

October 6, 2015

Dear Chairman Anson:

The current frustration within the recreational fishing community with red snapper management in the Gulf of Mexico has been more than a decade in the making. While the commercial sector has benefited immensely through the privatization of this public resource, federal management has been increasingly ineffective for the recreational sector, resulting in not only lost opportunities with family and friends for the private recreational angler, but also economic hardship in the charter/for-hire, tackle retailer and tourism industries. Recreational anglers, more than anyone, want to find a path towards a sensible solution for not only red snapper, but also other recreationally important species. However, we do not believe the proposed recreational advisory panel (AP) before the Council can, or will, serve as the vehicle that takes us there.

There are several inherent challenges and problems with developing an effective recreational AP within the Gulf Council. First and foremost is identifying a true representation of who the “recreational community” encompasses from the tens of thousands of anglers along the expansive and diverse Gulf Coast. While the relatively small community of commercial fishermen and the slightly larger number of charter/for-hire captains may lend themselves to a council advisory panel structure, the broad diversity and the sheer number of recreational anglers do not. Simply by its structure alone, an advisory panel would miss a significant portion of the private recreational angler perspectives necessary to be successful. Another is the issue of trust. Even if a representative subsample of the private recreational angling community could be identified, many likely would not participate due to the lack of trust they have for the council process and management by the National Marine Fisheries Service in general.

In an effort to begin assembling a diverse cross-section of the recreational angling community in the Gulf, a meeting was held on September 8th and 9th in Biloxi, Mississippi, where representative from state marine resource agencies, marina owners, charter captains, tackle distributors and private recreational anglers from Texas to Florida gathered to learn more about the current management process and to begin developing a path forward. Some of the overarching themes and action items resulting from the inaugural meeting included:

- Look to the NOAA rec fishing policy as a guidance document for opportunities to improve recreational fisheries management in the Gulf.
- The new state fishery-dependent data collection process (LA Creel, FWC’s reef fish permit, etc.) recently implemented by many of the states shows promising results for more accurately measuring angler harvest. Work with the states and the private recreational community on fostering more angler participation and accurate accounting of recreational harvest and ensure the data is incorporated in stock assessments.
- Work with the states and universities on stock assessment methodologies that include more fishery-independent data.
- Concluded that there was no support for expanding limited access programs to the recreational sector (fish tags). Every other fishery is successfully managed without the use of tags.

While this initial meeting provided a basis from which to start, additional meetings, both in-person and via conference call, are planned for the coming months. This informal coalition provides the flexibility to include a broad array of perspectives within the recreational fishing community from across the Gulf of Mexico region, and provides a setting where participants can comfortably exchange perspectives and ideas; which would not be possible under a rigid AP within the Gulf Council at this time. With each meeting, the sphere of Gulf recreational angling perspectives will grow as additional participants join the discussion, and as we work to incorporate specific action items towards a better, more accountable system of fisheries management for recreational anglers.

Sincerely,

Pam Anderson
Capt. Anderson's Marina

Hughes Andry
Sporting goods sales agency

Tammy Graham
Private recreational angler

Chris Horton
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