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Opening Statement of
Chairman John Fleming
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans & Insular Affairs
On Thursday, December 04, 2014
1324 Longworth House Office Building Legislative Hearing on
H.R. 3099, The Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Conservation Act of 2013

Good morning. Today, the Subcommittee will conduct a hearing on H.R.3099, the Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Conservation Act of 2013.

As I'm sure everyone in this room will agree, the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery is a mess.

This is a fishery that is an economic driver for many coastal communities, is a very popular sport fish for recreational fishermen, and supports a valuable commercial fishery. In fact, this fishery once supported a 180-day recreational season and, while it is currently under a rebuilding plan, both fishermen and NOAA agree that the fishery is rebuilding beyond expectations. Despite this rebuilding success, the recreational seasons have been drastically shortened - leading to only a nine day season in 2014. This increasingly shortened recreational season has had serious consequences for our coast communities and in particular for recreational fishermen.

I can certainly understand how recreational fishermen are frustrated. We have a stock survey system that appears to ignore key areas where red snapper are known to live and we have a recreational data collection program that not only doesn't work, but is now going to undergo yet another revision.

As we have heard at a number of hearings on the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the federal recreational data collection program has been repeatedly called into question. Two states have now undertaken their own recreational data collection programs and both have been able to collect more accurate information and have highlighted the shortcomings in the federal recreational data collection program.

Added to that mix, we have had a court ruling calling into question some of the basic provisions of the federal fishery management system.

With this as a backdrop, I want to thank Congressman Miller for his legislation that attempts to address these problems. I know H.R. 3099, the Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Conservation Act of 2013, has raised some concerns within the various sectors of the Gulf of Mexico fishing industry - and I know we will hear some of those concerns today - but I am glad this legislation will allow us to have this dialog. Hopefully it will lead to some creative solutions.

H.R. 3099 would transfer management of the red snapper fishery from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council to the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission. Supporters of the legislation have cited several examples of other fisheries that have benefitted from moving them from federal management to state management. As you know, many of the Members of this Committee support the notion that States can manage their natural resources more effectively than the federal government can.

However, there are a number of issues that will probably be raised here today that we need to consider. One of the most perplexing will be the question of how we fund this new authority for the Commission. A second concern is whether the Commission will be susceptible to an increase in lawsuits. And a third is how the Gulf States and the federal government will enforce a new management regime.

These are concerns that we must be aware of, but through the hearings we have held in the past, it is clear that there needs to be more flexibility in how states can manage red snapper and it is clear that the Gulf States need to be more actively involved in the management.

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council has been debating several amendments to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan to deal specifically with red snapper issues. The Council recently adopted a controversial sector separation plan that will split the recreational sector into a for-hire component and a private angle component. The Council is also debating a plan to reallocate fish from the commercial sector to the recreational sector. Finally, and probably most important to the discussion today, the Council is working on a regional management scheme that will give each of the Gulf States the ability to manage red snapper within state waters in a way that benefits their fishermen. I suspect some of today's witnesses will give us more information on these amendments and how they relate to the legislation before us.

As Members know, this is not the first hearing we have held on these issues and will likely not be the last hearing on how to improve the management of this important fishery.

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