

National Fisherman

Sustainability in the crosshairs

By Eric Brazer October 5, 2017



The red snapper tug of war in the Gulf of Mexico is being stretched to the limit in 2017, and the recreational fish grab is alive and well.

The first yank on the line came in mid-June when the U.S. Department of Commerce threw science out the window and extended the federal recreational red snapper season from three to 42 days. Yes, a 1,300 percent increase for a sector that has exceeded its quota 22 of the last 26 years. We don't blame individual recreational anglers for this trend; we hold their leadership responsible for failing to fix a problem that has persisted for a quarter century.

To its credit, NOAA confirmed the extension would “necessarily mean that the private recreational sector will substantially exceed its annual catch limit” and that “this approach may delay the ultimate rebuilding of the stock by as many as six years.” We'll see what the judge says about this extension.

Commercial fishermen — who have not exceeded their red snapper quota since the individual fishing quota system was implemented in 2007 — reacted strongly to this reward for bad behavior. Commercial fishermen shouldn't be stuck paying the overdraft fees when the recreational sector overdraws the account... again.

The next jerk came in late June, when Commerce tipped the scales of the Gulf council in favor of the well-funded recreational lobby. The only commercial red snapper fisherman ever appointed to the council was replaced by a red snapper scientist with strong ties to the Coastal Conservation Association. Rubbing salt into the wound, a two-term charter fishing business leader was replaced with a representative from Yamaha.

Then, in July, a series of legislative proposals dropped in Congress, raising a number of red flags. Most of these bills would create loopholes that allow the recreational sector to exceed their quotas (going so far as to require commercial fishermen to pay back those overages) and force the Gulf council to perpetually consider snatching quota from commercial fishermen and gifting it to the recreational sector.

Commercial fishermen in the gulf support improving management for private anglers, but it must be built on science and ensure accountability. Taking quota away from the commercial and charter fishermen doesn't solve the problem — in fact it creates new ones.

Commercial fishermen have been pulling back on the line, racking up some notable wins. First, we took the Department of Commerce to court over their decision to forcibly take 350,000 pounds of red snapper away from commercial fishermen and hand it over to the recreational sector as a reward for their overharvesting. We won the lawsuit, and that quota was returned to commercial fishermen.

We also joined forces with fellow fishermen in Alaska, California and New England to protect the Magnuson-Stevens Act and spearhead bipartisan legislation that will support the next generation of commercial fishermen.

But our biggest success remains the fact that the red snapper quota for all fishermen in the gulf nearly tripled in the last 10 years, from 5 million pounds in 2008 to 14 million pounds today. The commercial IFQ program has been good to all fishermen, commercial and recreational alike.

The red snapper quota is evenly split about 50-50 between commercial and recreational sectors, while gulf recreational fishermen have access to roughly 80 percent of the most popular fish species, including amberjack, red drum, speckled trout, king mackerel and triggerfish. Reallocating more fish to the recreational sector at the expense of the commercial sector does nothing to solve the fundamental problems in the red snapper fishery — namely, that nobody knows precisely how many recreational red snapper fishermen there are or how many fish they catch.

Ninety-seven percent of Americans get their access to fresh fish by purchasing it in restaurants, grocery stores and fish markets that commercial fishermen supply. Red snapper is a public resource, and commercial fishermen provide public access to millions of consumers who don't catch their own. Reallocation takes away that access.

The gulf's fight is everyone's fight. It's a fight to protect our businesses and put the long-term supply of fish first, to commit to science-based management, to insist on accountability across all sectors, to invest in the future generation and to defend the foundation of our nation's fisheries — the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

We'll keep digging in our heels, and we call on others to join us in the struggle.

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