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Subcommittee on Fisheries and Oceans
United States House of Representatives

Hearing on the Conservation and Management of Atlantic Striped Bass

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am Jim Donofrio, Executive Director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA). The RFA is a national 501(c)(4) non-profit grassroots political action organization whose mission is to safeguard the rights of salt water anglers, protect marine, boat, and tackle industry jobs, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our nation's marine fisheries.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee to discuss Atlantic striped bass conservation and management. I will discuss the economic and social importance of the recreational striped bass fishery and future management recommendations that will ensure the long term sustainability of the Atlantic striped bass.

The RFA commends Congressman Pallone for requesting this hearing and appreciates the interest of Chairman Gilchrest, Congressman Saxton and other Committee members who have been engaged in this issue. Beyond the economic significance, the Atlantic striped bass fishery is close to the hearts of the recreational fishing community who played a critical role in the successful recovery of the resource. Consequently, our membership has a significant interest in the responsible management of striped bass.

Economic Importance of Striped Bass

It is important to understand the substantial economic impact that recreational Atlantic striped bass fishing has on Atlantic states, particularly in coastal regions.

Healthy recreational fisheries can provide "enormous economic benefits to coastal communities...." Studies indicate recreational anglers fishing for Atlantic striped bass contribute significantly to our economy. The Atlantic striped bass recreational fishery supports a vast and diverse economic infrastructure, including party and charter boats, guide services, bait and tackle shops, sporting goods stores, boat sales and repairs, marine supply houses, gas docks, marinas, retail food stores, restaurants and hotels, as well as local manufacturers of fishing boats, tackle and gear. Along the East Coast, in 2003, there were 6.5 million marine recreational anglers who spent a total of \$2.4 billion on recreational striped bass fishing. This fishery had an overall economic impact of \$6.6 billion (after multiplier effects) and supported over 60,000 jobs. Additionally, trips targeting Atlantic striped bass account for 31 percent of the total number of fishing trips in any given year. These figures appear to be conservative but illustrate the magnitude and importance of the recreational Atlantic striped bass fishery.

Continued angler participation and spending on marine recreational fishing is highly correlated to fishing opportunities. Therefore, a loss of access to the striped bass resource due to a reduced biomass will have severe, negative economic consequences. This occurrence has been quantified in the context of the Atlantic striped bass fishery by comparing angler expenditures during a period of stock depletion, to angler expenditures during a subsequent period of stock recovery.

In 1981, the striped bass population along the Atlantic coast had been severely depleted, resulting in the imposition of stringent management measures and a complete harvest moratorium in the EEZ. These conservation measures were successful and by 1995, the stock had been restored. The number of directed recreational striped bass trips increased from about one million in 1981 (a time of depressed stocks) to over seven million in 1996 (a time of abundance), an average increase of 38 percent per year. Angler expenditures on striped bass trips increased from \$85 million in 1981, to \$560 million in 1996, an average annual increase of 35 percent.

In short, marine recreational expenditures are a function of recreational fishing opportunities. Consequently, lifting the

harvest moratorium on striped bass in the EEZ will result in restrictive management measures as pressure on the stock exceeds conservation targets mandated in the striped bass fishery management plan (FMP). A reduction in opportunities will result in decreased recreational expenditures, with consequent adverse economic impacts of a potentially substantial magnitude throughout the Atlantic Coast, particularly in its coastal regions.

Harvest Moratorium in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)

The Atlantic striped bass population along the Atlantic coast has been successfully rebuilt above target biomass thresholds specified in Amendment 6 of the Atlantic Striped Bass FMP (Amendment 6). In addition to restrictive size limits and bag limits, the harvest moratorium in the EEZ imposed on both commercial and recreational fishermen played a significant role in this success.

We are optimistic about the fishery and its recovery. However, we must be careful with the future management of this species particularly in the EEZ. The RFA believes that it is prudent to maintain harvest restrictions on striped bass in the EEZ indefinitely. Fisheries managers do not have a clear understanding of disconcerting issues such as non-directed bycatch of striped bass in commercial fisheries that occur in the EEZ and impacts of a 'new' striped bass fishery in the EEZ on target mortality goals set forth by Amendment 6 of the Atlantic striped bass FMP.

The majority of information describing the age structure of striped bass in the EEZ indicates that this area is more frequented by larger, older fish, a component of the population that Amendment 6 intends to protect and further enhance; "Establish a fishing mortality target that will result in a net increase in the abundance (pounds) of age 15 and older striped bass in the population, relative to the 2000 estimate." Also included in goals and objectives in Amendment 6, "To perpetuate, through cooperative interstate fishery management, migratory stock of striped bass to allow commercial and recreational fisheries consistent with the long-term maintenance of a broad age structure, a self-sustaining spawning stock and also provide for the restoration and maintenance of their essential habitat." The relative lack of larger fish in the population is a direct result of the overfishing that took place prior to the implementation of an effective management plan.

In addition, current data indicates that fish in the EEZ are typically larger, older fish (about 21 percent larger than striped bass in state waters) which tend to hold in the deeper waters of the EEZ. Further compounding this larger size structure found in the EEZ are climate changes that appear to be increasing the importance of the EEZ as wintering grounds for older striped bass. Therefore, allowing a directed or incidental fishery in this area would be at odds with the objective of Amendment 6. It is the belief of the RFA that the percentage of larger fish in the population will expand and the resource will continue to be sustainable as intended by Amendment 6 if the striped bass harvest moratorium in the EEZ remains in place.

A final concern would be addressing existing problems with consistency between state and federal goals and objectives regarding striped bass management and conservation. Currently, there is no fishery management plan for striped bass in federal waters. Several coastal states, including New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maine, and the District of Columbia prohibit commercial fishing for striped bass. Lifting the EEZ harvest moratorium would require that striped bass be landed and transported in these states, thereby creating a potential conflict of laws.

Conclusion

Based on the status of the stock, current management measures, and the economic importance of ensuring long-term sustainability, the RFA supports the continued moratorium for harvest of Atlantic striped bass in the EEZ. I would also respectfully request the Committee investigate the importance of the EEZ to Atlantic striped bass as critical wintering habitat and feeding grounds in light of recent, abrupt increases in average ocean temperatures along the Atlantic Sea Board.

The RFA appreciates the Committee's interest in this important issue and looks forward to working with members of the Committee to develop a long-term legislative framework to ensure the sustainability of Atlantic striped bass.