

## We must protect our young fish populations

**Eric Brazer**

Published 11:32 a.m. ET Aug. 23, 2018

*(Photo: Special to The News-Press)*



Despite multiple red tides, the worst oil spill in history and the near destruction of productive fish nurseries by repeated massive canal discharges from Lake Okeechobee, some fish populations in the Eastern Gulf of Mexico have improved significantly.

We can thank a strong, flexible federal fisheries management system that guards against depleting fish populations and provides managers at the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council with tools to keep fishermen fishing while stocks recover. However, commercial fishermen are deeply worried about the yet unquantified individual and cumulative impacts of low salinity and harmful algal blooms that plague our fisheries once again.

We're worried because coastal pollution and attendant harmful algal blooms can cost the public rising generations of younger fish. Florida's Gulf Coast estuaries serve as essential nursery habitats for highly valuable species targeted offshore, such as gag grouper, hogfish and most snapper species including mutton, gray (mangrove), and cubera. Red grouper grow up on nearshore reefs, while prized king and Spanish mackerel occur in shallow Gulf waters and in estuaries throughout different life stages.

When rising generations of fish are killed off by disasters such as those we are witnessing, fewer younger fish enter into the fishery. The management term for that is "poor recruitment." Managers must reduce harvest levels in order to safeguard viable numbers of adult fish that will hopefully spawn and replenish the populations over time. The consequences of poor recruitment and/or large-scale fish kills include loss of public access, lower commercial quotas, rising seafood prices, shrinking recreational fishing seasons and greater dependence on foreign seafood that may or not may be harvested sustainably — or handled safely.

As fishermen who led the fight to fix our federal fisheries management system, and as fishermen committed to sustainable fishing, we feel that corrective action to fix poor water quality is long overdue. Fortunately, there are some immediate steps we can take to improve conditions for Florida's favorite fish.

Scientists have said for decades that the best way to achieve dramatic reductions in the discharges to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries - and provide a source of clean fresh water for thirsty, hypersaline Florida Bay - is to create enough storage and water-cleansing capacity south of Lake Okeechobee, where the Everglades' River of Grass once slowly flowed.

After years of evasive action, the Florida Legislature has finally authorized the construction of reservoir and filtration-marsh projects south of Lake Okeechobee that will significantly, but not completely, improve the situation. The reservoir's federal authorization is included in the House and Senate versions of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA). This is a positive step toward correcting water quality and the Senate should pass its version of the bill as soon as possible so that this project can move forward.

Scientists have also long stated that we need dramatic reductions in the amounts of phosphorous and nitrogen that we allow into our waters. More of this nutrient reduction needs to be done in Florida.

Then there's red tide. Red tides occur naturally and have long been a fact of life in Gulf ecosystems. Meanwhile, there's some evidence that nutrients from Lake Okeechobee discharges and other sources feed red tide events and cause longer lasting and more lethal mortality events. The bottom line is that simultaneous discharges of nutrient laden water, cyanobacteria blooms and red tides at once spell far fewer fish for our future.

If we're going to protect our fisheries, we need to control what we can control. In fisheries management that means keeping harvest levels at sustainable levels. In water management, that means sending clean water to the right places at the right times in the right amounts. It also means cutting phosphorous and nitrogen loading across the entire urban and agricultural landscape. The status quo in water and nutrient management is incredibly damaging and grossly unfair to seafood suppliers working to make a responsible living on the water. Now is the time for dramatic changes in how we manage our water resources.

*Eric Brazer is the deputy director of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance – the largest organization of commercial snapper and grouper fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico. The non-profit is based out of Galveston, Texas.*

<https://www.news-press.com/story/opinion/contributors/2018/08/23/we-must-protect-our-young-fish-populations/1065443002/>