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Testimony on "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness"

Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries
United States House of Representatives
June 4, 2025

On behalf of the American Sportfishing Association, I am honored to have been asked to testify before the House Committee on Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife and Fisheries regarding legislation that affects marine resources and the recreational fishing industry.

The American Sportfishing Association (ASA) is the sportfishing industry's trade association committed to representing the interests of the sportfishing industry as well as the entire sportfishing community. We give the industry and anglers a unified voice when emerging laws and policies could significantly affect sportfishing business or sportfishing itself. ASA invests in long-term ventures to ensure the industry will remain strong and prosperous, as well as safeguard and promote the enduring economic, conservation and social values of sportfishing in America. Recreational fishing is truly an all-American activity. Our fisheries resources, which are held in the public trust and conserved through sound laws and policies, are envied the world over. In 2023, 57.7 million people went fishing in the U.S.[1] Recreational fishing supports 1,111,920 jobs and contributes $230.5 billion to the economy. [2] Fishing is the third most popular outdoor recreation activity, behind only running and hiking.[3]

All of this fishing activity supports the economy, connects people to the outdoors and provides substantial funding for conservation. Through fishing license purchases, excise taxes and direct donations, the recreational fishing community contributes approximately $2 billion toward aquatic resource conservation each year. I am confident in saying that no other user group contributes nearly as much toward ensuring our nation's waterways and fisheries are healthy and accessible to the public.

Fishing participation is dependent on two primary factors – access and healthy fisheries. Access can take several forms, including physical access to water (e.g., boat ramps, piers, public shorelines) and regulatory access (e.g., seasons, bag limits, size limits, closures). While simply being outdoors and wetting a line is a large part of the enjoyment of fishing, at some level, most people want to actually catch fish too. There are many more effective ways of catching fish than

[1] Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation. 2024 Special Report on Fishing. Available online at: https://www.takemefishing.org/getmedia/7d775bde-f3a1-4f97-b9bb-845dcb9e05ba/Special-Rport-2024-Infographic.pdf
[2] American Sportfishing Association. 2025 Economic Contributions of Recreational Fishing. Available online at: https://asafishing.org/economic-impacts-of-recreational-fishing/
[3] Outdoor Foundation. 2021 Participation Trends Report. Available online at: https://outdoorindustry.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/2021-Outdoor-Participation-Trends-Report.pdf

a rod, reel and hook, so for recreational fishermen to have a decent probability of encountering a fish, there have to be a lot of fish in the water.

On April 17, President Trump issued his Executive Order for "Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness." While much of the Executive Order pertains specifically to commercial fishing and seafood trade, many of the policies and priorities apply to United States marine fisheries more broadly, including recreational fisheries, such as addressing overregulation, ensuring access, improving fisheries management and science, and modernizing data collection. Recreational fishing is a significant source of seafood for millions of Americans who consume their own catch. In 2022, recreational anglers in the United States took over 200 million fishing trips and caught an estimated 1.1 billion fish. Of these, approximately 61% were released alive, while the remaining 39% were harvested.[4] ASA looks forward to working with the new administration on advancing the goal of the Executive Order while strengthening the recreational fishing industry. My testimony will focus on challenges faced by the marine recreational fishing community, particularly in the southeastern United States, and opportunities to address them.

Recreational Catch and Effort Data

In most cases, the foundation for fisheries management and conservation decisions is scientific information. Credible data on catches and fishing effort, along with information about the biology and ecology of fish stocks, are critical to ensuring fisheries stock assessments accurately characterize the status of stocks and in turn, ensure that management decisions are informed by the best science.

This is particularly the case with federal fisheries management, in which harvest is monitored relative to annual catch limits (ACLs), and accountability measures such as seasonal closures and ACL paybacks are used to constrain harvest. The federal government, via the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), manages fisheries in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which for the purpose of fisheries management is 3-200 miles off the South Atlantic coast and 9 -200 miles in the Gulf.

Too often, especially in the southeastern U.S. where I live, fisheries stock assessments have high levels of uncertainty (if assessments are even available) due to unreliable or sparse fishery data. The uncertainty caused by use of questionable fishery data to inform the status of fisheries and make management decisions can have severe implications for fish stocks, anglers, businesses, communities and the economy.

The Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) is a NOAA program that provides estimates of recreational fishing catches and trips that occur from Maine to Mississippi and Hawaii. These data are used to assess and manage state and federal fisheries in the Atlantic, Gulf and Hawaii. MRIP is the product of two different components:

1. Dockside interviews administered by state partners that gather information on angler catch rates (i.e., number, types and sizes of fish caught); and

[4] NOAA Fisheries Service. Fisheries of the United States 2022. Available online at: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/document/fisheries-united-states-reports

2. A mail survey administered by NOAA known as the Fishing Effort Survey (FES), which is used to estimate fishing effort (i.e., the number of fishing trips that occur).

For years, MRIP catch estimates have been a source of contention for anglers, state agencies, and other fishery managers that depend on accurate and precise data for decision-making. MRIP was originally designed to provide broad (imprecise) information about recreational fishing catch and effort trends. However, MRIP is currently used to manage federal fisheries to exact, poundage-based ACLs, in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA). In most cases, MRIP is the only information available on recreational catch and effort due to a lack of alternative data sources, and is considered best scientific information available by default. NOAA cautions use of MRIP estimates in fisheries management when percent standard error (PSE), which is a measure of precision or margin of error around an estimate, is greater than 30 and does not support use of MRIP estimates with PSEs above 50.[5] Unfortunately, MRIP estimates routinely have PSEs that are well above these thresholds but are nonetheless used by NOAA as the basis for fisheries management decisions. Using data that does not meet data quality standards to manage our fisheries is incompatible with the recent executive order, "Restoring Gold Standard Science," results in lost access when fisheries are closed due to unrealistically high and highly uncertain catch estimates, is detrimental to conservation, and further erodes public trust in the fishery management process.

In response to longstanding concerns with MRIP or its precursor, the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistical Survey (MRFSS), several states designed their own recreational data collection programs to supplement or replace MRIP to better align data collection with their management needs. The most recent state surveys are those developed and implemented over the past 10 years by the Gulf states, such as Louisiana's LA Creel. There is a long history of state-run recreational fishery surveys being used to generate recreational fisheries data that are used for management our nation's fisheries. For example, California, Oregon, and Washington replaced MRFSS with state surveys that better meet local needs about 20 years ago. Many state surveys are certified by NOAA, meaning they have undergone a rigorous scientific peer review process and have been found to be scientifically sound and defensible.

Since FES was overhauled in 2018, replacing a survey design based on calls to coastal landlines to a mail-based survey, many anglers and state agencies have expressed concerns that MRIP effort estimates have been greatly inflated, often producing unrealistically or impossibly high estimates. Indeed, a 2023 pilot study[6] conducted by NOAA in response to these and other concerns about MRIP estimates found that the order of mail survey questions in FES may be causing overestimation of recreational catch and effort by 30 - 40%. While ASA appreciates that NOAA recently conducted a follow-up study to further investigate this issue (the results of which are expected to be released in July), it is clear that changes beyond adjusting MRIP are needed to

[5] NOAA Fisheries Service. An Introduction to Marine Recreational Information Program Data. Available online at: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/recreational-fishing-data/introduction-marine-recreational-information-program-data#data-use-considerations

[6] NOAA Fisheries Service, Office of Science and Technology. Evaluating Measurement Error in the MRIP Fishing Effort Survey. Available online at: https://apps-st.fisheries.noaa.gov/rpts/main/public_docs/Evaluating%20Measurement%20Error%20in%20the%20FES%20Consolidated%20Final%20w%20Review.pdf?method=PUB_MANUSCRIPT&id=32268

meet the needs of anglers and fisheries managers. MRIP and recreational fisheries data collection is in need of an overhaul, not tweaks around the margins.

