

Written Testimony of
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Before

The U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington D.C.
June 3, 2026

Introduction

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Hoyle and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to be here today and testify on behalf of the Gulf of America state agencies. I am Joe Spraggins, Executive Director at the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources. I appear today in support of The Offshore Parity Act, which would establish a 9 nautical mile boundary for all states in the Gulf of America and alleviate a historical disparity established long ago. For my testimony today, I will address three key reasons why this act should be supported: consistency across all Gulf States, increased access for state shrimp fleets, and regulatory alignment for fisheries monitoring and management.

Consistency Across Gulf States

While the fisheries resources of Gulf of America are a shared resource that is managed by both state and federal entities, it is important to note that the jurisdictional boundary between state and federal waters is not consistent across states or species. Florida Gulf Coast and Texas, by benefit of a bill passed in the 1950's, have state jurisdiction out to 9 nautical miles while the central states of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana have jurisdiction to 3 nautical miles. A closer look at this disparity can focus on coastline, which shows that the 1,631 total miles of coastline in the Gulf of America is largely the combined 367- and 770-miles coastline of Texas and Florida, meaning that nearly 70% of the region is already under the proposed jurisdictional designation. The disparity in jurisdiction can cause confusion for anglers that cross jurisdictional waters, or even transit over to other states for vacations centered around enjoying the coastal waters of those states. This confusion often leads to uncertainty in harvest regulations which require clarification directly from state fisheries agencies and at worst, fisheries violations due to assumed consistency when fishing amongst neighboring states.

Coupled with the confusion between states is the disparity between species designations. Reef Fish in the Gulf of America are managed by all five Gulf states out to 9 nautical miles and have generally operated under federal consistency, meaning bag, size and seasons are consistent. While this increase in access has benefited states in terms of access and prioritization, it has also led to confusion when other species groups are encountered during fishing trips. Anglers encountering Cobia, King Mackerel, Spanish Mackerel, Sharks, or other species that may have differing regulations between state and federal regulations must recognize that they must abide by federal regulations when they are beyond the three nautical miles, even if they are harvesting the allowed reef fish within the nine nautical mile jurisdiction. In addition to recreational anglers, Federally and non-federally permitted charter boats must contend with this on a daily basis as the required permits for harvesting Coastal Migratory Pelagics and Reef Fish in federal waters are set at the two different jurisdictions. Consistency in jurisdictional designations across all the gulf states will lead to decreased angler confusion and more coherent and streamlined regulatory designations.

Enhancement of State Shrimp Fleet Access

The shrimp fishery of the Gulf of America has faced a multi-decadal decline associated with numerous impacts. Imports, increasing operational costs, large-scale storm events, and increasing regulatory burden have all taken their toll on a once profitable and viable domestic fishery. Throughout this timespan, decreases in active federal permits due to lapses in renewals and decreased profitability have shrunk the federal fleet substantially and impacted the availability and affordability of domestic shrimp throughout the country. Under current regulations, state licensed shrimp vessels without federal permits are not allowed to go past the three-mile boundary and drag in some of the more productive shrimping grounds of the Gulf. By passing the Offshore Parity Act, you will increase access to the productive shrimping grounds of the north-central Gulf of America and not only bolster the availability of shrimp to the market but expand the state-licensed vessels ability to participate in this fishery year-round.

Monitoring and Management

While I have listed numerous positive impacts and hopeful outcomes associated with the passage of this Act, I would like to also take time to assure members of the committee that the management structure that exists within the Gulf is robust enough to incorporate these changes. Each state operates a mandatory trip ticket system for commercial harvesters and has been designed to include reporting from federally permitted fishermen. These systems, funded through Gulf Fisheries Information Network (GulfFIN), operate with inter-agency cooperation and coordination through the Gulf States Marine Fisheries

Commission (GSMFC) and maintain a centralized data warehouse available to NOAA fisheries staff and state fisheries managers. Alongside the commercial reporting programs, each state operates a recreational monitoring program that produces catch metrics for nearly all targeted species in each state. I am particularly proud of my staff for the development and certification of MS Creel and encouraged by the regional consistency it will provide when paired alongside LA Creel and AL Creel. These fishery-dependent programs, which thrive under inter-agency and state-federal cooperation and are the highest prioritized funding items with GulfFIN will be paramount in measuring the impact that the passage of this bill would have.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier in my testimony, Texas and Florida's Gulf Coast have a nine-mile state jurisdiction; extending the territorial waters for Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana would provide consistency to the states for fisheries management and provide the flexibility needed to ensure optimal benefits for each state's fisheries.

Chair Hageman, I thank you and the committee for the opportunity to provide my testimony today and welcome any questions you may have on the subject.