



Red snapper: Unusual experiment in Gulf of Mexico may ripple nationwide

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David Rainer, AP

TAMPA, Fla. – An unusual experiment playing out in the Gulf of Mexico not only is helping defuse the nation’s most politically charged fishing dispute but also advancing a new way of managing one of the country's most popular pastimes.

Federal regulators and the five Gulf states – Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas – are sharing oversight of red snapper, the reef fish prized by private anglers and seafood lovers across the United States.

Congress last year created the two-year pilot program, [known as the "exempted fishing permit"](#) program. It grants states the day-to-day authority to manage red snapper seasons for recreational fishing in U.S. waters as far as 200 miles from the shoreline. Normally, state jurisdiction extends to no more than 9 miles off the coast.

The catch: States are in charge, but they must follow strict federal fisheries rules and close the season once they’ve reached their quota.

For environmental groups, it means tougher protections apply to the entire red snapper habitat, including state waters. For the federal government, it’s a chance to test ways of counting fish in an attempt to settle once and for all just how many there are swimming around the Gulf. And for recreational anglers, it means more time to fish for red snapper in federal waters that in recent years have had short seasons.

"We definitely have to get away from the federal government telling us how many fish we can catch," said Justin Lee Fadalla, 31, a private boat angler from Mobile, Alabama, who supports the change. "We really need the state (managing) and actually doing these research trips. They know how many snapper are out there. When you go out and catch your limit in 10 minutes, there's not a shortage of red snapper.

Under the program, each state receives a recreational fishing quota of red snapper and designs their own fishing seasons accordingly. So no more disjointed recreational fishing seasons like in Texas, where at one point last year state waters were open the entire year but federal waters were open for only three days.

The detente over a fish that can grow to about 40 inches, weigh up to 50 pounds and live more than 50 years has national implications.

Not only could it prove an incentive for developing nontraditional ways of managing and counting fish in other parts of the nation, but it also addresses an issue that has been a source of conflict between states and Washington, between environmentalists and the recreational fishing industry and between commercial boaters and private anglers.

"We think it is a really important step because it aligns state and federal seasons," said Matt Tinning, associate vice president for oceans at the Environmental Defense Fund. "If it works, I hope we can make it permanent."

Mike Leonard, conservation director for the American Sportfishing Association, which represents businesses that support recreational anglers, called the Gulf Coast pilot program "a positive outcome" following years of feeling ignored by the Obama administration.

The program won't have an immediate effect on customers who order red snapper at a restaurant or buy it at a supermarket. Those fish are hauled out of the water by commercial boaters who operate under their own quotas.

But the concern in the commercial industry is that states have allowed recreational anglers to overfish the stock for the most of the past 25 years. If allowed to continue, they fear it will leave fewer fish for them and, ultimately, consumers.

So commercial fishermen generally support the pilot program because they believe the federal fishery rules will keep the red snapper population growing and accommodate all parties.

"Helping private anglers doesn't have to come at the expense of hurting commercial fishermen," said Eric Brazer, Jr., deputy director of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance, a commercial fishing advocacy group.

The wrangling over who gets to fish for red snapper and for how long has become one of the nation's most contentious fights involving wildlife management.

The issue hit a boiling point last year.

The Trump administration, an ally of the recreational fishing community, extended the recreational fishing season in the Gulf of Mexico from three to 42 days – over the objection of environmental groups and many commercial fishermen – even though analysis by federal scientists showed it would lead to significant overfishing.

The success of the pilot program won't be known until at least this fall when initial results are due, analysts said. But its implementation means a uniform, science-driven management system is in place for now. And that has given conservation groups such as the Pew Charitable Trusts reason to get behind it.

The most important consideration is that red snapper management falls under tough federal regulations that bar overfishing, require corrective action if a state's quota is exceeded and keeps a stock such as red snapper that is not fully healthy on a rebuilding track, said Holly Binns, Southeast director of Pews' U.S. Ocean Conservation program.

"Those are the three bottom lines," she said. "And that's why we were supportive."

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/08/08/red-snapper-gulf-mexico-being-managed-unusual-pilot-program/916582002/>