When testifying before Congress in 2007, Donofrio noted that rebuilding provisions and rigid overfishing language hardcoded into the federal fishing law would have a significant impact on the red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. "The most recent stock assessment establishes the spawning potential ratio at seven times larger than the last assessment in 2000," Donofrio told the Committee on Natural Resources, adding "red snapper is at historically high levels of abundance."

Because of the inflexible requirements set forth by the Magnuson Stevens Act, anglers' total allowable catch (TAC) of red snapper has been cut by more than half in the past two years, resulting in a significantly shorter snapper season and drastically reduced bag limit. "This new regime is causing both unnecessary regulatory discards and severe negative social and economic impacts to local fishing communities throughout the Gulf," Donofrio testified in 2007.

The latest report by Dr. Shipp and Dr. Bortone helps bolster the on-water observations from Gulf fishermen and continued lobbying efforts by RFA. Fishermen often see changes on the water two to three years before they are even picked up in NMFS assessment, and in the case of red snapper around the reefs and rigs, NMFS does not include these fish as part of their sampling protocol which means there's no way for federal fisheries researchers to count these fish as part of the total stock.

"It is clear to the RFA that the red snapper stock and many others are in better shape," Donofrio said. "Fisheries managers must be afforded some type of limited flexibility when rebuilding healthy fish stocks such as red snapper to allow science to keep pace with management." Donofrio explained that it was the RFA which had recommended that Dr. Shipp be invited to the same Congressional hearing in 2007 to testify on behalf these "observable facts" within the Gulf of Mexico snapper fishery.

"The mission of the RFA forces us to challenge NMFS science when it does not reflect what we see on the water. When other organizations were willing to accept bad science while dismissing the claims of the anglers themselves who were out on the water, RFA was willing to fight for the recreational fishing community."

"We challenged what we knew was wrong and we hope other groups will join us in the future, not just in being critical, but by being analytical," Donofrio added.

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