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Shareholders Alliance supports red snapper rules, but still seeks accountability

By Steve Bittenbender
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A commercial fishing group has come out in support of an initiative that gives states along the Gulf of Mexico more control of managing the red snapper recreational fisheries.

Late last month, as Louisiana opened its recreational fishery, the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders Alliance said the exempted fishing permits approved for a two-year pilot program earlier this year by NOAA Fisheries shows that federal officials are willing to entertain and implement “creative ideas” brought forward by fishermen.

However, the alliance also wants to see some accountability along with that flexibility, and the organization is optimistic from what it sees out of Louisiana.

“These EFPs, if implemented with real-time data collection, could prevent overfishing, while at the same time could allow increased and more flexible access for the private angler sector,” the group said in a statement. “This would help private anglers without hurting commercial fishermen. The use of NOAA-certified self-reporting tools such as the State of Louisiana’s LA

Creel Survey, and mandatory catch reporting, would help improve data collection, reduce uncertainty and ultimately increase sustainable access to the Gulf's public fishery resources.”

Louisiana's recreational fishery will allow anglers to catch two fish a day that are at least 16 inches in length. The catch limit for the recreational fishery is set at 743,000 pounds.

The new red snapper management plans come at a time when optimism is growing about the species' presence in the Gulf. Last month in its State of the Fisheries report to Congress, NOAA officials formally removed red snapper from its overfished list. While the species population still tilts heavily toward younger fish and not the older fish, who can lay more eggs, the spawning biomass nevertheless tripled over a 10-year period through 2015.

Such trends give Bubba Cochrane, president of the alliance, hope that he can see his teenage son work in the industry. It also proves to him that science-based management practices work.

“This rebound has helped commercial fisherman grow their business and, in my case, helped me to teach my son about this great industry,” said Cochrane in a statement on the start of 2018 Capitol Hill Ocean Week. “My hope is to instill in him the understanding that we must protect the resource while we sustainably harvest it for seafood consumers across the country, whether they live in coastal Texas like we do or whether they live inland a thousand miles from the ocean.”

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