

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF
ERIC SCHWAAB
ACTING ASSISTANT SECRETARY
FOR CONSERVATION AND MANAGEMENT
NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**

**OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
THE MANAGEMENT OF RED SNAPPER IN THE GULF OF MEXICO**

**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Introduction

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about red snapper management in the Gulf of Mexico. My name is Eric Schwaab and I am the Acting Assistant Secretary for Conservation and Management at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) within the U.S. Department of Commerce (DOC). From daily weather forecasts, severe storm warnings, and climate monitoring to fisheries management, coastal restoration, and supporting marine commerce, NOAA's products and services support economic vitality and affect more than one-third of America's gross domestic product. NOAA's dedicated scientists use cutting-edge research and high-tech instrumentation to provide citizens, planners, emergency managers, and other decision makers with reliable information they need when they need it.

Today, I will discuss the current status of the red snapper rebuilding efforts, and how the plan to rebuild red snapper has benefited and will benefit the population, commercial and recreational fishermen, and fishing communities. Also, I will describe the challenges we face in translating rebuilding benefits into increased recreational fishing opportunities throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Finally, I will discuss several options the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) is considering to address recreational management challenges.

Historical Population Trends

Fishermen have harvested red snapper from the Gulf of Mexico since the mid-1800s, more than a century before the first federal fishery management measures were established in 1984. Currently, this species is one of the most popular and studied in the Gulf of Mexico, and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has conducted ten population assessments since the late 1980s. The first assessment, conducted in 1988, concluded the population was overfished and undergoing overfishing, meaning there were too few fish in the water to maximize catches over the long term and fish continued to be removed from the population at too high a rate. Six

assessments conducted in the 1990s confirmed that conclusion, suggesting conservation measures such as minimum size limits, commercial trip limits, and daily recreational bag limits implemented to end overfishing and rebuild the population, as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act; P.L. 94-265) were not sufficient. A Congressionally-mandated independent peer review of the scientific and management basis for red snapper management, completed in 1997, also echoed these findings.

Successful Rebuilding Efforts

The Gulf Council implemented the first red snapper rebuilding plan in 1990, but has modified the rebuilding schedule and goals several times in response to new scientific information. A rebuilding plan is a strategy used to manage catch levels over a specified time period so that an overfished population can increase in size to a target level.

The current red snapper rebuilding plan was designed to phase out overfishing between 2009 and 2010 and rebuild the population by 2032. The timeframe to rebuild overfished populations varies depending on the status and biology of the overfished species. The red snapper rebuilding schedule is lengthy because red snapper is a very long-lived species, reaching more than 50 years of age, and was severely overfished for many decades.

Substantial changes to the plan, as implemented in 2007, were informed by a 2005 population assessment and followed a court ruling on a lawsuit filed by the Coastal Conservation Association, Ocean Conservancy, and Gulf Restoration Network, who found previous rebuilding measures to be insufficient to rebuild the population on schedule. These changes reduced the combined (commercial and recreational) red snapper catch limit by 45 percent from 9.12 million pounds to 5.0 million pounds; reduced the recreational bag limit from four to two fish to slow the rate of catch; reduced the commercial minimum size limit from 15 inches total length to 13 inches total length to reduce regulatory discards in that fishery; and specified a maximum level for shrimp fishing effort which, if exceeded, would trigger area closures to minimize the incidental take of red snapper in shrimp trawls.

Also in 2007 the commercial red snapper fishery moved to an individual fishing quota program (IFQ), which allocates participating fishermen a percentage of the commercial annual catch limit based on their landings history. The IFQ program is intended and has been demonstrated to better align the capacity of the fleet with the commercial catch limit, to mitigate short fishing seasons, improve safety at sea and increase the profitability of the commercial red snapper fishery. Participation in the commercial red snapper fishery, measured by the number of accounts holding red snapper IFQ shares, has declined by about 25 percent since the program was implemented. IFQ participants are targeting red snapper year round. The fishery is reportedly safer than it used to be when fishermen were required to compete for the catch during very limited season openings. The average ex-vessel price of red snapper in 2012 was 27 percent greater than the average inflation adjusted ex-vessel price in 2007.

