

Testimony of

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On behalf of

Coastal Conservation Association
American Sportfishing Association
Center for Coastal Conservation
International Game Fish Association
National Marine Manufacturers Association
The Billfish Foundation
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership

Before the

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Power and Oceans

H.R.3094,
Gulf States Red Snapper Management Authority Act

October 22, 2015

Thank you Mr. Chairman, Congressman Huffman and members of the committee. My name is David Cresson and I am the executive director for the Louisiana chapter of Coastal Conservation Association. CCA was established in 1977 and is the largest marine resource conservation group of its kind in the nation, with more than 120,000 members in 19 state chapters along all three coasts. Comprised of recreational anglers and concerned conservationists, CCA has been active in state, regional and federal fishery issues ranging from forage species at the bottom of the marine food chain to pelagic, apex predators at the top. CCA's advocacy philosophy seeks to promote both the proper conservation of marine resources and the availability of those resources to the general public.

The commitment of anglers, and indeed of all sportsmen and women, to act as stewards of the wildlife resources they cherish is at the heart of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which is built on the premise that all fish and wildlife are held in public trust and belong to the people -- not designated individuals for personal gain. That is actually the first tenant in the North American Model, which has seven principal tenants in all.

The North American Model has produced tremendous conservation victories in this country, most notably in waterfowl and inland fisheries. In case after case, Congress, and the states, recognized that placing a dollar value on a wild animal all too often drives harvest past sustainable levels. It was a lesson that relegated commercial harvest of ducks, geese and buffalo to a historical footnote in this country many decades ago, in many cases saving species from extinction. However, the lessons learned on land and in our nation's freshwaters so many years ago seem to have been disregarded when it comes to industrial harvest of marine resources in federal waters. This stark philosophical contrast is at the heart of ongoing management dysfunction in the marine environment.

That being said, I am not here to rail against commercial fisheries. The majority of recreational anglers are not advocating for the elimination of commercial fishing, despite many in that industry attempting to muddy the water with claims to the contrary. We simply want a system of management that provides appropriate access to the resource and nowhere is such a system more lacking than in Gulf of Mexico red snapper. Federal management dysfunction of red snapper in the gulf continues to push recreational fishing away from the extremely successful North American Model and toward schemes meant to limit the public's access to abundant public resources in public waters.

At a Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council in August in New Orleans, a comment was made by a commercial harvester advocating for limiting access for anglers that recreational red snapper fishing needs to be managed according to a plan like duck hunting. Ironically, recreational fishermen would be much happier if snapper were managed like ducks, where state and federal wildlife managers share information and set remarkably consistent seasons and limits according to long-term population trends, not simply on best-guesses about harvest effort based on outdated information. Notice there isn't a Congressional hearing every six months or so on how to fix duck hunting? That's because the system works for its stakeholders. In Louisiana, duck hunters have had 60-day seasons for 20 straight years. Over that same period, federal seasons for red snapper have changed a dozen times, reduced from year-long access in 1996, when the population was beginning to recover, to just 10 days this year despite snapper populations being at what is likely an all-time high. One of the reasons given by NOAA for these shortened seasons is that the fish are so abundant they are too easy to catch. In no other fisheries or game management system is abundance used as a reason to shorten seasons and restrict access. But, somehow federal fisheries managers justify it for Gulf red snapper.

This year's season got even more complicated by sector separation. Again, using duck hunting as a model, it would be absolutely unfair and absurd for the US Fish and Wildlife Service to tell hunters they get 10 days to duck hunt federal Wildlife Management Areas if they go on their own but if they hired a guide to take them to those exact same lands they could hunt four times longer. Yet, that's exactly what happened with red snapper this year because of sector separation, a policy shoved through the Gulf Council and supported by NOAA despite opposition from every Gulf State fisheries agency and the overwhelming majority of anglers in the region. The Gulf Council held a meeting in Baton Rouge in August 2014 to gather public input on sector separation. Approximately 200 attended and those opposed to sector separation outnumbered those in favor 10-1. Gulf wide, according to figures provided by the Gulf Council, comments submitted to the Council were even more one-sided in opposition to sector separation with more than 96 percent of the nearly 3,000 comments submitted to the council website opposing. The council was even advised by its own reef fish advisory committee to not divide the season. The council still divided the season.

It's disappointing, but the sector separation vote and the support for sector separation by NOAA staff was not a surprise. Gulf Council meetings have become free-for-alls for badmouthing recreational fishermen with council members, commercial fishing interests, environmental groups and now a small but vocal group of charter captains accusing anglers of irresponsibility with the resource, a lack of accountability, selfishness and any number of other unfounded accusations. More irony -- most of the accusers are selfishly making the case that they should be in control of their own individual quota of a public resource rather than having access for all fishermen. And, the commercial, charter and environmental special interests on the council are now trying to push through additional efforts to expand and make privatization of red snapper and other fish permanent, another affront to the North American Model.