State-led, NOAA-certified recreational data collection programs that are designed to address MRIP shortcomings are providing alternative recreational catch and effort estimates that are increasingly used in federal management and assessments and are trusted by the anglers from which they collect data. In line with the Executive Order's directive to promote fishing opportunities, and modernize data collection for responsive fisheries management, these programs provide a model for recreational data collection improvements that are tailored to local needs and management and are trusted by anglers. For example, data from Florida's State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS), which is specifically designed to provide better recreational catch and effort data for 13 reef fish species, has now been used in federal stock assessments on Florida-centric stocks including Gulf gag grouper, yellowtail snapper, and mutton snapper. SRFS data is currently or expected to be used for federal management of these species in lieu of MRIP.

State-led data collection also provided a path toward innovative management led by the states for Gulf red snapper that was not possible under MRIP. After two years of testing the concept of state management under exempted fishing permits, in 2020, NOAA delegated each of the Gulf states the ability to set red snapper seasons, bag limits, and size limits for their anglers in adjacent federal waters. State management has been a game changer by providing reasonable private angler access to red snapper harvest that is tailored to local needs while improving recreational catch monitoring compared to the federal Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Prior to state management, the federal Gulf red snapper seasons got shorter every year and was down to just a handful of days. Last year, private recreational angler red snapper seasons set by the states ranged from 49 to more than 150 days.

Under state management, each state must monitor and constrain harvest relative to their allocated portion of the private angler component of the recreational ACL. To do this, each state uses their own data collection program that is designed to meet the needs of their state and its anglers. For example, Louisiana's program, called LA Creel, replaced MRIP in 2014 to provide more precise, localized, and near real time data on all saltwater recreational fisheries, including red snapper. Alabama and Mississippi designed programs that also provide red snapper harvest estimates independent of MRIP and recently adopted changes to their data collection methodology similar to LA Creel. Florida's program, called the State Reef Fish Survey, was designed to provide more precise and more timely catch and effort data on 13 reef fish species, including red snapper, by supplementing MRIP. Texas has always used their own data collection program (rather than MRIP) to monitor recreational saltwater landings trends. The surveys from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are "MRIP certified" by NOAA, which means they have been peer-reviewed and determined to be statistically valid for monitoring recreational catches.

Overall, state-led data collection and management has delivered recreational fisheries data improvements that in turn led to management improvements that promote conservation, angler access, and economic growth. Crucially, state management is viewed favorably by Gulf anglers, so much so that a focus group of Gulf anglers recently requested and the Gulf Council has expressed interest in considering state or regional management for greater amberjack.

South Atlantic Red Snapper

In terms of rebuilding, Atlantic red snapper is a success story. The fishery has responded to the strong regulatory measures taken by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) to rebuild the stock. Since 2010, South Atlantic red snapper have rebounded so much that scientists and fishermen both agree the stock is at record abundance and biomass, such that there are now more red snapper in the South Atlantic today than any living person has ever seen. Recruitment of young fish into the population has also been consistently high for nearly a decade. However, success in rebuilding has not translated into successful management that provides reasonable harvest opportunities. The recreational fishery has largely been closed for the past 13 years except for a few weekend openings. Last year's recreational harvest season was a single day.

Rather than exploring ways to improve management and access to this abundant fishery, on January 14, NOAA Fisheries released Amendment 59 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic that would prohibit fishing for 55 species, including red snapper, off much of the Florida Atlantic coast for three months of the year. This proposed Secretarial Amendment was prepared unilaterally by NOAA Fisheries as part of a legal agreement that requires the agency to take action to end overfishing of red snapper in the South Atlantic. As part of this legal agreement, the final rule for Amendment 59 must be submitted to the *Federal Register* by June 6. However, the consensus from an overwhelming number of public comments from South Atlantic fishermen over the past several years, discussions and decisions by the SAFMC, and recommendations from the SAFMC's Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel is that additional management measures to end overfishing are not necessary.

