Testimony of Chris Butler

Owner and Chief Executive Officer, Butler Marine
Founding Chairman, South Carolina Boating and Fishing Alliance
Board Member, Center for Sportfishing Policy
Board Member, Marine Retailers Association of the Americas

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Introduction

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the importance of protecting hunting and fishing access in the great American outdoors.

My name is Chris Butler. I am the Owner of Butler Marine, a recreational boat dealership headquartered in Beaufort, South Carolina. I was honored to serve as the founding chairman of the South Carolina Boating and Fishing Alliance, and I currently serve on the board of the Center for Sportfishing Policy as well as the board for the Marine Retailers Association of the Americas

I was born in Pennsylvania but migrated to South Carolina in my early twenties. I have fished and hunted in both states as well as hunted or fished in 25 other states in our great nation and 8 other countries. South Carolina has more than 11,000 miles of rivers and streams and nearly 3,000 miles of tidal shoreline. Recreational boating and fishing in our state support approximately 23,000 jobs and generate more than $6.5 billion in annual economic activity. My company employs dozens of South Carolinians and serves thousands of customers each year, many of whom depend on access to public waters and fisheries.

Public access is not just a quality of life issue. It is the foundation of the conservation funding model in this country. When access declines, participation declines. When participation declines, conservation funding declines as well. When conservation

funding declines, on-the-water and on-the-ground conservation and management decline.

Federal Mismanagement of Atlantic Red Snapper

The Atlantic red snapper fishery in the South Atlantic has become one of the most frustrating examples of federal mismanagement limiting public access without reflecting biological reality.

The red snapper population in the South Atlantic is larger today than any time in recorded history. Despite clear evidence of a strong and growing red snapper population, recreational anglers in South Carolina and neighboring states have been limited for decades to seasons as short as one or two days. In practical terms, this means that anglers are forced into unsafe weather windows, charter operators cannot schedule trips, and private boaters simply stop participating.

Federal harvest estimates for red snapper rely heavily on survey methods that are not designed to measure catch during extremely short seasons. As a result, harvest estimates often have error rates of up to 40 percent, rendering them ineffective for real management decisions. In some years, the data are so limited that meaningful estimates cannot be produced at all.

This has created a cycle where poor data leads to restrictive seasons, which then produces even poorer data.

South Carolina, alongside the other South Atlantic States, has proposed a solution. Beginning in 2026, the state has sought approval to manage the recreational red snapper fishery through a state-run exempted fishing permit program with an annual season of 61 - 62 days. The proposed approach includes conservative bag limits of one fish per angler, size limits, real-time electronic reporting, and enhanced monitoring.

A longer season improves safety by spreading fishing effort over calmer weather periods. It improves conservation by reducing discard mortality and generating better data. It also restores reasonable access to a public resource.

From an economic standpoint, the difference between a two-day season and a 60-day season is enormous. For boat dealers like me, for charter operators, tackle retailers, fuel docks, and coastal communities, red snapper access directly affects sales, bookings, and jobs. When anglers know they can fish responsibly over a meaningful season, participation increases and so does investment in boats, gear, and local economies. To put it into economic terms a 61-62 day season means a 10-15% increase in my business. That adds two more employees at Butler Marine as well as a more boaters coming to my county to spend their valuable dollars.

State-led management has already proven successful in the Gulf of America. There is no reason the South Atlantic cannot achieve the same results. We are looking forward

to NOAA Fisheries and the Department of Commerce approving the Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) applications from the states to drive data-driven results in management.

North Atlantic Right Whale Vessel Speed Rule

The second issue I want to address is the continuous proposed expansion of vessel speed restrictions intended to protect North Atlantic right whales.

The recreational boating and fishing community supports right whale conservation. These animals are critically endangered, and no one wants to see harm come to them, and I know as a boat owner and avid angler, no one wants to hit one of these majestic creatures with a vessel. Boaters and anglers are often the first to report whale sightings, and interactions with whales are widely viewed as a privilege and highlight of time spent on the water.

However, the 10-knot speed limit proposed in the Biden Administration for vessels 35 feet and larger across broad portions of the Atlantic coast – for up to seven months a year and out as far as 90 miles – would have had severe and unintended consequences. My business alone would have suffered at minimum a 20% reduction in revenue.

In South Carolina, offshore fishing grounds are far from port. The Beaufort, Hilton Head, and Charleston region, where my dealerships are located, is one of the furthest points from the Gulf Stream on the entire East Coast. Offshore trips routinely require 50 to 70 miles of travel one way. At 10 knots, those runs become impractical or impossible for day trips.

My business alone was threatened to decrease by at least 20%, that is a huge amount for a small business and would have required me to terminate at least 2-5 employees. This doesn't sound like many employees till you multiply it over the number of dealers up and down the east coast, then you are talking about hundreds of fellow Americans that have lost their job. The threat of the rule even cost me sales between 2022-2025. That loss would ripple through coastal economies, impacting boat dealers, charter captains, marinas, mechanics, tackle shops, restaurants, coastal grocery stores, and hotels.