There is clear evidence that the new measures implemented in 2007 are paying off. A 2009 red snapper assessment update, and a new assessment completed just last month, indicated those measures successfully ended overfishing and there are more red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico today than in decades. According to the new assessment, the spawning potential of the

population has more than doubled in the last five years. Spawning potential is estimated to have reached 13.4 percent in 2013 – more than half of the 26 percent rebuilding target (Figure 1). Spawning potential refers to the number of eggs a fish produces over its lifetime in a fished population compared to the number of eggs produced by a fish in an unfished population.

Many Gulf of Mexico fishermen echo the assessment findings, saying they are seeing more and larger red snapper than they have seen in their lifetime. Recreational fishermen are landing red snapper at three times the rate they did in 2006—an estimated 18,000 fish per day compared to 6,000 fish per day (Figure 2). In addition, each fish weighs more than twice as much as before (Figure 3), and fishermen on the west coast of Florida now have new opportunities to target red snapper as the stock expands back to its historic range. After decades of overfishing, the red snapper populations of the Gulf of Mexico were concentrated in offshore waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico. Now, catch data indicate red snapper landings are increasing both closer to shore and along the west coast of Florida, with some fishermen reporting landings as far south as the Florida Keys (Figure 4).

Ongoing Rebuilding Challenges

The rebuilding process is not yet complete. While the red snapper population has increased significantly in size, it has not yet reached the rebuilding target. Additionally, as a long lived species, red snapper depend upon a fully developed age structure. Currently, the population contains a disproportionate number of younger fish. A healthy population requires an appropriate mix of fish of different ages, including older, larger fish which produce more and healthier offspring. The need to complete this rebuilding process places continuing, but necessary constraints on the fishery.

Despite improved fishing experiences and opportunities, improved catch rates have unintended impacts on recreational fishing opportunities because the rate of landings is outpacing the rate of population growth. Recreational red snapper catch quotas increased by 62 percent from 2008-2012 compared to a 148 percent increase in recreational landings per day during that same time period. As a result, in compliance with Magnuson-Stevens Act requirements, the recreational seasons have been progressively shorter to prevent catch overages.

Recreational fishermen are understandably frustrated with this unexpected trend of progressively shorter fishing seasons. We recognize the adverse impacts of this trend on recreational fishermen and fishing communities and we are actively working with the Gulf Council to minimize those impacts throughout the red snapper rebuilding period while meeting the legal requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

When possible, we make adjustments in support of Gulf fisheries. We provided a supplemental recreational red snapper season in the fall of 2010 after the large-scale fishing closure was implemented in response to the Deepwater Horizon event that prevented the recreational fishery from reaching its catch limit. We also extended the length of the recreational red snapper fishing season in 2012 after determining a series of bad weather events likely caused fishing efforts to be lower than expected. We continue to look for these types of opportunities to adapt and improve our management approach to real time needs and conditions. Supplemental seasons have also

been provided in the past in response to new scientific information, and we will work as quickly as possible to implement the Gulf Council's new catch limit recommendation this year.

Opportunities for Growth and Improvement

Management

Our immediate challenge is to continue to translate rebuilding success into enhanced recreational opportunity. But doing so will also require recreational fishermen to articulate a broad shared vision of expectations and needs. The current lack of agreement on management goals, how best to approach limiting catches, and the appropriate commercial/recreational allocation has significantly stifled Gulf Council action to address management challenges. Also, inequities created by state jurisdictional and regulatory inconsistencies have affected the distribution of recreational fishing opportunities and rebuilding benefits, deeply polarizing the Gulf Council on critical decisions needed to effectively address long-standing issues. A lasting red snapper management strategy will require broad agreement, equitable application and management support at both state and federal levels.

NMFS' primary goal for the recreational red snapper fishery is to stabilize the length of the fishing season to provide for-hire businesses and private anglers more certainty and security in planning their operations and vacations. After several years of very rapid growth and change, this goal is now more achievable as increases in population abundance and fish size begin to slow and level off. The new red snapper assessment that the Gulf Council reviewed the week of June 17 indicates that a new combined red snapper catch limit can be set at a level that is considerably higher than combined commercial and recreational catches before we initiated rebuilding, resulting in more individual fishing quota for commercial fishermen and more days of fishing for recreational anglers.

