

Testimony  
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Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission  
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Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and members of the subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries, thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.R. 5699, the “Fisheries Data Modernization and Accuracy Act of 2025.”

My name is Dr. Christopher Sweetman, and I am the federal fisheries section leader for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), which is the agency that manages fish and wildlife in the State of Florida. As the federal fisheries section leader at FWC, I am the state’s designee on the Gulf Fishery Management Council, and I help coordinate fisheries management in the South Atlantic, where the topic of NOAA’s Marine Recreational Information Program, or MRIP, and challenges associated with its use for fisheries management have been discussed extensively.

Florida is the nation’s third most populous state, with a population of 23.37 million residents, and welcomed 143 million visitors, or 391,780 visitors each day, in 2024. This translates to roughly 42% of the entire population of the United States visited Florida last year. Florida is one of the premier fishing environments in the world, and our diverse and abundant fisheries are important drivers for tourism and the economy. Florida has more than 1 million registered recreational vessels, issued more than 2.5 million fishing licenses to residents and nonresidents, and issued almost 9,000 commercial fishing licenses. With this level of interest in our natural resources, it is easy to see why Florida is the fishing and boating capital of the world and a destination for sportsmen and women from across the globe.

Florida is home to some of the world’s most diverse wildlife. FWC protects and manages more than 500 species of marine life and more than 200 species of freshwater fish. Our more than 2,000 employees are committed to conserving wildlife for now and into the future.

As a peninsula state with fishery management responsibilities on both the Gulf of America and the South Atlantic, FWC helps support the federal management of fisheries from Texas to North Carolina as representatives on the Gulf and South Atlantic Regional Fishery Management Councils, which collectively manage more than 95 species in federal waters.

Fisheries management is only as effective as the accuracy of the data being used to make management decisions.. Data is the foundation of all fisheries management decisions, and as a state where fishing is a major component of our lives, having the correct data is essential. It is essential for the thousands of people who work in our fishing industry. It is essential for the food supply in the United States. Lastly, and most important, accurate data is essential for fisheries managers to ensure that our natural resources can be sustainable for future generations to enjoy.

I am here to testify on behalf of H.R. 5699, the “Fisheries Data Modernization and Accuracy Act of 2025.” FWC is pleased to support H.R. 5699 and thanks U.S. Rep. Rutherford (R-FL) for his leadership on this important issue. The goal of the bill is to improve MRIP, so those of us in the natural resource management field can ensure management decisions are based on the best science available.

NOAA Fisheries created MRIP in 2008 when MRIP replaced NOAA Fisheries’ previous recreational data collection system, the Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey (MRFSS). MRIP is supposed to

count and report marine recreational fishing catch and effort, and the data comes from two sources: (1) dockside reporting, which is mostly contracted out to states by NOAA Fisheries typically, on number, type, and size of fish harvested and discarded and (2) mailed surveys conducted by NOAA Fisheries that report the number of trips anglers took, which is called the Fishing Effort Survey (FES).

Based on our experience in the Gulf of America and the South Atlantic, MRIP has had serious, significant issues for a long time. And when there are issues, we can do one of two things: leave it alone or fix it.

FWC has chosen to fix it. FWC has long advocated for improvements to how MRIP works. In 2017, FWC's former executive director Nick Wiley testified in this room about the need to reform MRIP. Unfortunately, all the statements former director Wiley made in 2017 about MRIP's deficiencies are still very relevant today. Simply put, MRIP does not consider regional differences in data collection, and therefore, its 'one-size-fits-all' approach for the entire country routinely creates issues for numerous recreational fisheries at the regional level.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) was enacted by Congress for the federal government to regulate and manage the commercial fishing industry. The most recent reauthorization created the requirement for Annual Catch Limits (ACLs), and these ACLs are based on census-level commercial fishing data, where every pound of landed fish is accounted for. For the most part, MSA works well for the commercial fishing industry where it is easier to monitor and report catch information, including pounds of fish. When MRIP was initially created, its purpose was to provide trends in harvest and fishing effort for the recreational fishing industry. However, trends are not what is needed for this complex recreational management system. NOAA Fisheries uses MRIP data to estimate fish harvest and effort, which in turn is used by NOAA Fisheries for management purposes, such as projecting the length of a fishing season or closing a fishery if ACLs are estimated to have been met.

