

## Congress is considering big changes to longstanding federal fisheries regulatory act

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Eric Brazer likens federal fisheries management to a bank account held jointly by commercial fisherman, charter fishermen, restaurants and others who depend on a specific fish for their livelihood.

If one user overdraws the account, there is nothing left for the others, said Brazer, deputy director of the Galveston, Texas-based Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance, which includes commercial snapper and grouper fishermen from around the Gulf.

Brazer's organization is one of many groups keeping a close eye on two bills being debated in Congress. A House bill by Rep. Don Young, an Alaska Republican, and a Senate bill by Sen. Roger Wicker, a Mississippi Republican, could lead to significant changes in the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Brazer's organization doesn't like either bill.

"Our concern is they will create loopholes that will allow for overfishing and allow many more fish to be taken than what they are claiming," said Brazer, who supports keeping the basic framework of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, which has governed federal fisheries since 1976.

The House bill was scheduled for debate earlier this week, but action on the bill was delayed until mid-July. A spokeswoman for Young did not immediately return phone messages and emails seeking comment on the House bill, titled the Strengthening Fishing Communities and Increasing Flexibility in Fisheries Management Act.

Among many other things, the bill would allow regional fishery management councils to change catch limits for specific fish based on changes in the ecosystem and the economic needs of fishing communities. It would also extend the offshore fisheries jurisdiction of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama from three miles off the coast to nine miles off the coast for management of red snapper.

The Senate bill, titled the Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act, does not have an official summary. A spokesman for Wicker's office forwarded a 2017 news release, in which the senator said the legislation was needed.

"For too long, Mississippi's fishermen have been dealing with government policies based on bad data," Wicker said in the news release. "This legislation would be an important first step to

modernize the federal fishing policies on the Gulf Coast and preserve access to Mississippi's bountiful fishing resources for years to come."

Kendall Dix, fisheries associate for the New Orleans-based Gulf Restoration Network, has also been closely following both bills. Dix said it is unclear what the final version of either bill might be and what specific changes to fisheries management could come from the bills.

"If they both pass, a compromise bill could be written in a conference committee," he said. Like Brazer, Dix said he doesn't see a need to overhaul the Magnuson-Stevens Act. "They are treating all of the successes of the Magnuson-Stevens Act as problems to be solved when, in reality, it was this act that brought us back from the dark ages that everyone experienced in the 1980s," he said.

Magnuson-Stevens ushered in an era of science-based fisheries management that has allowed depleted fishing stocks to come back from the brink, Brazer said.

Destin Mayor Gary Jarvis, former president of the Destin Charter Boat Association, has been in regular contact with U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fort Walton Beach, and other members of the Florida Congressional Delegation over the two bills.

Jarvis said the association doesn't want to see a major overhaul of Magnuson-Stevens. "It is a legacy piece of legislation that does need to be revised from time to time," he said. "But they are attempting to gut some things in the Magnuson-Stevens Act to change how fisheries are managed."

Jarvis said charter fishing brings more than \$175 million a year to the regional economy. For the economic benefits to continue, there must be sufficient numbers of red snapper, triggerfish, amberjack, grouper and other popular fish species, Jarvis said.

"The Magnuson-Stevens Act has clear-cut management tools and what is happening is political maneuvering to weaken these existing rules," he said.

Jarvis said he fears charter fishermen won't be given a designated share of the catch limits. He also likened catch limits to a joint bank account.

"What is happening is that they are trying to make it easier for one user group to overdraw the account," he said.

<https://www.pnj.com/story/news/2018/06/29/big-changes-proposed-federal-fish-management/736405002/>