Before we reduced catch limits in 2007 to allow for rebuilding, the recreational red snapper season lasted for more than six months. Although the six-month season afforded recreational anglers more fishing opportunities, overfishing persisted and the quality of fishing suffered as a result. Now that the stock is rebuilding, the recreational catch limit is increasing and a lengthier, more stable fishing season may be achieved. But it is unlikely the current management approach will support a return to a six-month fishing season in the future. Fishery stakeholders and managers will need to work collaboratively and agree on common goals and solutions in order to maximize fishing opportunities and sufficiently account for scientific and management uncertainty that are inherent in managing this dynamic population.

Some of the region's commercial fishermen have looked to catch shares and other new tools to stabilize their fisheries and enhance economic opportunities. Commercial fishermen who participate in the red snapper IFQ program directly benefit from red snapper catch limit increases because they each receive additional pounds of red snapper quota that can be fished and sold. A five-year review of the commercial red snapper IFQ program recently completed by the Gulf Council and NMFS concluded the program has increased fishery profitability and achieved other stated goals, although there are still opportunities for continued improvement. We are proud of our achievements in the commercial red snapper fishery and will support Gulf Council action to maintain and build upon those successes as we continue to explore options for improving management of the recreational fishery.

Some recreational interests are also beginning to explore new and innovative tools and approaches, including regional management by states; recreational participation in the commercial IFQ program through intersector trading; a charter vessel days-at-sea program; separate management of the for-hire and private sectors (sector separation); and a tag program. But many of these new approaches are highly controversial, as they represent significant changes to the status quo. Also, their potential benefits are limited by several outdated and unique statutory requirements specific to Gulf of Mexico red snapper. For example, section 407(c) of the Magnuson-Stevens Act provides specific criteria for identifying participants in, and weighing votes cast, in referenda conducted in the fishery based on participation in the fishery between 1993 and 1996, restricting our ability to conduct fair and meaningful referenda on current management proposals. And section 407(d) of the statute requires the Gulf Council and NMFS to establish a separate catch limit for the recreational fishery to apply to both for-hire and private participants, and to close that fishery in-season when we determine the catch limit has been reached.

Finally, at the recently completed Managing Our Nation's Fisheries III conference, considerable attention was devoted to new approaches to limiting volatility in catch limits. For example, with appropriate analysis and adjustment of fishery control rules, it could be possible to safely phase-in results of new scientific assessments, rather than immediately adjusting the catch limit to the point estimate from the assessment.

Science and Data

While red snapper is one of the most studied species in the Gulf of Mexico, we still have much more to learn. Great variability in the number of fish surviving to enter the fishery each year and key questions about the effects of numerous environmental variables, like climate change and oil spills, on long-term productivity have made it challenging to effectively manage the population.

We monitor commercial red snapper catches on a near real-time basis, but the current system does not enable us to evaluate recreational red snapper data as quickly. We monitor recreational red snapper catches by conducting both telephone surveys of angler fishing effort and shoreside surveys of angler catch per unit effort. The Agency's Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) has recently implemented survey design improvements that have significantly reduced the potential for bias in survey estimators of catch. The MRIP has been developing improved sampling and estimation methods in accordance with recommendations provided in the National Research Council's 2006 report "Review of Recreational Fisheries Survey Methods". While the improvements are yielding improved accuracy, recreational data are primarily delivered in two-month increments and generally available to fishery managers after an additional 45 days. This means that data collected when the recreational fishery opens in June may not be available until well after the season is closed. Timeliness of data delivery has been particularly problematic for red snapper because the population has been actively rebuilding, making it difficult to accurately project when the fishery will reach its catch limit. This has contributed to a number of recreational overages in recent years and we continue to work toward improving the data collection and delivery system.

We are also continuously working to improve the precision and accuracy of the data used in red snapper population assessments and recently implemented a number of improvements consistent

with recommendations of the National Research Council's 1998 report "Improving Fish Stock Assessments", including maintaining at least one reliable abundance index for each stock. Maintaining long-term surveys of fish abundance is invaluable to assessments because those data provide an indicator of population status over time. The importance of such time series has been driven home by recent environmental events, including Hurricane Katrina, the oil spill in 2010, historic floods in the Mississippi River basin in 2011, and the severe drought of 2012; all of which have influenced commercially and recreationally important species and their habitats in the Gulf of Mexico.

