



# PRESS RELEASE

## Recreational Fishing Alliance

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### **OVERFISHING OF GULF RED SNAPPER IS OVER NOAA Says More Fish Means Less Fishing**

Following an updated population assessment that shows overfishing of Gulf of Mexico red snapper has ended and the population is rebounding, NOAA Fisheries is increasing the 2012 commercial and recreational fishing catch limits for the species from 7.53 million pounds to 8.08 million pounds as of June 1.

“Fishermen should continue to see bigger fish and larger catches as the population rebounds,” said Sam Rauch, NOAA’s acting assistant administrator for fisheries.

While it all seems like good news, NOAA Fisheries also noted that as the population of red snapper grows and the fish get bigger, recreational fishermen are catching their quota faster, which results in shorter seasons.

“How’s that for fishery management, as the population of fish grows the days which anglers are allowed on the water is reduced,” noted Jim Donofrio, executive director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA). “When fish stocks are low, managers stop us from fishing to protect the fish, yet as the population grows and the stocks become more plentiful, managers do the exact same thing, they stop us from fishing to protect the fish”

“Responsible resource management has been replaced by a complex set of contradictory constraints and arbitrary rules, all thanks to an act of Congress,” Donofrio said, alluding to the 2006 reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act which RFA believes must be amended to address the issue of decreased access and increased stock size.

While statutory overfishing of Gulf of Mexico red snapper is no longer occurring, the 2012 recreational season will last for only 40 days, closing on July 10. Although shorter than the 48-day season anglers had in 2011 when overfishing stock was still taking place, NOAA Fisheries said this year’s season would have been even shorter without the new catch increase.

According to NOAA Fisheries, it was fishing pressure in the mid-1900’s which depleted the red snapper population resulting in strict management measures including major adjustments to seasons, size limits and bag limits for anglers, and implementation of a catch share program for the commercial sector. NOAA’s release announcing the end of overfishing noted that strict commercial and recreational management measures were implemented in 2007, the same year that the reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Act was signed into law, and went on to claim how “fishermen are now seeing the benefits of these measures, and these actions are leading to increased catches.”

RFA said the NOAA release was mostly spin, short on substance and heavy on the hype.

“It’s obvious that it wasn’t a longtime NOAA Fisheries veteran who wrote this press release, certainly not someone who truly understands the Gulf fishery or has been around since the bycatch mortality arguments were made in the shrimp industry a decade ago,” said Donofrio.

“I would guess that the fact that over 90% of the shrimp consumed in the United States today is now imported from overseas has had a much bigger impact on red snapper than the newly minted catch shares scheme, but apparently the new Communications and External Affairs team at NOAA is spinning a different fish tale.”

According to recent NOAA studies, even with use of bycatch reduction devices, the shrimp fishery in the Gulf of Mexico was responsible for the removal of approximately 25 to 45 million juvenile red snapper each year as recently as 2006, a number which represents nearly one half the amount taken in directed recreational and commercial snapper fisheries combined. In recent years, particularly since the BP oil spill and several natural disasters, imports and farms have challenged the Gulf of Mexico's shrimp industry as cheaper Asian options have undercut America's wild harvested shrimp fishery.

"The bycatch of young red snapper was horrific with these fish trapped in the shrimp weirs, and in reality the collapse of the shrimp industry in the Gulf has been a boon to the red snapper population. However, recreational anglers really won't get a break until Congress gets involved and fixes problems created by the Magnuson-Stevens Act reauthorization back in 2007," said Donofrio.

RFA points out that a regulatory package is currently being discussed by staff members at the House Natural Resources Committee which could help correct the major problems with the present law. However, Donofrio said that key Committee members will need to get heavily involved in the process to ensure that any fisheries reform bill has the language necessary to get the job done.

"Some folks are pushing for language which would only provide relief in those fisheries that a stock assessment hasn't been conducted in the past 5 years, which wouldn't do anything to help with red snapper," Donofrio said. "The latest news on red snapper is based on an updated population assessment, and a new population assessment is scheduled for red snapper later this summer, so it's not hard to find the flaws in that logic."

RFA also warned anglers to be careful of online forms and chain letters being circulated by groups claiming to have anglers' best interests at heart. Donofrio noted that in April, an email campaign by Pew Environment Group's Holly Binns encouraged individuals to sign on to a chain letter to help "establish new protections for important spawning sites and critical habitats."

By addressing federal managers in the Southeast, Binns is asking for the public's help in pushing for 'no take' spawning reserves in the Southeast calling them "good prenatal care: We take extra care of new moms to ensure a healthy start for the next generation."

"The letter specifically mentions how a network of spawning reserves would have broad benefits for a range of reef fish, but it fails to explain how Pew and their allies have used similar letter-writing campaigns to arbitrarily shut down angler access across the globe through complex no-access reserves," said Donofrio. "Pew obviously doesn't care about stock assessments or need for improved science and data collection, they're simply trying to build a base of support for no-take, zero-access marine reserves in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico."

RFA is also concerned that the Reef Fish Amendment 26 passed in 2007 at the urging of environmental advocates like Binns which established an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) program on red snapper in the Gulf is clearly not reflective of the best interest of all local fishermen.

"These commercial IFQ permit holders are experiencing the full benefit of a rebuilt red snapper fishery, not the individual anglers," said Donofrio, adding "the red snapper IFQ program has clearly made winners and losers, unfortunately it's the recreational sector that's losing out on this biological success."

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