

Questions from Rep. Mike Ezell

1) How do unnecessary access restrictions and regulatory uncertainty hurt coastal economies, and how can Congress ensure federal fisheries management promotes access, relies on accurate data, and reflects real-world conditions rather than one-size-fits-all rules?

Response:

Thank you, Congressman Ezell. From my perspective as a boat dealer and lifelong offshore angler, unnecessary access restrictions and regulatory uncertainty do real damage to coastal economies because they suppress participation and stall investment.

At Butler Marine, our team includes 30 employees, and we serve 2,500 customers annually. In the years where offshore opportunity was limited or uncertain, we saw boat purchases canceled, customers sell their boats since they couldn't keep the fish they were targeting, less service work, fewer repowers, and less parts purchases. If the restrictions weren't in place it would 20% to business plus a 10-20% increase in number of employees.

In S.C. we have a \$6.5 billion industry which supports a full local ecosystem: charter captains, marinas, mechanics, boat manufacturers, tackle shops, restaurants, lodging, and tourism. When federal seasons are reduced to a few days, closed without warning, or governed by rules that do not match real-world conditions, it is not just an inconvenience for anglers. It disrupts planning and cash flow for small businesses.

The uncertainty is often as harmful as the restriction itself. Customers delay purchasing boats and equipment when they do not know whether they will have access to key fisheries. Charter operators cannot schedule trips responsibly when seasons are unpredictable or so short that weather becomes the deciding factor. Bait and tackle businesses reduce inventory and staffing when they cannot forecast demand. The ripple effect can be seen across fuel docks, boat storage, service departments, and hospitality businesses that rely on seasonal offshore activity.

Congress can help ensure federal fisheries management promotes access and conservation together by emphasizing three priorities:

1. **Better data and modernized recreational harvest estimation.** Federal managers should not be forced to make sweeping access decisions based on low-confidence estimates. Congress should continue pushing NOAA to adopt improved data tools, expand electronic reporting options, and incorporate state-led data collection systems where they can improve accuracy.
2. **Accountability and flexibility when the science is uncertain.** When data quality is poor, the default should not automatically be a near-total shutdown for the public. Congress can encourage pilot programs, exempted fishing permits, and adaptive management approaches that improve data while preserving reasonable access.
3. **Regional and real-world practicality.** One-size-fits-all rules fail in the Southeast where fisheries, distance offshore, weather patterns, and participation differ significantly from

other regions. Congress should ensure federal management reflects regional conditions and meaningfully incorporates state agencies and local stakeholders in decisions that affect access and safety.

Conservation and access go hand in hand because participation funds conservation through license revenues and excise taxes. When we reduce access unnecessarily, we reduce participation and undermine the conservation funding model itself. A management system built on accurate data, practical rules, and state-federal cooperation will protect fish stocks while sustaining coastal jobs and outdoor traditions.

Questions from Rep. Daniel Webster

1) Could you describe the economic benefit to coastal communities for the states assuming this authority (red snapper EFPs)?

Response:

Thank you, Congressman Webster. The economic benefit of state-led recreational red snapper management is straightforward: it restores predictable access, spreads participation across a realistic season, and stabilizes planning for coastal businesses.

When red snapper access is limited to one or two days, it effectively removes a key public fishery from the economy. A two-day season is not something charter operators can market responsibly, and it pushes private anglers into unsafe “weather lottery” behavior. It also discourages investment in boats, engines, safety gear, electronics, tackle, fuel, and travel.

In fact, a longer, predictable red snapper season would drive demand for 7 out of 8 my boat brands, repowers, electronics packages, and offshore safety equipment. At Butler Marine, we would expect meaningful increases in our service and parts departments, plus we would have more fisherman coming to Beaufort and Charleston to fish adding additional revenue to hotels, restaurants, marinas, tackle shops, and gas stations tied directly to improved offshore opportunity.

