Testimony of

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Before the

Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs Oversight Hearing
Committee on Natural Resources
United States House of Representatives

Regarding

Data collection issues in relation to the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act

May 21, 2013

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Congressman Sablan and members of the Committee. My name is Chris Horton, and I'm the Midwestern States Director for the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF). Established in 1989, CSF works with Congress, governors, and state legislatures to protect and advance hunting, recreational angling and shooting and trapping.

In addition to working closely with state legislators in Texas and Louisiana on various sportsmen's related issues, including recreational saltwater angling, I was recently appointed to the Recreational Fisheries Working Group of the Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee. An avid angler myself, I began my career as a fisheries management biologist for a state natural resource agency where I was tasked with managing the most popular and sought after group of game fish in the state - bass. I later became the conservation director for the largest fishing organization in the world (B.A.S.S.) before having the opportunity to help represent both freshwater and saltwater anglers in my current role with the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation.

I sincerely thank the members of this Subcommittee for the opportunity to speak with you today about recreational data collection as you begin discussions on the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Management Act. Recreational saltwater anglers are an important and significant component of our nation's marine fisheries. According to the 2011 NOAA survey, there were more than 11 million saltwater anglers who took 70 million fishing related trips and who contributed $70 billion in sales impacts to our economy - resulting in 455,000 jobs (both full and part time) in that year alone.

Another significant, yet often overlooked statistic is that recreational anglers spent $22 billion in 2011 on durable fishing-related equipment. When anglers purchase rods, reels, lures, hooks, line, sinkers, trolling motors, marine electronics and other equipment, an angler-supported excise tax is paid into the Aquatic Resources and Boating Trust Fund, which is appropriated back to the states to reinvest in the fisheries resource. These funds, along with angler license purchases, are part of the American System of Conservation Funding, and the most successful conservation model in the world. No other single group of marine users gives back directly or as substantially for the management and enhancement of our fisheries resources. Recreational saltwater angling is not only good for our economy - it's good for our fisheries.

Recreational fishing isn't about how many fish you can harvest. Granted, the ability to bring home a few fish for the family is certainly a bonus for recreational anglers. However, the ability to go fishing for the average American offers so much more in return than simply the fillets. It's an opportunity to relax with family and friends, presents an enjoyable and rewarding challenge of figuring out how to catch specific species and provides an opportunity to reconnect people, both young and old, with our outdoor heritage and the appreciation we have for our natural resources. The methods they employ to go fishing, the locations they fish and the species they try to catch are as diverse as this nation itself. The private boat angler in the Southeast has hundreds of inlets and passes to choose from to get to the ocean, while the Pacific Northwest angler is limited to a few dozen. Fishing by wading into shallow waters or casting from a beach, dock or pier is popular in some areas, while shoreline access may be limited for others.

Unlike a commercial fisherman who has a personal financial stake in a fishery, and thus its successful management, a recreational angler just wants to go fishing. It is this individual that is the basis for the recreational data collection system. This is the critical difference that must be kept in mind when contemplating recreational data collection – recreational anglers number in the millions and are pursuing a hobby.

In their review of the national marine fishery data collection system, the National Research Council (NRC) found significant problems with the catch estimation methodologies and suggested remedies. As other speakers note, NOAA has begun addressing those problems and the system in place today, the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), is better than the old catch estimation system known as the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS). But, the NRC also acknowledged the recreational catch will, in the vast majority of cases, be estimated using survey methodology. The current system, though an improvement from the last, would require a significant increase in funding to make it substantially better. And, although we could potentially get closer to the accuracy of the commercial fisheries data with additional investments, the quality of the data will never be equal. It is simply impossible to contact every recreational angler and count every fish they catch.

Fortunately, it's not necessary that we continue to sink more money into a program that will never be 100% accurate. Instead, it would make more sense and be less costly to offer a different management approach for recreational fisheries. The real problem, as we see it, is not with the recreational data collection system. The problem lies with how the data is used for management.

It must be recognized that commercial and recreational fisheries are fundamentally different activities, with dissimilar harvest data collection systems and thus require different management approaches. Yet, the last reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, for all intents and purposes, uses the same management strategy for both recreational and commercial fisheries - primarily poundage-based hard quotas with accountability measures. Although the accuracy of the commercial fisheries harvest data is suited well for this approach, the accuracy and timeliness of recreational harvest data is not and likely never will be. Again, it is not possible to contact every recreational angler and count every fish they catch. Instead, we should develop a separate management strategy for recreational fisheries based on the data available.

