

TESTIMONY OF  
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ON BEHALF OF

GULF STATES MARINE FISHERIES COMMISSION  
AND  
LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES

SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES AND OCEANS  
COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES  
U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished committee members, thank you for the invitation to appear today and provide answers to your questions on issues important to my state, the Gulf Coast region and the nation. I am John Roussel, Assistant Secretary for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Office of Fisheries. I am also the immediate past Chairman of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC). I will be wearing two hats today and testifying on behalf of both the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

The GSMFC is a legislatively authorized compact comprised of the States of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas; established through individual acts of the state legislatures and the U. S. Congress through Public Law 81-66. The general purpose of the GSMFC is to provide interstate and state-federal coordination of activities designed to conserve and manage marine fisheries resources in the Gulf of Mexico region.

The entire Gulf region, an area defined by its marine resources, has experienced hurricanes throughout history. History also reveals that the U.S. Congress has responded to hurricane disasters with funding relief to assist in restoring natural resources, management capabilities, fisheries infrastructure and community assets. I want to use this opportunity to thank the Congress for its help in the past. The fishing industries of my state and the Gulf region have never had greater need for assistance than they do now.

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita caused significant disruption of not only the fishery resources but also the physical assets of coastal communities and the economic and social fabric of the Gulf. While my state along with Mississippi, Alabama, southern Florida and eastern Texas took the one-two punch from Katrina and Rita we should remember that the Gulf was also impacted by Hurricanes Dennis and Wilma in 2005.

### ***Gulf of Mexico Fisheries***

Understanding the amount and extent of damage caused by the storms first requires an understanding of the importance of the fishing industry to the region and the nation. The Gulf of Mexico is home to some of the largest and most robust commercial and recreational fisheries in the nation. My state of Louisiana is second only to Alaska in terms of commercial fisheries production and second only to Florida in terms of marine recreational harvest among the states surveyed by the NOAA Fisheries recreational survey.

### ***Commercial Fisheries***

According to landings data tabulated by the National Marine Fisheries Service, commercial fishery landings in 2004 in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and the Gulf coast of Florida totaled 1.5 billion pounds, with a dockside value of \$668 million. The Gulf states' harvest totals equal 15% and 18% of total 2004 U.S. landings and value, respectively. If

we consider only the lower 48 states, the Gulf states' harvest in 2004 represented 35% of the landings and 28% of the total value .

In recent years Gulf of Mexico harvesters landed 92% of the U.S. harvest of the eastern oyster, 81% of the U.S. harvest of shrimp, 72% of the U.S. harvest of Gulf Menhaden, and 38% of the U.S. harvest of blue crab.

Many communities in the Gulf States are dependent on fishing, and several of these communities rank among the most important ports in the U.S. for seafood landings. In the NOAA-Fisheries summary, *Fisheries of the United States – 2004*, fourteen of the top fifty U.S. ports in commercial fishery landings and sixteen of the top fifty U.S. ports in commercial fishery value are located in the Gulf states. These ports alone accounted for 13% of the quantity of all U.S. landings in 2004, and 11% of the total value.

The dockside value of \$688 million is only the beginning of the impact on the economy. The dollars generated by commercial fishery landings ripple, or multiply, through many diverse sectors and industries, with each successive round of spending generating additional economic benefits. Fisheries economists estimate a total economic impact on the U. S. economy of \$6.04 billion and support of 116,411 jobs.

### *Recreational Fisheries*

Recreational fishing in the Gulf of Mexico accounts for approximately one-third of all the saltwater recreational fishing activity in the United States. In 2001, 2.9 million anglers spent nearly 30 million days engaged in saltwater fishing. They generated \$3 billion in retail sales annually, which produced \$5.7 billion in economic output and supported 57,535 jobs. A major component of this industry is the charter boat fishery. This is the portion of the recreational industry that provides guided fishing expeditions for its clients. Vessels in this fishery range from small inshore guide boats to off shore expeditions for blue water species such as world class marlin, sailfish, and tuna.

In Louisiana as well as many other areas of the Gulf the commercial fishing industry is a major driving force of the restaurant industry. Both the restaurant and recreational fishing industry are significant components of a large tourism sector along the Gulf coast.

### ***What was the amount and extent of damage caused by the storms?***

All of the Gulf states experienced losses this year associated with one or more hurricanes. Preliminary estimates compiled by the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission indicate a combined economic loss in the Gulf of:

- \$491 million in commercial dockside revenue;
- \$365 million in gear and infrastructure;
- \$242 million of oyster standing stock in Louisiana and Florida;
- \$148 million in lost inventory; and
- \$1.2 billion in lost economic impact of recreational fisheries.

These are not comprehensive totals because the states did not all report the same measures of loss, and they are by no means complete. However, these are the preliminary estimates provided by the states which indicate the magnitude of economic storm-related fisheries losses in the Gulf.

These economic statistics tell one part of the story but the reality is that some fishing communities in parts of Louisiana, and Mississippi no longer exist post Katrina and Rita. Louisiana is home to three of the top six commercial fishing ports in the country. Two of those no longer exist. Every commercial fishing facility in those two communities was totally destroyed.

Facilities are re-opening, but the pace varies depending on the severity of hurricane damage to the facilities and supporting infrastructure. For example, a survey conducted early in November in Louisiana, found 34% of commercial and recreational facilities remained closed due to damage from the storms, while 48% reported being fully operational, with the remainder having some operational capacity. Seven percent of these facilities were still not accessible by automobile.

In Louisiana, which has a system of reporting initial sales of seafood by commercial fishermen, sales were down 55% in September 2005 from the previous year, and 91% in October 2005 from the previous year.

## ***What were the specific effects on the fishery resources, the industry, and the communities that rely on fishing?***

### ***Fishery resources***

Estimates of direct effects on fishery resources are only available for certain non-motile species such as oysters and clams. Estimates of oyster mortality in some areas of the Katrina-impacted states were as high as 74% for seed oysters and 80% for sack oysters. Fortunately, this is one resource for which we have a history of successful resource restoration using federal funding. On numerous occasions, including last year following Hurricane Ivan and in 1993 following Hurricane Andrew, Congress appropriated monies to pay oyster fishers to clean both public reefs and privately held reefs buried by storm driven sediment and debris, and also to place new hard substrate for oyster larvae settle on in public oyster grounds. Studies have shown a return of \$10 of marketable oysters for every \$1 invested.

Most of the Gulf's large volume commercial fisheries are based on estuarine dependent short lived species and fisheries managers expect most fisheries resources to rebound fairly rapidly from the direct effects of these storms. Long-term ecological effects, however, are much harder to characterize. Damage to important fish habitat could have effects for years to come. In my home state of Louisiana, for example, coastal scientists have estimated that 100 square miles of marsh may have been lost as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Marsh plays an important role as a nursery in the life-cycle of many commercially and recreationally important species.

### ***Fishing Industry***

Both recreational and commercial fishing industries have experienced serious losses of physical assets necessary to support commercial and recreational fishing and the ability to earn income. The impacts of the storms on the industry are wide ranging and the severity varies across the Gulf region.

- Commercial and charterboat fishermen have lost income, homes, vessels, gear and the ability to generate income.
- Wholesale dealers have lost homes, commercial buildings, inventory, gear and sales opportunities.
- Docks and other necessary shoreside infrastructure are damaged or destroyed, including access to ice, fuel, water, etc.
- Debris, including vessels, buildings, cars, and all types of land items, litter much of our coastal waters making navigation and deployment of fishing gear hazardous at best.
- Resource management facilities and equipment have been destroyed or damaged, hampering state resource agencies' ability to conduct surveys and develop management actions to address storm related resource impacts.

### ***Communities***

Commercial and recreational fishing are large economic and cultural components of many Gulf coast communities. Many of these communities exist simply because the location provided opportunities to reap the benefits of coastal fishery resources. Many of these coastal communities have experienced serious loss of their physical and human assets. In addition to the physical destruction there continues to be a lack of basic services such as electricity, sewer service and water in many areas. People who were engaged in the fishery or in jobs that serviced fisheries have relocated. Many who have some type of housing in south Louisiana and Mississippi are trying to cope with their losses and are working in disaster recovery and rebuilding. The reality is that in many areas entire communities must be rebuilt.

