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## Senate unanimously passes "compromise" recreational fishing bill

By Steve Bittenbender

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The U.S. Senate on Monday, 17 December, unanimously passed a bill that would urge regional management councils to revise policies and take into account the needs of anglers in mixed-use fisheries.

The Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act, proposed by U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Mississippi), would require the Government Accountability Office to review how the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic management councils

allocate catch limits in fisheries shared by commercial and recreational fishermen. It also would encourage the two councils to find alternative methods for managing recreational fisheries.

“I appreciate the hard work of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to get this bill passed, but there is still more work to be done,” Wicker said in a statement. “I look forward to continuing our efforts to modernize federal fishing policies on the Gulf Coast and to support our fishermen.”

Monday’s vote comes after Wicker and members of the sportfishing industry stepped up their efforts to get the bill passed before the 115th Congress’ term ends. Wicker filed the bill in July 2017, and the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee advanced the bill in June.

However, the bill coming out of the committee met with serious resistance from commercial interest groups, who feared the bill would be detrimental to their industry. The Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders’ Alliance as recently as last month said it opposed the bill as written.

Eric Brazer, the alliance's deputy director, told SeafoodSource that the version the Senate approved contained many changes they wanted. That included striking a ban on limited access privilege programs and removing Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Council allocation review requirements that would have been punitive to commercial fishermen.

"The version of the Modern Fish Act that passed today is an improvement over the version that passed out of the committee, with many of our critical concerns being addressed," the alliance said in a statement after the Senate's vote. "Moving forward, the bill allows an opportunity for fishermen to continue to provide input on these issues and for the issues to be objectively reviewed."

In a statement from Share the Gulf, its co-chair, Nick Wallace, called the bill on Monday passed a compromise that helps anglers without harming commercial fishermen.

"Fishing and seafood are important to our economy, heritage, and our way of life in the Gulf," Wallace said. "As a chef, I know that access to local fish for seafood-lovers is critical, but maintaining smart policies that keep anglers coming to the Gulf is also important. We have seen an incredible comeback here in the Gulf with fish like red snapper, and I hope our leaders in Washington and down here in the Gulf can continue to work together to keep our fisheries strong and accessible to all Gulf residents."

Not everyone, however, signaled Monday's vote as a victory.

Greg DiDomenico, executive director of the Garden State Seafood Association, lamented that the time and energy directed toward Wicker's bill in the Senate could have been better used for discussing a Magnuson-Stevens Act reauthorization. If Wicker's bill becomes law, the best outcome might be that the public gets a truer sense of the impact the recreational industry has on Southeastern fisheries.

"This does not get us the real reform that both industries need," DiDomenico told SeafoodSource.

The push to revise recreational management policies comes on the heels of the federal government relaxing some regulations in the Gulf. Earlier this year, Gulf states started a two-year pilot to manage the red snapper recreational fishery in federal waters.

"This has been a tremendous year of progress on recreational fishing issues, driven by innovative thinking at the regional level," said Matt Tinning, an associate vice president with the Environmental Defense Fund. "The successful start of pilots testing state management of private anglers in the Gulf of Mexico and approval of new data collection systems represent important milestones for fisheries management in this country. We look forward to working under the legislation advanced by the Senate today, if it is enacted, to ensure that sustainable access to fisheries is maintained both for anglers who fish themselves and for the rest of the country that relies on commercial fishermen to access federal fishery resources."

The measure will now head to the House for its consideration, and its members are next scheduled to meet on Wednesday 19 December. Earlier this year, the House approved language

to revamp recreational fishery management in its Magnuson-Stevens Act reauthorization bill. However, that bill [never received a hearing in the Senate](#).

If the House fails to act on the bill before this Congress' term ends, the process [must start over in the next Congress](#), which begins next month.



Steve Bittenbender  
*Contributing Editor*  
[freelancehack@gmail.com](mailto:freelancehack@gmail.com)  
[@freelancehack](#)

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