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U.S. House of Representatives

Committee on Natural Resources

Washington, DC 20515

Opening Statement of Chairman Doc Hastings On Thursday, June 27, 2013 1324 Longworth House Office Building Full Committee Oversight Hearing on

“The Management of Red Snapper in the Gulf of Mexico under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act”

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I want to welcome all of our witnesses here today. I know most, if not all of you, spent last week at the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council meeting discussing the same topic we are going to discuss today – the management of the Gulf red snapper fishery under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. I appreciate your being here to help us understand what the Council is doing and how we can help.

You have all heard me say this before – at its most basic level, the Magnuson-Stevens Act works. It provides direct public involvement through a process that is open and transparent, and allows for the establishment of both recreational and commercial harvest levels based on science. Through our previous hearings, we have heard a lot of testimony about how the Act has worked to create economic benefits for coastal communities through the sustainable use of our Nation’s fishery resources.

Unfortunately, with the questionable data being used to set the fishing seasons, with States suing NOAA, and with States setting seasons in State waters that do not match the Federal fishery management plan, the management of red snapper cannot be considered one of those success stories. The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires sound scientific information to be effective and it requires that stakeholders buy into that information. In the case of red snapper, that does not seem to be the case. The scientific data has lagged behind the management measures and fishermen do not believe that the restrictions required by that lagged data are really necessary. Add to that a management system for the recreational sector that ignores the economic concerns of the coastal communities, and it is not a surprise that the red snapper fishery is the subject of its own hearing by this Committee.

Red snapper is one of the most valuable fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico, yet the management of the recreational sector of the fishery has not provided the flexibility for States and communities to maximize the economic value for the charter sector, the weekend angler, or the coastal communities. Because of this, five bills have been introduced in the last few months that would take management of the recreational fishery away from the Federal government.

Many people have tried to draw an analogy between the red snapper fishery and previous management of striped bass on the East Coast. While there are some legitimate comparisons that can be drawn, there is one stark example that should not be duplicated. In the case of striped bass, all Federal waters were closed with the promise that once the population of striped bass recovered, those waters would be reopened and all of the users would benefit. Almost 30 years later, everyone agrees that the striped bass recovery has been successful. And yet Federal waters remain closed.

We have seen this happen before, and we are now seeing it in New England. Once an area is closed to fishing, some groups will argue that the area should never be reopened to fishing even if the closure is no longer warranted and the opening is based on sound science. That is a key reason I am so concerned with the ocean and coastal zoning plan that this Administration is pursuing under the guise of a National Ocean Policy. That Policy creates a new process for Federal bureaucrats, behind closed doors, to zone our oceans, coastlines, and inland areas using vague criteria from an Executive Order. There is no statutory authority for this zoning process and I am afraid groups will use this process to close more and more areas to fishing – both recreational and commercial.

But the National Ocean Policy is not the subject of today's hearing. Today we are here to listen to those who are closest to the red snapper fishery management and to see if changes to the Magnuson-Stevens Act are necessary to create a better management system for red snapper in the Gulf.

I understand the Gulf Council at its meeting last week took the first steps toward a regional management plan that will allow states to meet their specific economic needs through different seasons, bag limits, and size limits. I look forward to hearing more about this from our witnesses and whether Congress needs to act to help this effort. I hope we will also hear other suggestions for how the Magnuson-Stevens Act could be modified to provide for better management of our fisheries and the red snapper fishing in particular.