

Testimony  
Of Robin Riechers  
Director, Coastal Fisheries Division  
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department

House Committee on Natural Resources  
Oversight Hearing: Management of Red Snapper in the Gulf of Mexico Under the Magnuson-Stevens  
Fishery Conservation and Management Act  
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10:00 am

Thank you Chairman Hastings and Members of the Committee. My name is Robin Riechers. I am the Director of the Coastal Fisheries Division of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD). TPWD through oversight by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission, is the state agency responsible for protecting and managing the fish and wildlife resources of Texas. This includes red snapper occurring in the Texas Territorial Sea (TTS) that extends 3 marine leagues (9 nautical miles) from the shoreline.

Since the late 1990's, red snapper recreational regulations in Texas state waters (set by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission) have been different than federal regulations in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Currently, regulations in Texas state waters are a 4-fish daily bag limit and a 15-inch minimum size limit, and the fishery is open year-round. In contrast, regulations in the federally managed waters of the EEZ restrict recreational harvest to 2 fish per day and a season that has varied in duration over the last ten years from 194 days to the fewest amount of days for this season at 28 days.

TPWD staff strongly believe Texas regulations for state waters are appropriate based on our routine stock monitoring program, the most current stock assessment, and the fact that the authority to manage Texas state waters falls within the jurisdiction of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission.

As part of Texas' routine stock monitoring program, scientific data are collected on the relative abundance of species found in state waters and used to monitor changes in trends over time. Coastwide catch-per-unit-effort from TPWD Gulf trawl data reflects the relative abundance of young-of-the-year fish. These are early recruits into the fishery, mostly aged 0-1, and represent what will be available for future years. Since 1986, catch-per-unit-effort has increased 5-fold from approximately 0.3 fish caught per hour in 1986 to just over 5 per hour in 2012. The four highest years on record have occurred in the past ten years.

A second part of the routine monitoring program is the analysis of recreational landings, specifically how many anglers achieve their bag limits. For all trips landing red snapper from the Texas Territorial Seas (TTS), more than one-third of anglers are landing their bag limit of four fish. More than half of anglers landing fish from the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) reach their bag limit. Total red snapper landings (numbers) by private and charter boat anglers off Texas have declined in the EEZ since 2005 but have remained steady in Texas waters. Landings by weight have remained relatively steady in both the EEZ and TTS over the same timeframe. More importantly than the percent of anglers achieving their bag limit is the fact that the average size of red snapper landed has doubled in the past 30 years. In 2012, an average red snapper landed from the TTS measures approximately 20 inches while a red snapper landed from the EEZ measured just under 23 inches. This is all indicative of a stock becoming healthier.

As red snapper exhibit a high degree of site fidelity, they typically do not travel long distances. In one study, the average distance moved was approximately 6.25 miles (Diamond et al. 2007). Fishing in a state such as Texas, that has more than 360 miles of shoreline, is unlikely to impact the red snapper population of another state. As shown in the 2009 Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Update Assessment (2013) the western Gulf red snapper sub-unit (waters off Texas and Louisiana) has a much greater biomass of spawners and recruits than the eastern Gulf sub-unit (waters off Mississippi, Alabama and Florida).

Even with the greater and increasing biomass, the percent of Gulf recreational landings for the western sub-unit has decreased since the early 1990's from 44% to 17%. Texas specifically has seen our percent decrease from just under 25% to around 10%. Additionally, the drop in Texas landings is due, in no small part, to the season being set to begin in June, a time of year in Texas when weather patterns and conditions make it difficult for small vessels to operate offshore. This change in pressure from the west to the east will only slow the overall recovery in the Gulf and places a disproportionate burden of stock recovery on the western Gulf sub-unit. The continued shift of landings from the western gulf to the eastern gulf, additional restrictions placed on recreational anglers in federal waters in spite of healthy snapper populations, and the continued approach of one season fits the entire gulf is a key element to why there is support for a regional management concept.

Regrettably, this issue came to a head last spring when our partners at National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) requested and received emergency authority to further restrict recreational harvest of snapper in the federal waters off of states like Texas, whose regulations were not consistent with those in federal waters. On May 31<sup>st</sup>, a U.S. District Court Judge in Brownsville, Texas overturned the emergency order issued by NMFS.

Following that ruling, NMFS set the 28-day 2013 recreational red snapper season in the Gulf of Mexico EEZ for June 1 through June 29 at 12:01 am. Previous to this, the recreational season was announced by NMFS to be 12-days in the EEZ off Texas. However, a recently completed stock assessment increased the 2013 Allowable Biological Catch for 2013, 2014, and 2015 to 13.5 million pounds, 11.9 million pounds, and 10.6 million pounds, respectively. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) is currently deliberating on the amount of additional pounds of red snapper to harvest and determining dates to extend the recreational season this year. A special meeting of the GMFMC is planned in July to release additional quota for this year and to set the recreational landings targets for the next two years.

Reef Fish Management Plan Amendment 39, which is currently under development by the GMFMC, would allow regional management of the recreational red snapper fishery if approved by the Secretary of Commerce. In its current draft form, Amendment 39 could provide greater flexibility to each state in setting recreational regulations for the red snapper fishery to optimize the economic and social benefits to the citizens within each region (state). The State of Texas and the TPWD are supportive of the concept of delegation of management for certain elements of the recreational red snapper fishery to Gulf states and will continue to work with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service in developing a regional management plan.

While Texas supports the concept of regional management, our complete endorsement and acceptance will depend on the stipulations set forth by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and National Marine Fisheries Service. In addition to awaiting final approval and implementation from GMFMC and NMFS, it must be noted that as a condition to receiving the delegation of authority we

would expect not to be held to any higher standard and quota (landings) adjustment procedure than the one currently being used by the GMFMC and NMFS.

We are optimistic the GMFMC is on a path to implement regional management of the recreational red snapper fishery in the near future. Nonetheless, the possibility exists that Amendment 39 will not be adopted, or if adopted, contain undesirable conditions not suitable for implementing effective regional fishery management plans. Modifications to the Magnuson-Stevens Act that specifically address the intent to move towards regional management by the Gulf states in a manner to maximize flexibility for managing the harvest in the recreational red snapper fishery would be beneficial. Also, greater flexibility in achieving rebuilding of fish stocks while understanding and preserving the actual fishery that depends on those stocks is paramount moving forward. The Act might also be modified to require improved monitoring and data collection of biologic and economic data for the red snapper fishery so the benefits of regional management can be fully achieved by reducing scientific uncertainty and refining management strategies.

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today and to present my testimony. I am happy to answer any questions any of the Committee Members may have.

Literature Cited:

Diamond, S. et al. 2007., Movers and stayers: individual variability in site fidelity and movements of *Red Snapper off Texas* in American Fisheries Society, Symposium 60: Red Snapper ecology and fisheries in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico 163-187 (2007).