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OVERSIGHT HEARING ON
THE MANAGEMENT OF RED SNAPPER IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE, OCEANS AND INSULAR AFFAIRS

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Introduction

Good morning Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today about red snapper management in the Gulf of Mexico. My name is Sam Rauch and I am the Deputy Assistant Administrator for Regulatory Programs at the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) within the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the U.S. Department of Commerce (DOC). From daily weather forecasts, severe storm warnings, and climate monitoring to fishery management, coastal restoration, and supporting marine commerce, NOAA's products and services support economic vitality and affect more than one-third of America's gross domestic product. NOAA's dedicated scientists use cutting-edge research and high-tech instrumentation to provide citizens, planners, emergency managers, and other decision makers with reliable information they need when they need it.

Today, I will describe the current status of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico and the benefits fishermen and fishing communities are realizing from rebuilding efforts, as well as the ongoing challenges we face in ensuring those benefits are equitably distributed between all user groups. Also, I will describe the status of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Gulf Council) work to develop a regional management strategy for the recreational sector and NMFS' views on the hallmarks of a successful regional management strategy.

Historical Population Trends

Fishermen have harvested red snapper from the Gulf of Mexico since the mid-1800s, more than a century before the first federal fishery management measures were established in 1984. Currently, this species is one of the most popular and studied in the Gulf of Mexico, and NMFS has conducted ten population assessments since the late 1980s. The first assessment, conducted

in 1988, concluded the population was overfished and undergoing overfishing, meaning there were too few fish in the water to maximize catches over the long term and fish continued to be removed from the population at too high a rate. Six assessments conducted in the 1990s confirmed that conclusion, suggesting conservation measures such as minimum size limits, commercial trip limits, and daily recreational bag limits implemented to end overfishing and rebuild the population, as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act; P.L. 94-265) were not sufficient. A Congressionally-mandated independent peer review of the scientific and management basis for red snapper management, completed in 1997, also echoed these findings.

Status of Rebuilding Efforts

The Gulf Council implemented the first red snapper rebuilding plan in 1990, but has modified the rebuilding schedule and goals several times in response to new scientific information. A rebuilding plan is a strategy used to manage catch levels over a specified time period so that an overfished population can increase in size to a target level.

The current red snapper rebuilding plan was designed to phase out overfishing between 2009 and 2010 and rebuild the population by 2032. The timeframe to rebuild overfished populations varies depending on the status and biology of the overfished species. The red snapper rebuilding schedule is lengthy because red snapper is a long-lived species, reaching more than 50 years of age, and was severely overfished for many decades.

Substantial changes to the plan, as implemented in 2007, were informed by a 2005 population assessment and followed a court ruling on a lawsuit filed by the Coastal Conservation Association, Ocean Conservancy, and Gulf Restoration Network, who found previous rebuilding measures to be insufficient to rebuild the population on schedule. These changes reduced the combined (commercial and recreational) red snapper catch limit by 45 percent from 9.12 million pounds to 5.0 million pounds; reduced the recreational bag limit from four to two fish to slow the rate of catch; reduced the commercial minimum size limit from 15 inches total length to 13 inches total length to reduce regulatory discards in that fishery; and specified a maximum level for shrimp fishing effort which, if exceeded, would trigger area closures to minimize the incidental take of red snapper in shrimp trawls.

Also in 2007 the commercial red snapper sector moved to an individual fishing quota program (IFQ), which allocates participating fishermen a percentage of the commercial annual catch limit based on their landings history. The IFQ program is intended and has been demonstrated to better align the capacity of the fleet with the commercial catch limit, to mitigate short fishing seasons, improve safety at sea and increase the profitability of the commercial red snapper sector. Participation in the commercial red snapper fishery, measured by the number of accounts holding red snapper IFQ shares, has declined by about 28 percent since the program was implemented. However, the average ex-vessel price of red snapper in 2013 was 33 percent higher than the price prior to instituting the IFQ (inflation adjusted, 2002-2006). Also, IFQ participants are now targeting red snapper year round, and the fishery is reportedly safer than it used to be when fishermen were required to compete for the catch during very limited season openings.

There is clear evidence the rebuilding measures implemented in 2007 are paying off. The 2009 assessment update and the current assessment completed in 2013 indicate we ended overfishing and there are more red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico today than in decades. According to the current assessment, the total biomass of the population has more than doubled in the last five years. The biomass of the Gulf of Mexico red snapper population is estimated to have reached 60 million metric tons in 2014, which is more than half of the rebuilding target (Figure 1).

