



PRESS RELEASE

Recreational Fishing Alliance

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RFA WELCOMES NEW SUPPORT FOR MAGNUSON REFORM Calls On Industry & Congress to Unite in Effort to Fix Federal Fisheries Law

Nearly 5 years of political pressure by grassroots political activism along the coast seems to be paying off for recreational fishermen and business owners, as a new piece of legislation introduced before Congress last week (HR 2304) shows that Congress is beginning to recognize the plight of the saltwater angler.

According to the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) which has publicly led the charge for fisheries reform, the Fishery Science Improvement Act (FSIA) sponsored by Rep. Rob Wittman (R-VA) and supported by the Congressional Sportsman's Caucus attempts to address some of the key issues impacting angler access to healthy, rebuilding fisheries stock. In a release issued by the legislative caucus last Friday, HR2304 would address key elements of the current Magnuson Stevens Act, including setting of annual catch limits (ACLs) and accountability measures (AMs) using current scientific stock assessments as well as extending rebuilding deadlines for non-overfished stocks of fish.

In light of the current fisheries train wreck now derailing the livelihood of so many members of America's recreational fishing industry, RFA Executive Director Jim Donofrio praised the legislative caucus for recognizing the need for management flexibility in saltwater fisheries. "This has been a long battle for our RFA members, not only in getting more legislators onboard with Magnuson reform, but especially in getting some of our friends in the industry to jump onboard," he said. "RFA has taken some heat these last few years for arguing against the use of annual catch limits and accountability measures in the recreational sector while pleading for relief from arbitrary deadlines, so our thanks to Rep. Wittman and his Caucus members for pledging to get involved in Magnuson reform."

RFA has thoroughly reviewed the legislation and believes there is good, straightforward language included which can help alleviate access problems in many fisheries, though Donofrio hopes that Caucus members will be willing to work with the Congressional representatives who've been spearheading Magnuson reform since 2007. "As RFA has said all along, our recreational fishermen cannot be managed the same as commercials, and ACL's and quota paybacks cannot be used in our sector when the survey data is so hopelessly flawed."

While RFA supports much of the language in the bill, the political action organization does have concerns with some language and is hopeful the issue will carry over into further Congressional conversations as various reform bills are discussed. "HR 2304 would suspend ACLs in all fisheries, including the commercial sector, and that's a dangerous door to open," Donofrio said. "In theory, commercial landings are accountable in pounds of fish, so ACLs should be left in place in that sector. Our community however cannot be held to the same rigid standard when we rely on random surveys to track trends in participation and theoretical numbers of fish landed," he said.

"While suspension of ACLs may have an immediate positive impact on the recreational sector, RFA is bound by a mission to protect fishermen, fishing industry and the fish, which means we must evaluate the overall conservation impacts which might result from the bill's passage," Donofrio said. "We're also concerned that specific language to extend rebuilding deadlines for non-overfished stocks isn't included in the final bill. RFA will need to be active working with the sponsors to ensure this well-intended bill does not produce unintended negative consequences for our coastal fisheries, or for our coastal fishermen," Donofrio said.

Ever since the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSRA) was passed by unanimous consent in the Senate in 2006, [RFA has been sounding the alarm](#) on diminishing angler access; within months of being signed into law in 2007, a bipartisan coalition of coastal Congressmen spearheaded efforts to see it reformed with the incorporation of much-needed management flexibility within federal fisheries law.

“RFA and our coastal allies saw this train wreck coming from the very beginning, which is why we’re thankful for the support of representatives like Jon Runyan (R-NJ), Walter Jones (R-NC), John Mica (R-FL), Barney Frank (D-MA) and of course Frank Pallone (D-NJ) for taking what’s been mostly a solitary stand for Magnuson reform up to this point,” Donofrio said, adding “RFA hopes that the caucus members will show willingness to discuss our coastal fisheries problems with these coastal congressional leaders who’ve championed efforts to fix these flaws.”

Members of RFA’s national board of directors expressed cautious optimism that this new support for fisheries management flexibility now embraced by members of the national sportfishing industry, together with broader congressional willingness to open Magnuson for reform, showed that the recreational community could be turning a corner. “RFA has held firmly with our belief that it’s inappropriate to force annual catch limits and accountability measures upon the recreational sector until adequate science programs are undertaken by NMFS,” explained RFA board chairman Bob Healey, Jr. of Viking Yachts. “While this bill doesn’t do everything that RFA has requested and continues to request, RFA members should take pride in knowing that their voice is starting to get the full attention of Congress and the industry,” Healey said.

“While I certainly commend the associations who have put this legislation together, I still have two concerns,” added fellow RFA board member, Jack Holmes, President of the Southern Kingfish Association. “This is still a stop gap measure because Magnuson is still not changed. Magnuson’s re-authorization in 2006, if you will recall, was unanimously approved by all of these groups and has been a complete disaster, costing the marine and tackle industry millions of dollars, jobs, and many people’s livelihood. The root of the problem is still the very people who are paid to follow the mandates of Magnuson. They’ve had five years to figure out how to measure at least the stocks that are most commonly fished and still don’t have a plan.” Holmes added “There needs to be accountability by the very people taxpayers pay to do a job. This bill certainly sends a very strong message but does not solve all the problems.”

“On behalf of the members of NACO, I applaud this new effort to address one of the requirements of the 2007 reauthorized MSRA,” said RFA board member Capt. Bob Zales, II, president of the National Association of Charterboat Operators (NACO). “The unintended consequence of having the NMFS rush to implement ACLs and AMs on all fisheries has clearly affected all fishermen and their communities by eliminating fishermen and costing jobs. It is clear that the reauthorized MSA is too restrictive.” Zales also praised the caucus members for their willingness to help fix the fisheries problems along the coast, adding “It is wonderful to see all the various organizations finally come together to support what many of us have pushed for since before the reauthorization.”

Donofrio said there are several bills waiting to be heard by Congressional committee which address problems brought about by the 2006 MSA reauthorization, but he said he’s hopeful that a more comprehensive package will get a proper, open debate in Congress. “The quality of data used to run assessment models and determine the harvest estimates for recreational anglers is critical to the overall quality of the stock assessment, which is precisely why RFA members have been rallying for assistance,” Donofrio said, referencing the February 24, 2010 rally in Washington DC in a call for fisheries reform.

“When NOAA moved \$36 million away from cooperative research and towards catch shares in their 2012 budget, it only confirmed what RFA has said all along that the agency is not willing to make meaningful improvements to stock assessment and data collection, meaning our only hope, regrettably, is through an Act of Congress,” Donofrio said. “Perhaps the national industry doesn’t always like the way our members hammer away at the issue, but if you’re going to drive home a message I think a hammer is probably the best tool to use,” he said.

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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.