

More groups weigh in on red snapper actions

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A commercial fishing group is the latest to express hope that a test program that gives states more control over recreational red snapper fishing will benefit the Gulf of Mexico fishery overall.

Louisiana's season started Friday and will remain open until state figures show the federally approved quota of 743,000 pounds for sport fishermen has been met.

The action comes after the state Wildlife and Fisheries Department won federal approval last month to oversee fishing of the popular species in federal waters up to 200 miles offshore both this year and in 2019.

Under the Exempted Fishing Permit, or EFP, sport fishermen are limited to two red snapper a day at least 16 inches in length. The state will use its LA Creel program to monitor catch totals.

Sport fishing groups, in earlier comments, welcomed the action.

Last week, it drew qualified praise from the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance, which represents commercial red snapper fishermen.

"The Shareholders' Alliance has always supported the EFP proces because it takes fishermen's creative ideas and puts them in the hands of regional managers to implement," the group said in a prepared statement. "Critical to the success of the EFPs, however, are meaningful accountability measures as well as accurate and timely catch monitoring systems."

The test program, if implemented with real-time data collection, could prevent overfishing while allowing increased and more-flexible access for sport fishermen, the alliance says.

"This would help private anglers without hurting commercial fishermen," the group added.

It says use of federally certified self-reporting tools, such as Louisiana's LA Creel Survey, and mandatory catch reporting will help improve data collection, reduce uncertainty and ultimately increase sustainable access to the Gulf's public fishery resources.

"Our core belief is that fisheries management should be founded on strong science and individual accountability, as supported by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management

Act, and these EFPs are an encouraging step in that direction for the private angler sector,” the alliance says.

Louisiana officials said they hope the test program will lead to turning over more authority to states to set red snapper seasons off their coast in the long-term.

Recreational fishermen have for years complained that federal authorities have set overly restrictive catch limits and unnecessarily short seasons for red snapper despite a rebound in the species’ numbers. Environmental and conservation groups counter that the shortened seasons are necessary to help the species meet federal targets for rebounding after years of severe overfishing.

Red snapper was removed last week from the federal government’s “overfished” list, but whether that will lead to lessened catch restrictions for anglers remains uncertain.

Environmentalists and some commercial fishing interests have raised concerns that the removal, along with test programs and bills in Congress aimed at giving states more control, will reverse gains for red snapper and other fish species.

The Gulf Restoration Network along with Mississippi Commercial Fisheries United credit the Magnuson Act and strong federal enforcement for increasing snapper and other species that had long been overfished.

“Strict adherence to total allowable catch rates while also seeking optimum yield is a delicate balancing act that has granted our nation the ability to fully utilize our marine resources while also ensuring the sustainability of the fisheries for generations to come,” Ryan Bradley, the Mississippi group’s director, said in a news release. “The tenets of the MSA are deeply rooted in science and accountability that depend on all user groups to be accountable for every fish pulled from the ocean.”

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