Investments are being made in new sampling technologies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our scientific surveys. For example, studies are underway to examine the use of towed camera arrays for sampling untrawlable reef habitats that are critical for red snapper and other commercially and recreationally important fish stocks.

Electronic reporting regulations for commercial dealers and for recreational headboat captains will also soon be finalized for the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic areas. Support for the regulations is strong within the fishery management councils and the industry because it puts the data into scientists' and managers' hands more quickly.

Current Management Options

Gulf of Mexico red snapper management has always required balancing competing demands and fishery stakeholders and managers are divided regarding the appropriate path forward. The Gulf Council is currently exploring the following management options:

- A regional management strategy, which would enable recreational red snapper management to vary among states, or defined regions, to meet local needs while meeting Gulf-wide conservation goals.
- Increasing the amount of red snapper allocated to the recreational fishery when distributing future catch limit increases;
- An inter-sector trading program, which would allow for-hire permit holders and potentially private anglers to trade quota with commercial red snapper fishermen to increase the amount of fish available to the recreational fishery.
- A days-at-sea program for the for-hire sector, which would provide those participating in the program a certain number of days to fish per year, then allow participants to choose when to use those days.
- A fish tag program, like those used for hunting, which could limit the number of recreational fishermen that could target red snapper, but provide those fishermen greater flexibility in when they could fish.

At this time, the Gulf Council is primarily focused on evaluating regional management and allocation options. During its June meeting, the Council approved regional management options to share with the public for comment this summer and requested additional analyses of alternative allocation scenarios to review at its August meeting.

A regional management strategy could effectively resolve the current challenges created by inconsistent state jurisdictions and regulations. Some of these interstate management challenges

are not unique to the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, they are present in every region where major fisheries span multiple state jurisdictions and have been addressed in different regions in different ways, such as through legislation authorizing the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission as a coordinating body on the U.S. east coast. While there are any numbers of models that may work, each requires the collective involvement and support of the states, and full accountability to comply with agreed upon management strategies.

Since 1990, the Gulf Council has allocated 51 percent of the red snapper annual catch limit to the commercial fishery and 49 percent of the annual catch limit to the recreational fishery based on historical landings data for each fishery during 1979-1987. However, they are now considering reallocating some portion of future catch limit increases to the recreational fishery to achieve a more stable fishing season and provide recreational fishermen a greater opportunity to benefit from rebuilding progress.

Furthermore, the Gulf Council is exploring ways to improve the timeliness of data delivery, including how best to apply promising new technological innovations like iSnapper, iAngler, and electronic logbooks.

Conclusion

We have made great progress in rebuilding the Gulf of Mexico red snapper population. There is no denying the population is in better shape today than has been observed in many people's lifetime. But this achievement has not come easily, nor will it be sustained without continued attention.

This year is the first that the allowable red snapper catch limit will exceed the combined commercial and recreational catch limit in place before the rebuilding plan was implemented. This is a critical time in the history of red snapper management, and we must respond with thoughtful and disciplined planning and decision making to ensure the fishery is able to meet the needs of both current and future generations. We must continue the achievements we have gained in the commercial fishery while providing greater stability and predictability to the recreational fishery. Doing this will require fishermen, fishing communities, and other interested parties to define a common, clear vision for the fishery. This means grappling with difficult issues like allocation, fully exploring all reasonable management options, and allowing local debates about controversial approaches, such as catch shares and sector separation.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the current management challenges are a function of success. The red snapper population is rebuilding and that is a good thing. Now we need to make some tough decisions about how to best distribute the hard-earned benefits provided by this growing population.

Currently, all Gulf Coast states have expressed some form of support for a regional management strategy and the Gulf Council is working to implement such a regime in the recreational fishery for the 2014 fishing year. NMFS will continue to fully support discussion and exploration of this and any other option that has broad stakeholder support and provide the fishery greater stability.

Gulf of Mexico fishermen and fishing communities sacrificed a great deal to get us here. It is critical that all involved remain engaged and work together to find a way forward in the cooperative spirit that the regional fishery management council process promotes.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss Gulf of Mexico red snapper management. I am available to answer any questions you may have.