However, there is a huge difference in data collection between the commercial and recreational fishing sectors, and the federal government and NOAA Fisheries have problems making the distinction that the sectors should be treated differently based on accuracy of their respective data collection programs. Census-level data collection from the commercial sector is possible because, relatively speaking, there are much fewer commercial fishermen than recreational fishermen. As a result, data from the commercial sector is accurate, trusted, and useful for management purposes. Conversely, the recreational sector has dramatically more fishermen than the commercial sector and, as a result, MRIP only covers a small percentage of all anglers, and these numbers are then extrapolated to estimate the total landings, effort, and discards. Beyond the limitations of MRIP not being a census-level data collection program, recreational data collection from MRIP are further confounded by what is known as "rare event species." "Rare event species" are species that are infrequently sampled by MRIP, mainly because of the programmatic design, and, therefore "rare event species" have high levels of error associated with the data. These species typically include those caught farther from shore, such as red snapper, gag grouper, red grouper, and other reef fishes. NOAA Fisheries' own policy states that recreational data should be treated with caution for use in management if error levels reach above 30% and are not recommended for use in management if error levels reach above 50%. "Rare event species" fall into this level of error, yet NOAA Fisheries still classifies MRIP as the best scientific information available and, therefore, forces the Regional Fishery Management Councils to use unreliable data to manage nearly all of their fisheries. This has created a lack of trust from the public and represents a systematic failure of not just the MRIP program, but also a management system that was designed to provide benefits and services to the people of America based on sound science and reliable data. While NOAA Fisheries has continued to try and improve MRIP, the management system is still greatly impacted because the Regional Fishery Management Councils review the past and correct MRIP errors constantly. MRIP is so very far behind in what is needed for recreational fisheries management, particularly in the Southeastern United States and Florida where recreational fishing effort is much higher than anywhere else in the country. Fisheries

managers cannot continue to do the same thing, with minor improvements, and expect better results. Recreational anglers cannot continue to be told that federal data is improving and only see marginal improvements. We need reform and we need it quickly. Because of these issues, states in the Southeastern United States are forced to spend their own funds to try and improve this system to more accurately reflect what fishermen are seeing on the water. Clearly, states are committed to improving management and rebuilding trust with fishermen because of the issues with the MRIP data collection system and how it impacts management.

And since the recreational and commercial sectors are managed to a specific ACL, and only the commercial sector has census-level data collection for the purpose of quota tracking, it is clear that MRIP's foundation was not designed or equipped for tracking recreational catch to the pound or to report on each individual fish caught. Rather than seeing the recreational and commercial sectors as separate and distinct, the federal government and NOAA Fisheries impose the commercial fishing one-size-fits-all ACL-management style on the recreational industry. There are many instances in recent years when NOAA Fisheries made a projection using MRIP, which resulted in fisheries managers, scientists, and the public finding the estimates to be unrealistic. Simply put, MRIP is less precise than commercial monitoring and reporting, and is behind in its estimates because, again, it was not designed or equipped to monitor and report on each individual fish caught.

The complex management system that exists in the MSA essentially requires near real-time recreational data in order to project seasons and prevent quota overages. However, MRIP operates in two-month waves and does not come close to providing adequate information for fisheries managers to make informed, educated decisions.

Here are a few examples where MRIP missed the mark:

**Greater amberjack in Mississippi:** In 2022, a single greater amberjack was intercepted by MRIP dockside samplers in Mississippi. Despite high levels of error, which NOAA's own policy guidance states that MRIP estimates with an error of greater than 50% should not be used for management, this single fish was extrapolated to estimate that 300,000 pounds of fish were harvested.

**Gag Grouper:** Gag Grouper is a popular fish in the South Atlantic and the Gulf of America. MRIP estimated that private recreational anglers harvested 701,162 pounds of gag in the Gulf of America in less than two months of fishing in 2023, which exceeded the ACL by 181%. In fact, NOAA Fisheries' preliminary MRIP landings estimated that 106,000 pounds were landed due to a single fish intercepted at the Sunshine Skyway Fishing Pier. This did not make sense to us or the Gulf Council on many levels. Using Florida's State Reef Survey data collection system, FWC estimated that catch was only 236,854 pounds, or 33% of the MRIP estimate. Ultimately, the Gulf Council's scientific advisors agreed that Florida's State Reef Fish Survey represented the Best Scientific Information Available and replaced MRIP-FES as a data collection and monitoring program for the private recreational sector.

