



## Official Statement of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance

### NMFS Gets It Wrong On Red Snapper Reallocation.

The National Marine Fisheries Service has formally announced its decision to penalize commercial red snapper fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico for adhering to their legally-required sustainable catch limits. Years of illegal recreational sector mismanagement, massive recreational sector overharvesting, and extreme political pressure have culminated with the judgment that the only fair and equitable response is to take red snapper off the plates of American seafood consumers and undermine successful fishing businesses. NMFS's policy is evidently to reward those who exceeded their catch limits with an increased allocation, by taking fish away from those who worked hard within the law to develop sustainable fishing practices with full accountability.

While not the fault of individual recreational anglers, it is a fact that the recreational sector has overharvested for nearly a quarter century, removing millions of pounds of fish more than scientists intended. It is true that some of the assumptions NMFS made when estimating these catches were determined to be faulty. But what NMFS conveniently downplays is that, when these errors were corrected, the recreational sector was apparently overharvesting *even more than* anyone had thought. But instead of rectifying that problem, NMFS concluded that since the recreational sector was catching more fish in the past, it should get more fish in the future. The efforts of the commercial sector to design a better management system that guarantees adherence to its catch limits counted for nothing.

Recreational anglers complain that they need more fish because the fishing season for red snapper in federal waters is so short. But approximately half of the recreational sector's quota is used up during fishing seasons in state waters. The Gulf States are lengthening their recreational fishing seasons every year, which only uses up more quota and forces a further reduction in the length of the season in federal waters. NMFS freely admits that reallocating more fish to the recreational sector will not remedy the problem of shortened fishing seasons in federal waters. So at the end of the day, NMFS is now forcing the commercial sector to subsidize these increasingly non-compliant state fishing seasons. There is nothing fair or equitable about this.

Apart from the inequities of reallocation, NMFS's own studies show that it will exacerbate depletion of the red snapper stock in half of the Gulf of Mexico. Scientific surveys in the past several years show an alarming decline in the spawning stock in the Eastern Gulf. Because the recreational fishery is concentrated in that region, reallocating more fish to that sector will put further pressure on this dwindling resource. NMFS ignored this problem, concluding that since the Eastern Gulf spawning stock is decreasing anyway, exacerbating the decline is immaterial. For

an agency entrusted with protecting and restoring the long-term health and stability of the fishery, this conclusion is troubling to say the least.

The bottom line is that reallocation violates numerous legal requirements, frustrates management objectives, and conflicts with the Gulf Council's allocation policy. NMFS should have taken a stand for resource conservation and responsible fisheries management and disapproved it.

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