Many Gulf of Mexico fishermen echo the assessment findings, saying they are seeing more and larger red snapper than they have seen in their lifetime. The recreational red snapper quota in 2013 and 2014 was set at the highest level in the history of managing the red snapper fishery (20% greater than the next highest quota level on record). Recreational landings in 2013 were the highest in recent history. In addition, each fish weighs more than twice as much as before. Also, fishermen on the west coast of Florida now have new opportunities to target this popular species as the population expands back to its historic range. After decades of overfishing, the population was concentrated in offshore waters of the northern Gulf of Mexico. Now, catch data indicate red snapper landings are increasing both closer to shore and along the west coast of Florida, with some fishermen reporting landings as far south as the Florida Keys.

Despite these remarkable improvements, the current assessment indicates rebuilding is not yet complete because the overall biomass and reproductive potential of the red snapper population have not yet reached the rebuilding target. There is a new red snapper update assessment underway, which will provide additional information on the status of the population relative to the rebuilding target. That assessment will be completed and presented to the Gulf Council early next year.

Management Challenges

While fishermen, fishery managers and scientists all agree the red snapper population is making a remarkable recovery, there is also widespread agreement there are real challenges in the fishery in terms of ensuring rebuilding benefits are fairly and equitably distributed among all user groups.

NMFS has increased the combined (commercial and recreational) catch limit each year since overfishing ended in 2009 and, since 2013, the catch limit has been the highest ever specified for this fishery – 11 million pounds. The commercial sector is flourishing at that limit under the IFQ program. Unfortunately, the recreational sector is not sharing the same benefits of stock recovery.

Higher catch rates and larger fish, while improving recreational fishing experiences and opportunities, are causing the recreational sector to reach its catch limit much more quickly. As a result, higher catch limits have not translated into increased fishing days for recreational fishermen. The recreational red snapper catch limit increased by 62 percent from 2008-2012 compared to a 148 percent increase in recreational landings per day during that same time period. As a result, the recreational season has been progressively shortened to prevent catch limit overages, in compliance with the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Recreational fishermen are understandably frustrated by this unexpected trend, which has been exacerbated by state jurisdictional and regulatory inconsistencies. The federal recreational fishing season length is further reduced when Gulf Coast states implement less restrictive red snapper regulations in state waters because both catches from both state and federal waters must be counted against the catch limit. Such state actions also create inequities because not all fishermen benefit equally from less restrictive state water regulations.

In response, the Gulf Council set the 2014 recreational red snapper catch target 20 percent below the limit to reduce the likelihood of an overage this year. This action, along with extended state-water fishing seasons and other impacts of the litigation, effectively reduced the 2014 federal recreational red snapper fishing season from 40 days to 9 days – the shortest ever. Preliminary 2014 catch data indicate recreational catches were below the quota for the first time in many years.

Management Options

The Gulf Council recently approved a new fishery management plan amendment which, if implemented, would enable them to manage the private and federally-permitted for-hire components of the recreational red snapper sector for different objectives for a three-year trial period. For-hire fishermen are working with the Gulf Council to explore new tools to increase their catch accounting, stabilize their business operations, and improve their economic viability. However, developing solutions for the open access, private angler component of the recreational sector is more challenging and will require a broad shared vision of expectations and needs.

The Gulf Council is actively working through its state agency representatives, fishermen and other stakeholders to identify shared goals and develop management options that more equitably distribute rebuilding benefits. These options include reallocating some portion of future catch limit increases to the recreational fishery to achieve a more stable fishing season and provide recreational fishermen a greater opportunity to benefit from rebuilding progress. Also, they include a regional management strategy, which would provide the states greater flexibility to tailor recreational red snapper management to local needs and objectives while meeting Gulf-wide conservation goals.

All Gulf Coast states have expressed some form of support for a regional management strategy, but have had some difficulty coming to agreement on a fair and equitable methodology for allocating the recreational red snapper quota among the states. As a result, the Gulf Council has not yet finalized a specific regional management strategy for review and implementation by the Secretary of Commerce. However, during its October 2014 meeting, the Gulf Council identified a preliminary preferred state-specific allocation methodology and requested additional analyses and process options to review at its January 2015 meeting. NMFS is committed to continuing to support the Gulf Council's efforts to finalize this plan over the next year.

NMFS supports regional management in concept as a way to resolve the current challenges created by inconsistent state jurisdictions and regulations, stabilize the recreational sector, and better manage the expectations of for-hire fishermen and private anglers. Interstate management challenges are not unique to the Gulf of Mexico. In fact, they are present in every region where

major fisheries span multiple state jurisdictions. Such challenges have been addressed in different regions in different ways; for example, through legislation authorizing the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission as a coordinating body on the U.S. east coast. While there are any number of models that may work, each requires the collective involvement and support of the states, and full accountability to comply with agreed upon management strategies.

NMFS believes the hallmarks of a successful regional management strategy for red snapper include:

- Fair and equitable allocations among all of the states and user groups;
- Sound, science-based decision making that accounts for all sources of fishing mortality, recognizing that limiting shrimp trawl bycatch of red snapper is a critical component of the red snapper rebuilding plan;
- Coordinated data collection systems, which provide consistent, reliable data; and
- Catch accountability, including mechanisms to prevent and respond to quota overages.

