

The RED SNAPPER Act of 2017

“The Red Snapper Act proposes a well-designed process to address the critically mismanaged red snapper resource in the Gulf of Mexico. It provides assurances to protect the resource as well as the various groups involved with the fishery.” – Dr. Bob Shipp, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, Professor Emeritus and past Chair, Department of Marine Sciences University of South Alabama.

Earlier this year, NOAA announced a 3-day Gulf of Mexico red snapper season for 2017 (June 1 through June 3). Last year the season was 11 days, and season length has been consistently decreasing over the last decade. While NOAA has granted 39 additional days this year for red snapper fishing in federal waters, the issue of shorter and shorter federal seasons is unfair to private anglers. They deserve a management system with increased sustainable access to this public resource. The region has a very healthy stock and something has to change. It is time to replace the status quo with a management system that more accurately reflects today’s red snapper private recreational fishery.

Adopting new and revised approaches to saltwater recreational fisheries management was one of six recommendations made by the Commission on Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management, more commonly known as the Morris-Deal Report, in its 2014 report “A Vision for Managing America’s Saltwater Recreational Fisheries.” NOAA Fisheries also identified the need to explore management approaches more consistent with the culture of recreational fishing in its 2015 National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy, which states as a goal: “Exploring management approaches that have the potential to better accommodate the unique nature of recreational fisheries while achieving conservation mandates.”

In this vein, this legislative proposal is based on both depth-and distance-based management informed by science. Longer recreational red snapper fishing seasons can be achieved by retaining the current state seaward boundary (9 nmi) while meeting conservation goals by also setting a maximum distance from shore (25 nmi) and a maximum depth at which the species can be recreationally harvested (25 fathoms). The proposal empowers the states to set seasons within this new area while preserving the fishery by leaving the majority of the stock in areas outside the restriction untouched. For red snapper, this is particularly important as a significant portion of the brood stock lives on habitat in water deeper than 150 feet (<25 fathoms). According to an analysis requested by the Alabama Department of Conservation and done by Dr. Sean Powers, Chair, Dept. of Marine Sciences; Director, Center for Environmental Resiliency, University of South Alabama & Senior Marine Scientist III, Dauphin Island Sea Lab, just 19 percent of red snapper occur in water less than 25 fathoms. In other words, in regions of the Gulf where habitat distribution is similar, 81% percent of the stock is protected.

Our proposal creates a virtual marine protected area for red snapper in depths greater than 25 fathoms or further than 25 nautical miles, greatly reducing bycatch and release mortality. The commercial sector would continue with their IFQ program, and the federally permitted charter sector would also remain unaffected, maintaining the ability to harvest red snapper in state waters during their federal season. Most importantly, it would bring stability to the private recreational red snapper fishery, allowing individuals and organizations to plan ahead.

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