Safety is also a major concern. Many recreational boats are designed to operate safely while on plane. Operating at slow displacement speeds in open water reduces maneuverability, increases exposure time, and limits a captain's ability to respond efficiently to weather changes or avoid hazards. As a boat owner for over 40 years and with thousands of hours on the water I would not have engaged in offshore trips at 10 knots, it invites too much potential for injury, loss of life, and damaging equipment.

It is also important to consider actual risk. Since 2005, vessel strikes involving recreational boats under 65 feet have been extremely rare. Off the coast of South Carolina, there has been only one serious recreational vessel strike incident in the past

50 years. That means you have a better chance of being struck by lightning than hitting a whale.

And of course, no mariner wants to strike a 50-ton whale.

While the proposed rule was withdrawn in early 2025, we must anticipate another version of an ill-conceived vessel speed rule is likely to rear its head, unless legislative efforts can successfully tighten up the Endangered Species Act. Any future approach must be grounded in law and science.

Science-Based Alternatives and Practical Solutions

The common thread between federal red snapper mismanagement and any future resurrections of the right whale vessel speed rule is not a lack of concern for conservation. It is a lack of reliable, modern data.

In both cases, broad access restrictions have been driven by uncertainty rather than precision. When agencies do not have confidence in where fish or marine mammals actually are, when they are present, or in what numbers, the default response has been exaggeration of the Precautionary Principle: to limit access across wide areas and long periods of time. That approach is inefficient, economically damaging, and ultimately counterproductive to conservation.

Better data offers a better path forward.

For red snapper, the shortcomings of federal recreational harvest data have been well documented. Extremely short seasons produce unreliable survey results, high margins of error, and management decisions that do not reflect real-world stock conditions. Initiatives like the Great Red Snapper Count demonstrated that red snapper abundance was significantly underestimated by traditional federal assessments. That effort showed what is possible when modern tools, state leadership, and industry participation are combined to improve stock estimates.

State-led red snapper management proposals build on those lessons. By using real-time electronic reporting, conservative harvest limits, and enhanced monitoring, states can generate higher-quality data while simultaneously restoring reasonable public access. Longer seasons not only improve safety and participation, they also produce better science by spreading effort over time and reducing discard mortality. Better data leads to better management, which in turn supports both conservation goals, public trust and regional economies.

The same principle applies to whale conservation.

Protecting North Atlantic right whales requires knowing where whales are, when they are present, and how they move across changing ocean conditions. Blanket speed restrictions imposed over vast areas assume constant risk everywhere, when in reality

whale presence is highly variable and seasonal. Improved data collection and information sharing allow for targeted risk reduction rather than permanent access limitations.

Legislation such as the WHALE CHARTS Act reflects this more precise, science-driven approach. By investing in high-resolution habitat mapping, predictive modeling, and real-time dissemination of whale location data, policymakers can give mariners the tools they need to avoid interactions with whales without unnecessarily shutting down access to public waters. These types of solutions protect marine mammals while maintaining safe and practical boating activity.

Across both fisheries management and marine mammal protection, the solution is not less participation. It is better information.

State-led monitoring programs, voluntary reporting systems, public education, and public-private partnerships all play a role in improving data quality. Sportsmen and women are willing partners in these efforts. They want to comply with conservation measures when those measures are clearly tied to real risk and supported by transparent science.

Conservation policies work best when they are built with the people who use the resource and fund its protection. When better data replaces uncertainty, regulators can move away from broad prohibitions and toward targeted solutions that achieve conservation outcomes while preserving public access.

Sportsmen and Women are Conservationists

Hunters and anglers are America's original conservationists. Through excise taxes on fishing equipment, boating fuel, firearms, and ammunition, sportsmen and women have funded wildlife and fisheries conservation for decades.

The Dingell-Johnson Act alone has generated billions of dollars for fish restoration, boating access, education programs, and habitat improvement. These funds support state fisheries management, thousands of boat ramps, hundreds of hatcheries, and youth fishing programs across the country.

South Carolina is home to the three largest fishing tackle manufacturers in the world. These companies pay a substantial share of the federal excise taxes – a 10% excise tax the industry imposed on itself – which funds conservation nationwide. Their success depends on participation. Participation depends on access.

When access is restricted, fewer people fish and boat. When fewer people participate, conservation funding declines. Policies that reduce access ultimately undermine conservation.

Conclusion

Access and conservation are not opposing goals. They are inseparable.

Federal red snapper management and the right whale vessel speed rule illustrate what happens when access is limited without sufficient data, flexibility, or stakeholder input. In both cases, better science, state leadership, and practical solutions offer a better path forward.

Sportsmen and women want to be partners in conservation. We fund it. We live it. We depend on it.

I appreciate the Subcommittee's leadership on these issues and its focus on protecting hunting and fishing access in the great American outdoors.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions.