



Gulf States Advance Red Snapper Exempted Fishing Permits

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Red snapper has been the center of a “who can manage it better” battle for the last several years. In federal waters, red snapper management is dictated by the [Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act](#) (MSA) and falls under the jurisdiction of the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) (NOAA). Despite a successful track history of rebuilding stocks ([44 stocks have rebuilt in 18 years and 90% of fisheries managed are not overfished](#)), a few, very vocal recreational lobbying groups claim NOAA cannot effectively manage red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. Yet, in the last ten years, red snapper populations have rebounded, the population is no longer considered overfished, quotas have tripled, and the average fish size has increased.

Many in the Gulf think the science-based catch limits and accountability measures have significantly contributed to rebounding red snapper populations. Commercial and charter reef fish fishermen like myself applaud the efforts of NOAA and are proud of the part industry has played in rebuilding the fishery. Through the [Individual Fishing Quota](#) (IFQ) program, we have stayed under our science-based quota every year since the program was implemented.

Management of red snapper is complex, however, given that the species swims in both state and federal waters. Inconsistent management has led the private angler sector to exceed its science-based quota in [23 of the last 27 years](#). Recreational fishermen are continually frustrated, understandably so, by shortening seasons in federal waters because states have lengthened their seasons.

In 2015, some in the recreational sector pushed the [Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council](#) (Gulf Council) to [reallocate quota from the commercial sector to private anglers](#). While the Gulf Council initially approved the reallocation, the amendment was ultimately [vacated in court](#) because it violated the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

The allocation debate often centers on the belief that NOAA's fisheries data are not accurate enough to give a fair picture of catch, which underpins decisions about allocation. The five Gulf States have been developing their own systems to track landings and effort in order to collect more up-to-date information on recreational fishing impacts. These systems have been used in state waters the last few years and are in the process of being certified by NOAA. In late 2017, [La Creel](#), the reporting system created by Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, [achieved certification](#).

Last month, NOAA took another step and, with support of the Gulf Council, [approved exempted fishing permits \(EFPs\) for each state](#). EFPs can [allow limited fishing activities that are otherwise prohibited](#) in order to test new ideas in a fishery. Under these recently approved EFPs, states can set red snapper seasons (for private anglers only) in both state and federal waters, test their private angler reporting systems, and collect recreational landings data.

The state-set season for private anglers under the EFPs starts between May 25 and June 1, marking the first year of the states' management of private anglers fishing for red snapper in federal waters. Accountability and accurate catch reporting are vital to the success of these programs. The states need to demonstrate that they can, in fact, capture real-time data from the recreational sector.

Commercial and charter fishermen, like myself, [support the EFPs process](#) because it takes fishermen's creative ideas and allows them to be tested on the water. These EFPs did not include the commercial and charter-for-hire sectors, allowing them to keep fishing under federal management, which these sectors generally support. Additionally, this option for managing private anglers helps recreational fishermen without impacting charter and commercial fishermen's seasons ([charter-for-hire red snapper season will run June 1-July 22](#) and commercial snapper fishermen can fish year-round). All sectors of the snapper fishery recognize that something needs to change for the private anglers, and the EFPs, if implemented properly, could provide the avenue for a change that benefits everyone.

While fishermen, state managers, NOAA and the Gulf Council are working on the ground to improve regional issues with EFPs, Congress is advancing harmful legislation that could reverse many of the fishery management successes we've seen. [H.R. 200](#) (Strengthening Fishing Communities and Increasing Flexibility in Fisheries Management Act of 2017) contains language that will make the EFP process more burdensome, potentially blocking fishermen-led ideas from being tested on the water. This bill would undermine the exact process that delivered the bills' sponsors what they wanted: more time to fish. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. H.R. 200 would also threaten the reliance on best-available science and dilute the importance of annual catch limits that have contributed to red snapper's rebound. Both H.R. 200 and [S. 1520](#) (The Modern Fish Act) would require reallocation reviews on dozens of stocks, leaving little time for the fishery management councils to do anything else like review and approve innovative EFPs, improve data collection or revise regulations.

Congress needs to work with those of us on the ground and most knowledgeable in Gulf fisheries to find ways to solve problems, instead of creating federal legislation that will be counterproductive to conservation, undermine effective fishery management, and threaten [the long track record of recovering stocks, thanks to Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act](#).

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