

Statement by the Honorable John Fleming
Chair, House Water, Power and Oceans Subcommittee
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 3094
“The Gulf States Red Snapper Management Authority Act.”
October 22, 2015

Good morning. Today, the Subcommittee will conduct a hearing on H.R. 3094, the Gulf States Red Snapper Management Authority Act.

Since our hearing in December of 2014, while there have been several major developments related to the policies governing the fishery, not much has changed in terms of outcome. The Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery is still a mess. The status quo is unsustainable, which leads us to the bill before us.

Let's start by looking at a bit of context.

The red snapper fishery is a key economic driver for many Gulf communities. Private anglers contribute to a growing support industry that includes everything from boat building to tackle shops. The charter-for-hire boats make use of that economic infrastructure as well, but also bring in tourism dollars. Finally, commercial fishermen deliver their product throughout the nation, and also contribute to tourism as award winning chefs use commercially caught fish in culinary masterpieces.

Leaving aside the economic benefits, these are large, beautiful, and tasty fish that are prized by fishermen and consumers alike. Anyone who has been on the water or even just witnessed the impressive catches in photographs can understand the allure of catching red snapper.

This fishery once supported a 180-day recreational season. Despite rebuilding success, recreational seasons have been drastically shortened over time. Even after quotas were adjusted upwards to account for a larger-than-expected stock assessment, private anglers got only a 10 day season in federal waters for 2015. These shortened seasons have real consequences in the economies of coastal parishes and counties.

I understand the ongoing and increasing frustrations of the recreational fishing community. We've held hearings in this committee on how NOAA count fish where they don't live and neglect where they do. We've also looked at some of the state data collection programs, like LA Creel (lah KREEL) and how they are superior to NOAA's data collection, but NOAA does not incorporate the data from the states.

This is a controversial topic, with the recreational, charter, and commercial sectors all competing for a share of a growing--but still rebuilding--resource. We will hear from all of those interests today, and I'm glad to have that dialog. I'm hopeful that we can continue that dialog to find a solution that everyone can live with.

H.R. 3094 would transfer management of the red snapper fisheries from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

to a newly created Gulf States Red Snapper Management Authority. The bill's sponsor has pointed to the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act and the Dungeness Crab Management Act as precedents, and I look forward to examining the similarities and differences with those management schemes.

The states have made a lot of progress in shaping this plan since the hearing last year. But there are a few outstanding questions, such as how federal enforcement will work in state waters for a state managed plan, how disputes between the states will be settled, and how all of Louisiana's economic and cultural interests can best be protected.

While we hope to find answers to these questions today and in the coming weeks, it is still clear that something has to change to allow the recreational community better access to this important resource.

I want to thank all the witnesses for coming to testify and share their expertise and passion on this issue. I hope that we can have a productive dialog that leads to solutions.