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“There are No Free Fish” Longer and Longer State Seasons Force Regulators to Offset with Shorter Seasons in Federal Waters

The Charter Fisherman’s Association and the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders’ Alliance issued a joint statement of concern today in response to recent projections for the length of the 2017 federal recreational red snapper season:

The federal recreational red snapper season is shrinking because the five Gulf States have continued to increase their noncompliant state waters seasons, robbing the public of days to fish red snapper in federal waters. These noncompliant state seasons are cutting off public access to this public resource in federal waters.

The rebound of the red snapper fishery is a success story. As a result of decades of work by commercial, charter and recreational fishermen, red snapper have recovered from the brink of disaster. In fact, federal regulators have more than doubled the recreational quota in the last several years in response to the growing red snapper population. But there are no free fish: Longer seasons in state waters lead directly to shorter seasons in federal waters.

The facts matter. First, more red snapper are being caught inside state waters than ever before. Since the Gulf-wide recreational quota can be caught in either state or federal waters, catching more of the quota in state waters means that less of the quota can be caught in federal waters. So as the five Gulf States continue to set longer state fishing seasons that are noncompliant with scientific advice, it should come as no surprise that the recreational fishing season in federal waters shrinks in response.

Second, this problem was exacerbated when state waters in Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana were extended out to nine nautical miles last year. More red snapper were caught in this larger state waters area than in the previously smaller state waters area, which contributed to the federal season being further shortened to protect this valuable fishery.

Additionally, the private recreational subsector overfished its allocation in 2016, catching 125 percent of its quota. That overage must be made up in this year’s

season, which means a smaller 2017 recreational quota. This will shorten the federal private angler fishing season even more.

It's time to solve this problem, before the federal season shrinks to zero days. The rubber is about to hit the road in 2017, and we are flying an early warning flag. National Marine Fisheries Service estimates that up to 80 percent of the recreational red snapper quota will be caught in state waters this year. This would leave only 20 percent of the quota for a federal recreational season, which is about 700,000 pounds of red snapper for the entire Gulf from roughly Brownsville, TX to Key West, FL from 9 to 200 miles offshore. If any Gulf State extends its state season or if more recreational anglers fish in 2017, that 20 percent shrinks even further to the point where there is a distinct possibility that there will be a zero day federal recreational season this year.

We strongly urge science and long-term thinking to guide decisions regarding this fishery. Working together, fishermen saved this fishery, and we can solve these problems if we recognize the real cause and together set out to advocate for cooperation and constructive solutions.

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Media Contacts

Charter Fisherman's Association – Capt. Shane Cantrell, Executive Director, 512-639-9188
Shareholders' Alliance – Eric Brazer, Deputy Director, 919-451-1971