Testimony of Dr. Robert L. Shipp

Committee on Natural Resources

March 13, 2013

My name is Bob Shipp, and I am a professor of Marine Sciences at the University of South Alabama. In addition I have served 17 years on the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, three times elected chair of the Council, and presently serve as chair of the Council's reef Fish Committee.

The current management of reef species in the Gulf of Mexico is failing. I am suggesting a shift in the management authority as described below.

I am in support of increasing fishery management authority to the Gulf states by extending the state's authority to manage reef species of finfish out to 20 fathoms. I will address three fundamental reasons why this would be beneficial.

First, most reef species, and especially red snapper, inhabit the Gulf waters to depths of 100 fathoms. So by extending state authority to 20 fathoms in no way threatens optimal management of reef species. In fact, the Gulf states have excellent histories of successful fishery management, and it is in their best economic interests to optimally manage these species. Beyond 20 fathoms, the Fishery Management Councils and National Marine Fisheries Service would continue their authority.

Second, I refer to the language of National Standard 1 of the Magnuson Act: "prevent overfishing and achieve optimal yield." Recently we have been primarily concerned with the "prevent overfishing" verbiage, often times ignoring "achieving optimal yield." By allowing individual states to manage reef fish stocks to 20 fathoms would markedly improve the likelihood of achieving optimal yield. As an example, in Florida spotted sea trout (=speckled trout) bag limit is 4. In Louisiana it is 25. This is because the habitat for spotted sea trout in Louisiana can support a stock with the larger yield. A similar situation exists for red snapper. Off the Alabama coast, some 17,000 artificial reefs have been constructed. Each holds a tremendous number of red snapper, which could easily support a fishery with a far higher yield, an optimal yield, than the current 28 day season with a 2 fish bag limit.

Third is a matter of logic. I was trained by the Jesuits, and one of the first required courses was "logic." With red snapper populations we have a conundrum of logic. Red snapper stocks are considered overfished. Projections of red snapper maximum sustainable yield (MSY) made during the past twenty years have varied between about 15 – 30 million pounds annually for the Gulf of Mexico. But we have never harvested more than 10 million pounds, and often much less than that. So if a stock can yield 15 or more million pounds annually, but has never yielded anywhere near that number, how can it be overfished? There is an answer to this riddle. The habitat for red snapper has been increased dramatically. Before World War II, there was little or no red snapper harvest from the northwestern Gulf, despite numerous attempts to locate fishery productive areas there. But from the mid- forties on, the harvest in the western Gulf has increased dramatically. The reason? About 4,000 petroleum

platforms, and thousands of artificial reefs. Currently more than sixty percent of snapper harvest comes from these areas with artificial habitat. In total the harvest potential of red snapper in the Gulf has increased.

And related, the current practice of removing these platforms with explosives kills thousands of pounds of reef species. A recent video obtained by the NBC affiliate in Mobile, revealed a mortality of about 10,000 pounds of red snapper at the surface. Divers tell me that probably 4 to 5 times that much is hidden beneath. Far better would be to dismantle these structures, lay them on their sides on the bottom, as is done in the “rigs to reefs” program off Louisiana.

So we have the most valuable finfish fishery in the Gulf of Mexico not being harvested at optimal yield and with its habitat under duress. Reauthorization of Magnuson as described above would rectify this dilemma.