The results of a stock assessment update completed by NOAA Fisheries and used as the basis for Amendment 59 confirms what fishermen already knew: Atlantic red snapper is no longer overfished. In recognition of the growth of the red snapper fishery and recent above average recruitment, as part of Amendment 59, NOAA Fisheries recommends changing the definition of overfishing for red snapper such that red snapper is no longer classified as undergoing overfishing. In other words, the status quo is working and management restrictions via Secretarial Amendment are simply not necessary to allow the stock to rebuild by the 2044 deadline.

While the Amendment 59 proposals to remove the overfished and undergoing overfishing designations for red snapper and an increase in quota are positive steps, NOAA Fisheries' proposed closure to snapper grouper fishing is based on notoriously unreliable estimates of fish released by recreational anglers. During the proposed closure, all recreational hook-and-line fishing (including trolling) would be prohibited from December – February each year in federal waters from Cape Canaveral to the Florida / Georgia border (an area the size of the Virginia). The 55 species proposed to be closed include snappers, groupers, jacks, sea basses, porgies, triggerfish, hogfish, tilefishes, and grunts. If adopted, this drastic action will cause irreparable economic damage to the coastal communities and businesses in the area of the closure that rely on recreational fishing, as well as recreational fishing manufacturers and suppliers across the

country. In exchange for this large area closure to 55 species, NOAA Fisheries proposes a 4-9 day recreational harvest season for red snapper. In terms of both angling opportunities and economic impact, this proposal is not a good trade. While an increase in the recreational season is certainly warranted, it is unjustified to simultaneously propose drastic closures.

ASA is grateful to Florida Congressman Rutherford, as well as subcommittee members Congressman Soto, Congressman Webster, and Congressman Ezell for taking a stand against this harmful proposal by sponsoring the Red Snapper Act (H.R. 470), which would stop NOAA Fisheries from unilaterally closing the South Atlantic red snapper fishery until reliable and accurate data from the South Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count is incorporated into the ongoing stock assessment. Over the past three years, Congress has invested $8.7 million in independent survey data over the past three years, including $3.3 million for the South Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count, which will provide an independent estimate of red snapper abundance. This study, along with other ongoing and recently completed studies aimed at addressing data needs such as reliable recreational discard information, will help address data deficiencies to improve management of the Atlantic red snapper fishery.

With the imminent release of the final rule for Amendment 59, a growing red snapper stock, and new data feeding into a new stock assessment, Atlantic red snapper anglers are wondering whether they can expect to have reasonable access to red snapper harvest. Many have watched state recreational red snapper seasons increase in the Gulf and have asked when it will be their turn. Likewise, recent statements from Governor DeSantis of Florida[7], Governor Kemp of Georgia[8], and members of Congress from South Carolina[9] all express interest in bringing the Gulf red snapper model of state data collection and management to the South Atlantic.

Before the Gulf states were officially delegated management authority for Gulf red snapper, they were able to test state management for two years via exempted fishing permits (EFPs) following a directive in Senate Report language 114-239 accompanying the 2017 Appropriations Bill.[10] Section 4(c) of President Trump's Executive Order on seafood, which calls for expanding exempted fishing permit (EFP) programs to promote fishing opportunities, could provide this break for Atlantic red snapper if adequate red snapper quota is allocated to the South Atlantic states. Given the ongoing federal management challenges to provide reasonable harvest access to Atlantic red snapper despite successful rebuilding, ASA supports consideration of this approach. As in the Gulf, EFPs to test state management in the South Atlantic could be a gamechanger.

Shark Depredation and SHARKED Act of 2025 (H.R. 207)

Imagine hooking the fish of your lifetime, enduring a long, hard fight to get it to the boat, and at the last second before landing the fish, a shark emerges and engulfs your catch. Few experiences can match the highs and lows of fishing as shark depredation, and unfortunately it is becoming an increasingly common occurrence.

[7] https://floridapolitics.com/archives/730659-snapper-desantis-trump/
[8] https://ccaga.org/2025/04/10/kemps-letter-on-red-fish/
[9] https://fry.house.gov/uploadedfiles/final_5.28.2025_-_sc_delegation_letter_to_sec_lutnick_re_state_management_of_red_snapper.pdf
[10] https://www.congress.gov/congressional-report/114th-congress/senate-report/239

Shark depredation occurs when a shark eats or damages a hooked fish before the fish can be landed. These interactions can be frustrating for anglers when they result in damage to or loss of fish, bait, and/or fishing gear. There are also concerns that increasing levels of shark depredation on hooked fish and scavenging of released fish is reducing fish survival, negatively impacting fisheries, and will eventually contribute to stricter regulations intended to offset or avoid shark interactions. The sportfishing community cares about conservation of all marine life, and the escalating issue of shark interactions with recreational fishing must be addressed for the benefit of all fisheries and the fishing public.

A recent study found that, "77% [of anglers surveyed] had experienced depredation in nearshore and pelagic fisheries in the last five years, with depredation more commonly reported in the southeastern United States."[11] 87% of charter guides surveyed said they experienced depredation with clients, resulting in a negative business impact. This research underscores the economic burden and negative attitudes generated from shark interactions.

In the United States, sharks are managed at state, interstate, and national levels and through international treaties. Historically, shark populations were significantly reduced primarily due to overfishing. Over the past few decades, management under MSA has focused on rebuilding overfished stocks and maintaining sustainable shark fisheries. As such, the United States has achieved increases in populations of many shark species.[12] Despite this progress, several shark species are expected to be in rebuilding plans for decades because they are slow to grow and reproduce; prohibited from harvest for conservation purposes; and/or listed under the Endangered Species Act.[13]

Although this multi-layered management framework has contributed to the success in rebuilding shark stocks, it also presents constraints in how fishery managers can respond to increasing shark interactions. Human conflicts with sharks are expected to further increase as shark populations continue to improve. This will require fishery managers and scientists to collaborate with the recreational fishing community on solutions, while considering the complexities of shark fishery management and science.

Increasing shark depredation is negatively impacting fishing experiences, threatening the safety of sharks and humans, and negatively impacting the sustainability of targeted fish populations. ASA believes that fishery managers need to move beyond identifying the challenges with shark interactions and begin working collectively on solutions.

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[11] Grace A. Casselberry, Ezra M. Markowitz, Kelly Alves, Joseph Dello Russo, Gregory B. Skomal, Andy J. Danylchuk. When fishing bites: Understanding angler responses to shark depredation, Fisheries Research, Volume 246, 2022.

[12] Peterson et al. 2017. Preliminary recovery of coastal sharks in the south-east United States. Fish and Fisheries (18):845-859.

[13] NOAA HMS, 2021. 2021 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report for Atlantic Highly Migratory Species. National Marine Fisheries Service, Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Division. 250 pp.

The SHARKED Act (H.R. 207), which has already passed the House, is a huge step towards addressing this issue. H.R. 207 would establish a task force of experts, including state and federal fishery managers and shark researchers to develop ways to improve coordination and communication to address shark depredation, identify research priorities and opportunities, develop recommended management strategies to address shark depredation, and coordinate development of educational strategies to help the fishing community minimize shark interactions. ASA is grateful to House Natural Resources Committee members that have championed this bill: Vice Chairman Wittman, Congressman Webster, and Congressman Soto. We look forward to introduction and passage of the SHARKED Act in the Senate.

Conclusion

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide the sportfishing industry's perspective on some of the top challenges and opportunities for marine recreational fishing, particularly in the southeastern U.S. We are grateful for the ongoing work of the House Natural Resources Committee to advance legislation that will strengthen the management and conservation of the nation's public lands and waters. We look forward to working with the Committee on legislation that affects the recreational fishing industry and America's 57.7 million anglers.