Conclusion

We have made great progress toward rebuilding the Gulf of Mexico red snapper population. But this progress has not come easily, nor will it be sustained without continued attention. This is a critical time in the history of red snapper management, and we must ensure the fishery is able to meet the needs of both current and future generations. We must continue the achievements we have gained in the commercial fishery while improving stability, accountability, and predictability to the recreational fishery.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the current management challenges are a function of success. The red snapper population is rebuilding and that is a good thing. Now we need to make some reasoned, thoughtful decisions about how to best distribute the hard-earned benefits provided by this growing population.

Gulf of Mexico fishermen and fishing communities sacrificed a great deal to get us here. It is critical that all involved remain engaged and work together to find a way forward in the cooperative spirit that the regional fishery management council process promotes.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss Gulf of Mexico red snapper management. I am available to answer any questions you may have.

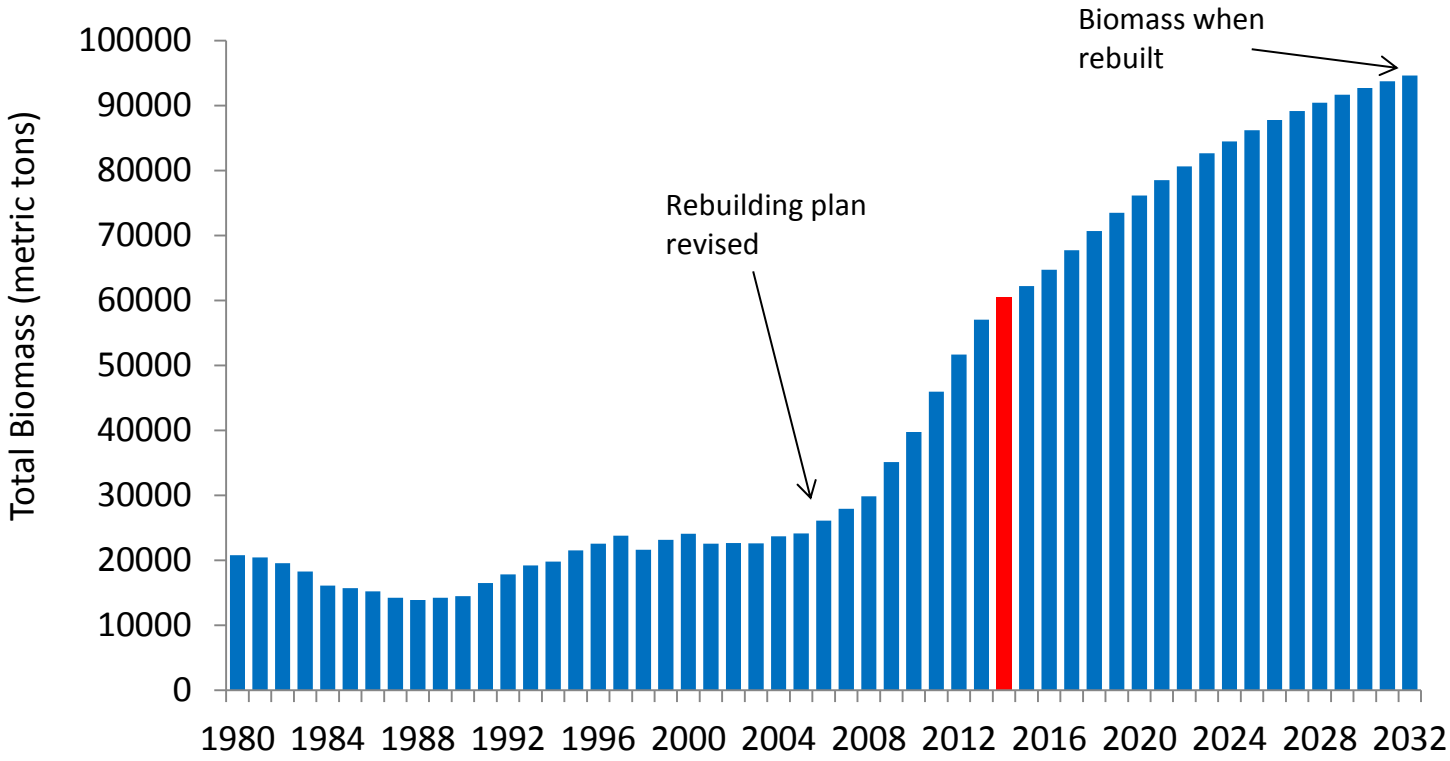

Figure 1. Historical and projected trends in Gulf of Mexico red snapper biomass.