

Federal legislation would change how red snapper fishing is regulated

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A Louisiana congressman is fighting to overhaul federal fisheries regulations, including those governing popular charter boats that lure tourists from around the country to the Pensacola area to fish for red snapper.

U.S. Rep. Garrett Graves, a Republican, sponsored the Modern Fish Act and the Red Snapper Act of 2017. Both bills passed the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources this month and should be debated by the full House early next year.

"Passage of these landmark policy changes represent major movement toward regional flexibility, tailored management strategies that favor local over federal control, better data collection and enhanced responsiveness to the needs of recreational anglers and mixed use fisheries," Graves said in a news release.

The bills have drawn opposition from groups including the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance and the Environmental Defense Fund. The groups say existing regulations are working and the proposed changes are too far reaching and risk further depleting already threatened fisheries.

Graves' Modern Fish Act would make broad changes to the Magnuson-Stevens Act, which has governed federal fisheries since 1976.

The Red Snapper Act would allow states to regulate charter snapper fishing in some federal waters. In the news release, Graves said the act will "allow states to work with federal fisheries managers to expand access for recreational fishing to 25 miles or to a depth of 150 into the Gulf of Mexico."

He said the move would give states more autonomy in deciding how the red snapper catch is regulated.

"Fishing pressures are different in the varying regions of our country and management strategies should be tailored by region," he said.

Eric Brazer, deputy director of the Galveston, Texas-based Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance, said the bills would jeopardize 40 years of progress in the management of federal fisheries. The alliance includes commercial snapper and grouper fisherman from around the Gulf.

Brazer said the Magnuson-Stevens Act is doing what it was intended to do by helping ensure the long-term survival of critical fish species.

Handing over snapper regulations for charter fishing to the states would be better done as a pilot program, he said.

"Then you would have measures in place to make sure something doesn't go horribly awry," he said. "The Graves (red snapper) bill is a creative idea, but it falls short of something our organization can approve."

But Kurt Schnupp, dock manager at the Pensacola Beach Marina, said something needs to be done to ensure the continued survival of the region's charter fishing industry.

Schnupp schedules fishing tours for many of the boats housed at the marina. The limited 2017 snapper season and frequent changes to catch rules make it difficult for charter fishermen to build their businesses, he said.

"They keep changing the rules in the middle of the race. The regulatory groups should look forward enough to give the fishermen time to react," he said.

Customers are disappointed when they spend hundreds of dollars to book a charter fishing trip during their annual vacation only to learn that red snapper have been declared off limits during the time they are in town, he said.

"Red snapper is the iconic fish of this region and it is what people look forward to catching whenever they go out on a charter," he said.

Schnupp said charter fishermen want to work with scientists and regulators to ensure the continued survival of specific fisheries, but they also want reasonable catch guidelines.

<http://www.pnj.com/story/news/local/pensacola/beaches/2017/12/19/federal-legislation-would-change-how-red-snapper-fishing-regulated/961500001/>