## ***Is the damage short-term or long-term in nature?***

Whether the damage is short term or long term depends in part on how and when assistance is provided. Community and fishery infrastructure can be rebuilt, resources will recover, but for the fishing industry and fishing communities to recover, people must stay engaged in the fishery. If dislocated people are unable to return to their homes and their old livelihoods for extended periods of time, they will find other professions and settle permanently in other communities. Fishing is an art and a tradition passed down through the generations. With any extended interruption, the nation may lose much of the knowledge of fishing necessary to reap the benefits of its living marine resources.

### ***Recovery and Rebuilding Assistance***

There will be many opinions both inside and outside of government about what to do. Recovery and rebuilding will be a long

term endeavor; however, action by Congress is needed now before patchwork restoration begins. Many who are considering reinvestment of their effort back into marine fisheries of the Gulf Coast are looking for acknowledgment that the federal government recognizes the importance of their industry to the nation.

For government assistance programs to be effective the programs must be multi-faceted, and rely on state and local governments and fishing industry participants to tailor the assistance to meet local needs. The states have successfully used federal funding in a number of instances to address resource restoration, provide direct financial assistance to fishermen and to fund seafood marketing efforts.

Recovery efforts must include rehabilitating coastal and fishery resources where direct impacts have been documented. As in the past, the federal government can provide funding to state and local government for rehabilitating fishing resources like oyster reefs.

In order to maintain important fishing industries, Congress and the federal government can restore income to impacted industries during the rebuilding effort. Direct payment to commercial harvesters and vessel owners to keep them engaged and connected to local fisheries can include:

- funding to map navigational hazards and debris;
- funding for restoration of navigation;
- funding for clean-up of gear-damaging debris;
- funding for a collaborative effort between researchers, engineers, and fishers to develop new vessel and gear technologies, including increased energy efficiency and safety;
- funding for training of fishermen and fisheries workers in enhanced seafood handling techniques;
- funding for training of industry participants as fishing observers and data collectors;
- funding for replacement of damaged gear with best available gear;
- funding for commercial and charter vessel owners to make uninsured repairs to damaged vessels;
- funding for dealers/processors to cover uninsured loss of equipment and facilities; and
- funding for marketing efforts to reestablish the market for Gulf seafood.

Concurrent with funding efforts to keep fishers and vessel owners engaged in fishing-related activities, there is a desperate need to rebuild damaged or destroyed fisheries infrastructure. Congress can provide funds for local governments to rebuild essential docking facilities, boat ramps, shipyards, ice plants, and safe harbors as part of their larger plan to rebuild communities.

Coastal restoration and enhanced storm and flood protection projects are also being reevaluated at all levels of government and in the public forum right now. Fisheries managers must play a role in future coastal planning to ensure that potential impacts of these projects on fisheries resources are considered.

### ***How can we protect the identity and viability of coastal fishing communities?***

There is a lot of discussion now within the states and throughout the nation about how to rebuild communities that were destroyed by hurricanes. Local fishing communities are a unique part of the network of a working coastline. The fact that the renewable fishery resource continues to be available provides a reason to return and establishes a foundation for the redevelopment of these communities. Providing help for the basics of utilities, access, and market will allow the fishermen and their families to resettle these areas and to stay engaged in this important economic activity. Their communities would once again be defined by the culture of fishing.

I have presented the importance of the Gulf of Mexico fishing industry to the nation, the damage from the storms, and suggested ways that Congress can help. I have referred to tens of thousands of people in broad strokes through out this presentation and now I want to acknowledge them as individuals- the hardworking people who make the nets, weld the vessels, bait the hooks, find the fish, pack the product, and set the plate of seafood on your table. They are a proud community that seldom asks for assistance, that has a history of using assistance wisely when given and that have just encountered a season of storms that they can not steer through on their own. Your consideration is appreciated.