

WRITTEN TESTIMONY BY PAMELA BAKER, DIRECTOR, GULF OF MEXICO AND SOUTHEAST OCEANS, ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE FUND BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES HEARING ON “THE MANAGEMENT OF RED SNAPPER IN THE GULF OF MEXICO UNDER THE MAGNUSON-STEVENS FISHERY CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT ACT”

Thursday, June 27, 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the management of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). Please accept this written testimony into the record for the hearing.

The MSA has played a vital role in helping to protect stocks from overfishing, rebuild those that are overfished, and provide for continued enjoyment of important recreational opportunities. Gulf of Mexico red snapper has benefited from the MSA’s conservation provisions, but we agree with fishermen and others who have expressed the need for more effective management of the recreational sector of the fishery, which faces the shortest season on record this year, even as managers anticipate that catches will exceed established limits yet again.

The difficulty providing adequate fishing opportunities for recreational fishermen is in stark contrast with the success of commercial red snapper management. Not long ago, commercial fishermen dealt with regulations similar to those now governing recreational fishing, such as short seasons, daily trip (poundage) limits, and high minimum size limits. These rules led to dangerous derby fishing, huge amounts of fish thrown back dead or dying, economic decline and quota overages.

In response, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) overhauled management, by dividing the commercial share among participants, holding each party responsible for complying with his limit, and implementing strong reporting and monitoring systems. This approach, called individual fishing quotas (IFQs), allows fishermen to benefit from higher quotas when the fish population grows, creating material incentives to support science-based management. These changes helped stop overfishing, and red snapper are now available year-round and helping to meet the growing U.S. demand for wild fresh seafood. In addition, strong and stable prices for this high-quality fish are protecting jobs and boosting businesses in coastal fishing communities.

Nearly identical issues to those confronted by the commercial fishery a decade ago now plague recreational fishermen. As the stock rebounds and snapper are plentiful and larger, anglers reach their quotas faster. With recreational fishing of red snapper still based on failing tools such as season length, daily catch and size limits, get-it-while-you-can racing is growing more intense and regulations are forcing anglers to throw back millions of small fish, usually dead or dying. Moreover, data collection and monitoring systems are outdated, slow and imprecise, which further undermine faith in management. While tools like daily catch and size limits are used successfully in many coastal fisheries, they are not

effective for fish like red snapper and other reef fish that do not survive catch and release well, and are caught together with other species sharing the same offshore habitat throughout the Gulf, even if anglers are not targeting them.

Because the management system is not tailored to the particular conditions of the fishery and data systems are poor, it cannot keep the recreational sector within its share of the quota or provide the longer, year-round fishing opportunities anglers want. Recreational fishermen are rightfully angry and confused as they are told that they have exceeded their quota even though they individually comply with tighter restrictions on a growing fish stock.

In the face of this frustrating situation, States and Members of Congress have suggested that red snapper be managed via “regional management” that divides the red snapper fishery among states and allows each to manage the fish in both the state and federal waters off its coast. Some proposals apply only to recreational catch, while others include the commercial sector. This approach holds promise for private recreational anglers, but changing the managers will not fix the problem unless the states have the authority and the incentive to use new management techniques that are appropriate to the conditions of the fishery.

For example, states can try methods such as harvest tags, similar to those used to allot hunting privileges for limited game populations like deer and elk. Tags could be allocated throughout the year to accommodate tourist seasons, tournaments, and other priorities. Angler management organizations, which receive a given amount of fish to distribute at the local level and allow anglers to manage themselves in cooperation with regulators, also have promise. Anglers have developed self-reporting systems that can harness modern technology to greatly improve data collection and monitoring. Whatever their approach, states’ authority should be conditioned upon demonstrated improvements in setting, monitoring, and complying with recreational harvest limits over the existing Gulf-wide plan. While state management agencies have greater experience with managing recreational species on land and in freshwater, questions remain concerning how to enforce different rules in the deep, offshore marine waters off of different states and how to account for the catch. States can play an important role in improving management of the recreational sector, but they need to demonstrate how they would do so in order to justify transferring authority to them.

The for-hire sector occupies a unique position in the fishery, providing access to offshore fishing grounds for anglers who do not own boats. Like commercial fishermen, for-hire captains run small businesses and have a commercial orientation. As such, for-hire captains could benefit from a specially-tailored IFQ plan similar to the one designed by the commercial sector so that they can plan trips and serve customers to make the most of the limited fish. Accordingly, they are likely better managed by federal regulators, who have greater experience with such systems.

As the red snapper fishery recovers, we must make sure not to undermine the benefits a growing red snapper population has provided to all fishermen, consumers and coastal communities. Real challenges face recreational managers – whichever level of government they work for – and that is why improved management tools are urgently needed. Commercial management has already demonstrated how a healthy Gulf red snapper fishery can accommodate the ever-shifting demands of society for recreation and fresh, locally-caught seafood. Congress should encourage fishermen to work together to improve management to make the most of the growing red snapper bounty. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.