



Official Statement of the **Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance** **Gulf Fishermen's Association** **Charter Fisherman's Association**

Extension of State Waters Boundaries in the Gulf of Mexico.

The most recent in this ostensibly endless charade of red snapper politics involves a seemingly simple and inconspicuous measure being pushed by Senator Vitter – to extend state waters boundaries in the Gulf of Mexico from the existing 3 nautical mile boundary out to 9 nautical miles (10.3 statute miles). However, the unintended consequences of such an idea will fall swift and hard on the backs of the fishermen this misguided proposal is trying to help.

The five Gulf States deliberately set recreational red snapper fishing seasons in their state waters to conflict with and undermine federal regulations. In 2014, all five Gulf States allowed additional fishing days for red snapper in state waters; about half of the entire recreational quota (2 million pounds of the 4.3 million pound catch target) was caught in state waters under these non-compliant regulations. In 2015, all five Gulf States went noncompliant again; and we expect that when the numbers finally come in, we'll see (once again) that a large portion of red snapper are reported as being caught in state waters.

So what do we expect to happen when Congress triples the state waters area in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi? Common sense says that an even larger proportion of red snapper will come out of state waters.

This is why the federal recreational red snapper season keeps getting shorter and shorter.

In the Gulf of Mexico, there is a single overall recreational quota. So whether red snapper are caught in state waters or federal waters, this catch is deducted from this single quota. By tripling the state waters fishing area, Congress is inviting an even larger amount of red snapper to be caught in state waters. This will directly shorten the federal private angler red snapper season even further. This could lead to more recreational quota overages, which have occurred in 21 of the last 24 years. When this happens, the overages come off the top of next year, which reduces that year's quota, compounding the problem of shortening federal recreational season.

These overages also undermine the sustainability of Gulf red snapper – taking to many fish out of the ocean today leads to fewer fish to catch tomorrow. This hurts commercial fishermen and the American seafood consumer who can now access Gulf red snapper 365 days a year thanks to a stable commercial management system. And let's not forget about the federally-permitted charter

boats – the sector of the fishery that provides the most public access to Gulf red snapper – who are not allowed to fish in state waters, which makes them the ones most directly impacted by shortening federal seasons caused by the Gulf States.

Complicating this issue even further, Senator Vitter’s rider would only apply to reef fish (snappers, groupers, tilefish). However, fishermen catch many other fish in the Gulf inside of 9 nautical miles. In this case, fishermen fishing 8 miles offshore for red snapper are fishing in state waters while fishermen fishing for king mackerel in the exact same area at the same time with the same fishing gear would be fishing in federal waters. Fishing regulations are already complex enough; we don’t need Senator Vitter or others creating more confusion.

And let us not forget how this temporary measure, in place today but set to expire on December 31, 2015, was approved in the first place – it was tacked onto a federal “must pass” appropriations Bill. Last time we checked, taking advantage of critical federal legislation to push an unrelated personal issue isn’t the right way to manage a public resource.

Congress has already approved a process by which people directly involved in fisheries management get together and hash out management plans – it’s called the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. While it is far from perfect, the Gulf Council more than adequately represents state interests. In fact, 16 of the 17 voting member of the Gulf Council have been approved by the Governors of the Gulf States, and Gulf state employees make up nearly a third of those voting members.

So when the five Gulf States cry foul over shortening federal recreational red snapper seasons, they need only to look in the mirror to see the problem.

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