If the South Atlantic states can manage red snapper through exempted fishing permits with a meaningful season and modern reporting, the benefits to coastal communities include:

- **More consistent tourism and travel** over weeks rather than a single weekend
- **Increased charter bookings** and better trip scheduling that improves safety
- **Higher spending at marinas, fuel docks, and service departments**
- **Increased tackle and gear purchases** tied to legitimate opportunity
- **Greater confidence for boat buyers**, especially for offshore-capable boats
- **Better conservation outcomes** through improved data collection and reduced discard mortality

State-led programs also incentivize better science. Real-time electronic reporting and enhanced monitoring allow managers to measure outcomes more accurately and adjust responsibly. That is good for conservation and good for the long-term economic health of coastal communities.

2) How would misguided regulatory approaches like the proposed right whale vessel speed rule have hurt businesses like yours?

Response:

First off, even the proposal of the rule hurt my business, we saw at least \$1 million in purchases delayed just by the threat of having to go the speed of a slow golf cart to a fishing hole 70 miles away. The proposed expansion of a 10-knot speed restriction for vessels 35 feet and larger would have harmed businesses like mine in three primary ways: reduced participation, reduced safe access, and reduced consumer confidence.

In the South Carolina Lowcountry, offshore fishing opportunities are far from port. The Beaufort and Hilton Head area is among the farthest points from the Gulf Stream on the East Coast. Offshore trips often require 50 to 70 miles of travel one way. At 10 knots, many day trips become impractical or impossible. That would directly reduce boating and fishing participation.

Second, it would have created safety concerns for many recreational boats that are designed to operate most safely while on plane. Forcing boats to travel at slow displacement speeds in open water increases exposure time and can reduce maneuverability in changing conditions.

Third, it would have depressed consumer purchasing decisions. The rule signaled to many customers that offshore boating might become functionally inaccessible for months at a time. When customers lose confidence that they can safely and reasonably use their boats, they delay purchases, reduce upgrades, and scale back travel and spending. That affects boat dealers, manufacturers, mechanics, marinas, and local hospitality businesses.

In short, a broad, one-size-fits-all rule would have reduced access and harmed coastal economies, without necessarily targeting risk in the most effective way.

3) From your perspective, what would a better regulatory approach to conserve right whales look like?

Response:

A better approach to right whale conservation is a targeted, science-driven strategy that focuses on real risk while preserving safe and practical access for recreational boating and fishing. Right now, we are taking a hammer when a flyswatter approach is needed. Keep in mind, there has only been one serious vessel strike off the coast of South Carolina in the last 50 years.

The recreational community supports whale conservation. Boaters and anglers are often the first to report sightings, and many already comply with existing measures. The best regulatory approach should build on that willingness by improving information and precision rather than relying on sweeping restrictions.

Key elements of a better approach include:

1. **Better data and mapping.** Invest in high-resolution habitat mapping, improved monitoring, and predictive modeling that reflect when and where whales are actually present. Tools that provide mariners with more accurate information reduce risk without unnecessarily restricting broad regions.
2. **Real-time communication to mariners.** Expand real-time alert systems that notify boaters when whales are detected, paired with practical guidance for avoidance and safe operation. Real-time information is more effective than permanent restrictions in areas where whale presence is variable.
3. **Targeted measures focused on the highest-risk scenarios.** Prioritize enforcement and compliance where risk is greatest, particularly among larger commercial vessels and in known high-density whale areas and times.
4. **Stakeholder engagement and regional tailoring.** Any future rulemaking should meaningfully incorporate state agencies and the boating and fishing community. South Carolina's coastal geography and offshore travel patterns differ from other regions, and rules must account for those real-world differences.

I would also emphasize that broad, long-duration restrictions can reduce participation, which reduces conservation funding over time. The best long-term conservation outcomes come when the public remains engaged, informed, and invested. The technology is evolving quickly that will allow us to help the Right Whale without causing a negative economic impact on marine industry.

The goal should be to reduce whale strikes through better science, better tools, and targeted risk reduction, not by limiting public access across vast areas based on uncertainty.