Commercial fisheries are managed for yield. They are pursued by relatively few fishers, all with (understandably) the same goal – to harvest as many fish as possible as efficiently as possible in order to maximize profit from the sale of whatever species they pursue. Commercial landings can usually be counted or weighed in real time, thus quotas can be enforced in real time. This allows managers to close a fishery before the allowable catch is exceeded. In short, a commercial fishery's catch can be managed in real time and based on verified landings. Managing commercial fisheries based on biomass or yield makes sense.

Managing the recreational component of marine fisheries with similar yield-based parameters, on the other hand, does not. Recreational fisheries are dynamic in nature and enjoyed by millions of individuals with diverse goals. Again, some try to catch fish for food while others simply want to have fun catching and releasing fish and enjoying their time outdoors, either in solitude or in the company of friends and family. The frequency of their trips often depends on circumstances such as stock abundance, weather, the economy or any of a myriad of factors. Catch is estimated, not counted, with a significant time lag for producing such estimates. Landings estimates, at best, are compiled 45 days after the end of each two-month sampling wave; thus 2 months pass before any estimate of what anglers are catching in a particular fishery can be developed. Unlike commercial fisheries management, real-time catch information for the recreational users is simply not practical (with very rare exception). For this reason, recreational fisheries cannot be fairly managed under the current management system.

The Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery is a prime example of where managing a recreational fishery based on total yield, rather than in relation to the health of the fishery, is having a devastating and unnecessary impact on recreational anglers and coastal economies. Even though methodologies to estimate recreational harvest have improved since the last Magnuson-Stevens reauthorization, recreational anglers continue to be penalized as stock biomass increases. The red snapper fishery is as healthy as it's been in decades, with more and bigger fish in the fishery. Because the average weight and abundance of red snapper has increased, seasonal opportunities to access the healthy stock are further reduced each year in order to keep the estimated recreational harvest in pounds under an ACL that is several years old. Ultimately, the healthier the Gulf of Mexico red snapper population gets, the less anglers can fish. It is absurd to manage fisheries in this way. The current management system simply doesn't work and is an injustice for recreational anglers.

As a former state fisheries manager, I can tell you that poundage-based management is never even considered when managing game, waterfowl or most inland fisheries where similar challenges to developing accurate data exist.

Can you imagine a system where hard poundage quotas on squirrels, with in season monitoring, were implemented? Suppose the state of Louisiana was told they could only harvest 10,000 pounds of squirrel annually. Once they reached 9,999 pounds, they had to close the season or pay back any overages in the quota next year. That would be a nonsensical approach and hunters wouldn't stand for it. Yet, that is exactly what we do in marine fisheries management.

Let's accept the fact we are always going to use surveys to estimate the vast majority of the recreational harvest. The system is not perfect, but given the resource available it is a very good system that produces good estimates of harvest for the more commonly caught, important species. However, a couple of significant short comings will inevitably persist. The weakest parts of the recreational data collection system are the time lag necessary to produce harvest estimates and the conversion of the recreational catch estimate to pounds. Unfortunately, the current management method preferred by NOAA is to measure harvest in pounds with a hard quota, implying that it is possible to have real time

quota management when it is not. The result is that success of the current management strategies hinges on the weakest part of the recreational data collection system.

Instead of trying to force a management system designed for commercial fisheries onto recreational fisheries, NOAA should be tasked with developing a rational recreational fishery management system that uses the data available to us now. State fishery and wildlife managers have done it successfully for decades; one need only look at the highly effective management of speckled trout (which was the leading recreationally-caught species at 51 million fish in 2011), red drum and striped bass. They are for the most part abundant, healthy stocks that are managed primarily by harvest rates rather than poundage quotas.

Let's look to successful management strategies that can effectively use the current data collections system, rather than continue to insist what is primarily a commercial fisheries management strategy will work for recreational fisheries. Inland fisheries stocks are successfully managed based on population information and harvest rates, not on biomass. The same successful tools can be applied to marine recreational fisheries management that still protect stocks while reducing costs and providing greater benefits for recreational anglers and the economy.

Aldo Leopold once said that conservation is a state of harmony between men and land. I don't think he would mind if we extended his vision to the ocean. The goal for federal fisheries management should not be to create a system that unnecessarily severs our connection to the oceans. Our goal should be to create a management system that fosters trust and cultivates a state of harmony between the American people and our marine environment.