**MRIP-Fishing Effort Survey:** As mentioned above, NOAA Fisheries has used MRIP-FES data to make unrealistic projections and management decisions. For example, in 2023, NOAA Fisheries admitted its Fishing Effort Survey (FES) may be overestimating recreational effort data by 30 to 40%. Based on our knowledge of fisheries in the Southeast U.S., we knew all along MRIP was off. The lack of confidence in MRIP-FES has become so pervasive that the Gulf Council passed a motion not to address sector allocations until NOAA Fisheries completes the FES pilot study aimed at rectifying the overestimation of effort issue. While it is good that NOAA Fisheries is finally addressing long-standing concerns about MRIP, many expect this 'fix' to be a band-aid on a large, open wound. What is clear is that MRIP-FES, in its current form, does not represent an accurate data collection program for use in monitoring and managing some of the United States' most valued recreational fisheries.

South Atlantic Red Snapper: For years, FWC heard from fishermen in northeast Florida that the abundance of red snapper in the South Atlantic did not match the measly one or two-day fishing season allowed by NOAA Fisheries. The very first time FWC met with Congressman Rutherford, he asked about this very issue. The most recent stock assessment update conducted by NOAA Fisheries indicated that the Atlantic red snapper stock is no longer overfished, and, following implementation of Secretarial Amendment 59, is no longer undergoing overfishing. The stock is rebuilding 20 years ahead of schedule, and biomass and abundance are at record highs. Despite these facts, NOAA Fisheries has consistently advocated for closures off Florida to address what NOAA says is a discard mortality issue that can only be addressed through a reduction in fishing effort. Given that discard estimates are based entirely on MRIP-FES and the high levels of uncertainty associated with those discard estimates, past NOAA Fisheries leadership and the present South Atlantic Council Science and Statistical Committee Chair have stated that discards should not be used for management purposes due to their uncertainty. Closures in Florida based on inaccurate MRIP data would have significant, negative economic consequences, and FWC has consistently advocated for better data to be used to manage this fishery. Comparatively, Florida's SRFS data indicate that catch, effort, and discards are about 2-3 times less than what NOAA Fisheries' estimates with MRIP-FES.

These are just a few examples, but it is a pattern with real-life consequences. First, it fosters mistrust between NOAA Fisheries and all interested parties, including state fisheries managers and the fishing community. Second, since NOAA Fisheries considers its results from MRIP as the Best Science Information Available (BSIA) for most fisheries, NOAA Fisheries uses the MRIP data to determine the fishing season length and the number of fish that may be harvested. Third, because of MRIP's inadequacies, each state in the Gulf of America has developed its own state data collection system where the information being reported by our stakeholders is better, more accurate, and timelier than MRIP. In fact, Texas and Louisiana have already dropped out of MRIP and Mississippi and Alabama are in the process of dropping out of MRIP. On the west coast, Oregon, Washington, and California do not belong to MRIP. FWC has its own data collection and reporting program – State Reef Fish Survey – but we use our data to supplement MRIP, so Florida still utilizes MRIP more than other Gulf states.

Having the Gulf states develop their own reporting system was key in moving towards state management of red snapper in the Gulf of America. We believe state management of red snapper in the Gulf of America may be one of the greatest success stories of fisheries management in the history of the United States. Building off the success in the Gulf, South Atlantic states are going to use that same management model to test state management of Atlantic red snapper. Last week, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina submitted exempted fishing permits (EFPs) to begin the transfer of management of red snapper in the South Atlantic from the federal government to the states, and all of us look forward to the federal government approving our EFPs to begin the process of state management.

It is well past time to improve MRIP, and H.R. 5699 will make necessary improvements to MRIP. For example, having the National Academy of Sciences act as a de facto auditor and independent reviewer will provide the important scientific peer review that is lacking currently. Second, requiring NOAA Fisheries to reduce levels of error in MRIP or to use data collected from state programs is a huge improvement. Third, providing funds to the states to establish or improve their data collection system will provide more data points for better fishery management. Those are just some of the reasons why FWC supports H.R. 5699.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.