NOAA regional staff points fingers too, accusing anglers of being too difficult to work with, unwieldy and unwilling to come up with a workable plan for snapper management. To NOAA's credit, in 2014 it heeded the advice of organizations like CCA, The American Sportfishing Association, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, National Marine Manufacturers Association and others to develop its first-ever national policy on saltwater recreational fishing. But as NOAA was working with anglers to write the policy with guiding principles like "expanding fishing opportunities based on conservation gains and understanding and addressing factors affecting angler participation and satisfaction", NOAA Southeast Regional Staff was voting for sector separation at the Gulf Council, a move that severely limits fishing opportunities despite conservation gains and increases the already-pervasive dissatisfaction and distrust recreational fishermen have with federal management.

Recreational anglers are a force for conservation at the state level. They have stepped up to build world-class hatcheries and worked with universities to build world-class science centers. They have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for law enforcement equipment and other support for state game wardens. They have been the driving force behind habitat projects ranging from marsh restoration and oyster shell recycling programs to offshore artificial reefs.

In addition to the license anglers buy just to go fishing, every time we purchase a package of hooks, a fishing rod, reel, lure, tackle box, depth finder, trolling motor, fuel for our fishing boat and other supplies we gladly pay an excise tax that goes into a fund called the Sport Fishing and Boating Trust Fund. The majority of those funds go back to the states for fisheries conservation, angling and boating access and

boating safety. And, 18.5% of that fund is dedicated to a program called the Coastal Wetlands Program. In 2015 alone, that 18.5% equates to around \$112 million going to on the ground projects to conserve and restore coastal habitats. In the last two-plus decades, that money has helped rebuild and sustain more than 100,000 acres of coastal wetlands in Louisiana. It's part of the American System of Conservation Funding - paid for solely by anglers and boaters - and it's the lifeblood of the North American Model.

Anglers have taken on these challenges because we have gladly accepted the responsibility of being stewards of the resource. Gulf anglers regularly ask state agencies to reduce creel limits when stocks show signs of decline or are affected by weather or other environmental factors. Gulf-coast anglers also led the charge in the 1980s to end the use of destructive fishing gear like gillnets and purse-seines that were decimating speckled trout and redfish stocks, pushing these iconic species to the brink of collapse.

The angling community is also largely responsible for the miraculous recovery of Gulf red snapper. In 2005, a lawsuit brought by concerned anglers forced implementation of arguably the single most significant action in the history of red snapper management. After years of inaction by NOAA Fisheries and a relentlessly depressed red snapper stock, a federal judge finally ordered a 79 percent reduction in red snapper mortality from shrimp trawls. After almost 30 years of failed policies and half-measures, this landmark decision finally set the stage for the incredible recovery in red snapper stocks that we are seeing today. Indeed, information presented by the Gulf Council consistently reflects an almost meteoric rise in Gulf red snapper populations beginning in 2005, coinciding exactly with the reduction in shrimp trawl bycatch mortality.

Anglers are accountable as well despite the accusations to the contrary. Anglers in Florida asked the state to institute a saltwater fishing license in 1989 to help better account for angling effort and generate revenue specifically dedicated to conservation, science and management. In 2014, Louisiana anglers successfully backed a bill to increase their license fees from \$15.00 per year to \$22.50 specifically to better account for angling effort and increase and improve data collection and science. And, anglers in all five Gulf States are working with their state fisheries management agencies to develop better accounting systems like Florida's Gulf Reef Fish Survey, Alabama's Snapper Check Reporting Program and Louisiana's LA CREEL Program.

Anglers gladly work with the states to help develop, pay for and contribute information to these state-based programs because they are state-based. Recreational fishermen trust the states. The states very successfully manage recreationally-important species like redfish, speckled trout and largemouth bass. The states very successfully manage mixed-sector species like sheepshead, flounder, black drum and blue crabs. And, the states very successfully manage commercially vital species like shrimp, oysters, crawfish and wild catfish. Recreational fishermen confidently know that when they have concerns, the states will listen and work with them because states understand the economic and cultural value of both recreational and commercial fishing. And, the states work to make fishing an enjoyable experience for families and friends, providing ample opportunity to access the resource while conservatively managing fish and game for abundance. Meanwhile, the federal approach in the Gulf is pointing to privatization of the resource, less access and yielding to the will of a small group of special interests determined to force anglers to hire guides to access the fish and limit time for family and friends to enjoy the resource.

We've been in Washington and in courts fighting over federal management of red snapper for far too long and the fundamental problems aren't getting fixed -- only poorly bandaged, creating more

problems. It's time to rip off the band aid and fix this system. A good way to start is to let the states do what they've done very successfully for a host of other fish and game, both recreationally and commercially, and manage red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico.