

Good afternoon Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today regarding H. Con. Res. 427.

My name is Rick Weber of Cape May, New Jersey. I am before you today as a Conservationist, a Businessman, and an Offshore Angler. My comments on 427 itself are relatively brief, and I know you have other panel members to give you facts and figures. So I would like to take a moment to fully introduce myself in hopes that you can better understand its impacts on me, and members of your constituencies that I likely represent.

I've been involved with fish, fishing, and the ocean for as long as I can recall. My father was a charter boat captain and I remember going down to the docks each day to see what he had caught. Once, he showed me a movie he had taken when he went on a trip on someone else's boat, a bigger boat, that they could take far offshore.

They didn't catch much that trip, but it didn't matter. The trip alone seemed like an adventure, a long trip to take them to remote waters, where few people had ever gone. They hoped to find a lot of fish or maybe a big one, but no one knew for sure what they would find. The anglers had waited all day by the rods to be ready incase they got a bite, or two, or three. The mate kept the cockpit ready while the captain scanned the ocean for signs of fish. As a young boy I was awestruck by the tale. I had caught marlin fever.

Ladies and Gentlemen, that spirit is alive today in the heart of every marlin fisherman. We are the ultimate optimists. How else can you explain getting up at 3 a.m. to then run offshore for 3 or 4 hours, trolling around through the day, only to run those same 3 or 4 hours back home. All in the hopes of maybe encountering a fish, that for the most part we have neither intent nor desire of landing. But that optimism has a limit.

As stocks have declined, as we all know they have, marlin fisherman have adapted. We are traveling further. Modern boats and electronics help us run to wherever the fishing is hottest, rather than just fishing your local grounds. We fish keener. That is, changing our equipment and methods to catch more of what we see, since the encounters have become less frequent. And ultimately, we have scaled down our expectations. Time was when a 3 or 4 fish day was ordinary, now it has become note worthy and commendable. We are hoping to catch fish on every trip, but that optimism has a limit.

Each fisherman will decide for themselves how great the likelihood need be of catching a marlin to make the time and expense involved worthwhile. Some have already decided to get out of the sport. For certain, others are right around the corner. We would ask that you use what powers you have to help save our sport.

To me though it is about more than saving a sport. You see over twenty years ago that charter boat captain father of mine bought the very marina where he kept his boat, and not long thereafter a second marina. We have as a family (That is mother, father, sister, grandfather, both aunts, both uncles, and most of my cousins) spent over two decades building a business centered around one niche market, the East Coast marlin fisherman.

We have sold them boats, homes, tackle and outfitting. We have stored, serviced, financed, and even insured their boats. We have hosted them for parties, tournaments, and rendezvous. Again, I'll let others give you the industry values, I want you to understand the mindset of the consumer. When these people catch that marlin fever, when they decide to jump into the marlin fishing scene, they do it with both feet.

They buy things, they hire people, they contract services, they contribute to the industry and the national economy as a whole. For the most part they have continued to do it despite the decline in the populations. But make no mistake, each one that leaves, takes thousands if not millions of current and future dollars of spending with them.

My family's livelihoods along with thousands of other people's and their family's are inextricably tied to the health of the white and blue marlin stocks. Think for a moment of the number of people behind every offshore trip; boat builders, sellers and outfitters; marina operators; dock attendants; bait and tackle suppliers; captains and mates. And the fuel behind this economic engine? The optimism that today will be a great day of fishing. We would ask that you use what powers you have to help save our industry.

Anyone who has spent any time at all around these sleek, powerful, nimble animals can hardly help but become a conservationist. Following in the footsteps of that same charter captain, who spent many years as a director of The Billfish Foundation and was instrumental in the founding of the Recreational Fishing Alliance, I am currently a director of the National Coalition for Marine Conservation and last year accepted a nomination to the Billfish Advisory Panel to NMFS. We get involved with these groups and enter the national discussion and debate because we refuse to believe that the fate of the marlin is cast in stone.

We are intent on saving our sport and our industry, not for ourselves but for our children, and our children's children, and perhaps yours too. That they too might know the excitement of an outrigger clip snapping or the frustration of a mistimed backlash or the simple sheer joy of setting off early one morning on an adventure, full of optimism of what the day might bring. For these next generations, we would ask that you use what power you have to help save our marlin.

That brings us to today's topic, 427. Let me start by thanking you for this resolution. Billfish conservation in general is a slow moving cause, where progress is measured in inches rather than yards. I'm sure that each of us involved has, at one time or another, wondered if we were getting anywhere, whether we were just going through the motions. The fact that you and your staffs were willing to spend time, energy, and political capital on this resolution is re-energizing, a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. We are happy to have your attention.

Would I change 427? I suppose we all have our own biased agendas and there are things I might like to take further. But, I'm told politics is the art of compromise, and I certainly don't see anything here that would cause me to oppose the resolution. Am I then supportive of 427? Frankly, I am supportive of any initiative that might help the long term health of my sport and my industry and promote the conservation of marlin. This resolution if acted upon certainly would be helpful. So yes, I support and encourage you to support 427 as written. Am I hopeful for 427? That friends lies with you. This is not a topic that you will be able to address with a few choice words and hope it will resolve itself from there. I am here to tell you it will not. It will take some resolve from this body to move this agenda forward.

The international nature of the resolution is sure to help it pass. One thing that the environmental, commercial, and recreational sectors all agree on is that by almost any test, U.S. fisheries are cleaner, more selective, and more closely monitored than any other in the world. The oceans would be a better place if more nations would follow our examples. Does that mean, though, we should all park our domestic agendas, or stop striving for cleaner fisheries? To the contrary, once we have people following our lead, it is more important than ever that we keep raising the bar, that we keep pointing the way to sustainable fisheries.

In the past year you have considered so many things that would be beneficial to the nations billfish. You have looked at Congressman Saxton's rolling closures, Congressman Hunter's total closures, Congressman Farr's ecosystem management, and Chairman Gilchrist's bycatch reduction, to mention a few. Any these are examples of ways we might next lead the world in billfish management.

If the 'Sense of Congress' reflected in 427 is that we must reverse the decline of marlin populations, then we must not be afraid to demand more. More of ICCAT. More of our trading partners. More of our government. And yes, more of our domestic fishing industries. We all understand that you have started where there is the greatest consensus. The important thing to me is that you have started.

To those who say the U.S. has done enough, I would respectfully disagree, but there are still places for us to work together in the future as well. I have attached, as part of my testimony, a copy of a petition filed with the United States Trade Representatives that, if accepted, would require them to take action along the same lines as what is requested in 427. The petition was filed by the Recreational Fishing Alliance, but is quickly gaining support from all sides amongst those who would rather work together where we can and only fight where we must. They could use any assistance your offices could offer in getting it accepted and moved through the system.

It is critical that the world understand that as a nation we will not sit back and let them go on decimating these populations, ignoring what international law if not common sense tells them is the better path. We need you to send a clear message expressing our collective resolve to save these fish. That we will not allow them to further harm my industry nor undermine the conservation efforts being made by our domestic commercial fisheries. We need to see those stock levels start rising again. It gives us hope. It gives us optimism, which is truly the most important thing, to me, my family, my progeny; my sport, my industry, my nation; and ultimately to the fish themselves.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak.