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House Subcommittee on Water, Power and Oceans

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 200 (Rep. Don Young), To amend the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to provide flexibility for fishery managers and stability for fishermen, and for other purposes; H.R. 2023 (Rep. Garret Graves), “Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act of 2017.”; H.R. 3588 (Rep. Garret Graves), “RED SNAPPER Act”; and Discussion Draft of HR ____ (Rep. Jared Huffman), To amend and reauthorize the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, and for other purposes

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Chairman Lamborn, members of the committee and staff, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. My name is Chris Macaluso. I have been the Center for Marine Fisheries Director for the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership for the last five years and have worked as a freelance outdoor writer and radio show host for the last two decades. I am an avid hunter, angler and conservationist and a lifelong resident of Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

The TRCP’s mission is to guarantee all Americans quality places to hunt and fish. We are a true partnership and work with 56 official partners representing a wide-range of perspectives on hunting and fishing, land access and resource conservation. Our partners include Ducks Unlimited, The National Wildlife Federation, American Sportfishing Association, Coastal Conservation Association, The Nature Conservancy, Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and many others.

My work for the organization focuses on collaborating with our partners as well as state and federal fisheries managers on improving federal fisheries policy and legislation related to recreational fishing. I also work with a host of conservation and sportsmen’s groups on habitat restoration in the Gulf of Mexico region and The Everglades. I would not be here today representing the TRCP if my views were not reflective of the majority of the sportfishing community.

Today, I am more optimistic about the future of federal recreational fishing management than I have been at any other time in the last 10 years. I know it’s unusual for recreational fishermen, or anyone else for that matter, to come to Washington to say thanks. I do so because the bills under consideration today contain provisions that would help improve federal fisheries management for recreational fishing, potentially marking the first time in the history of the Magnuson-Stevens Act that the law specifically recognizes the vital role recreational fishing plays in our economy and identifies that recreational fishing is a fundamentally different activity than commercial fishing that requires a different management approach.

The requirements in these bills that alternative approaches to current federal management be examined and possibly implemented, the improved data collection efforts prescribed and the requirement that NOAA Fisheries work with state fishery agencies, research institutions and anglers to develop and incorporate better data are all recommendations made by the TRCP and its sportfishing partners in the 2014 report “A Vision for Managing America’s Saltwater Recreational Fisheries.”

The alternative management approaches likely to be examined and considered will include the ones that the TRCP and its partners and other sportsmen and conservation groups have explored and considered in the 2017 report “Approaches for Improved Federal Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management.”

In each case, the conclusions and recommendations in these reports are the result of a year or more of meetings and discussions with fisheries management experts on the state and federal level, biologists, environmentalists, anglers, economists and law and policy makers. They all represent an honest and earnest effort on the part of the sportfishing community to improve fisheries management and improve the conservation of the resource. It is clear in reading these bills that those efforts have made an impression and have been carefully considered by members of this subcommittee and beyond. I have included links to both the Marine Vision report and the Alternative Management report as attachments.

The TRCP and its partners are optimistic because for the first time in working with Congress to advance improvements to federal recreational fisheries management over the last five-plus years, there are companion bills in the Senate. In the case of the “Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act of 2017,” the Senate has benefitted from the bill being first introduced in the House and has been able to clarify some possibly confusing language regarding Annual Catch Limits and rebuilding timeframes. We would encourage the House to work with the Senate to have the two bills be as closely aligned as possible and we have been given assurances that those discussions are ongoing and that having the two bills align is the goal.

It is my job to work on fisheries management policy and law, but first and foremost I am an angler. I will not disclose how much I fish for fear of reprisal from my bosses and my wife, but I will say that I have spent many extended lunches trying to catch largemouth bass from the ponds in Baton Rouge and I have no shame in admitting I have arranged it so many of my work duties require a boat ride and a rod and reel. I get as much satisfaction from a fishing trip for 10-ounce bluegills as I do 150-pound yellowfin tuna. Now that I have a young son and daughter, the joy has shifted more to watching them soak it all in and start to gain an appreciation of why going fishing is such an incredible experience. It’s not just the fish you catch, but the alligators and the snakes you see, the bird life, the dolphins, the way a school of mullet explodes from the surface when a big redfish chases them or a shrimp skips across the water when a speckled trout is in pursuit. Every day on the water is a learning experience and a chance to make a connection and gain a greater appreciation for what nature has provided. Being a sportsman is about gaining these appreciations and about ensuring that these resources, the fish and game of our country, remain publicly held resources that all Americans have a chance to experience and enjoy.

Improving federal recreational fisheries management will go a long way in ensuring that the experiences that I have enjoyed and hope to continue to enjoy will be available as my children and many others grow and become the next generation of sportsmen working to conserve our natural resources.

It is no secret that there is great discontent and distrust among anglers over the way recreational fisheries have been managed in federal waters. I believe this distrust is born out of trying to force policies and regulations designed to manage commercial fishing into managing recreational fishing. This level of anger, distrust and discontent is not seen at the state fisheries management level. Certainly, there are some who will disagree with any level of government management or involvement in fisheries management, but anglers are mostly satisfied with state management approaches, even in fisheries where there are commercial and recreational harvests such as black drum, southern flounder, sheepshead, blue crabs, catfish and others. State managers have understood for a long time that the same rules and regulations do not have to apply to commercial and recreational activities. They also understand that the value in a fish is not always tied directly to how much that fish can be processed and sold for. The value in a fishery also comes from the ice, fuel, bait, fishing line, baloney sandwiches and toilet paper that anglers buy on their way to the marinas in the morning or when heading out for a long weekend on the coast.

The importance of changing federal fisheries management and exploring alternatives to current management is not simply because it could lead to more days on the water for anglers but because it has the chance to improve trust among anglers and federal managers and make anglers much more willing to participate in the process of gathering data and conservatively managing fish.

Once that trust gains traction, federal managers will discover what state fisheries managers have known for a long time, that anglers are trusted partners in conservation and are willing to spend their own money in pursuit of their passions and in improving the management, conservation and long-term sustainability of fisheries resources.

There are examples of this happening all over the country, but I am proud to say that one of the best and most successful is in my home state of Louisiana. Five years ago, Louisiana fisheries managers decided they could no longer work with the imprecise and often flawed data being produced by the federal Marine Recreational Information Program, especially as it was applied to fish like red snapper that were being managed using Annual Catch Limits and in-season closures. The irony of MRIP, is that it's actually a very useful tool in managing state-based fish like speckled trout and redfish that have very consistent seasons but it struggles mightily at managing fish caught in federal waters and managed under ACLs. Louisiana managers created a new system call LA CREEL, which dramatically increased the number of harvest surveys conducted at the dock and utilized emails and phone call surveys to gauge effort.

Louisiana also implemented the Recreational Offshore Landing Permit program, which requires anyone fishing for red snapper, grouper, tuna and any other offshore species to provide contact information and to have the cost-free permit with them when offshore fishing. This has allowed state managers to differentiate between saltwater anglers fishing offshore from those who only fish inshore, something

MRIP cannot do. The more precise data about who is fishing for what species has allowed the state to get a much better handle on effort and harvest of fish like red snapper. It has also helped state biologists break down harvests of inshore and nearshore species basin by basin and could allow for adjustments of creel and size limits in targeted areas to improve fish stocks showing signs of distress.

In order to pay for these programs, Louisiana's Department of Wildlife and Fisheries had to ask the largely conservative Louisiana Legislature to double the saltwater fishing license fee. The legislature approved the increase because the state's anglers overwhelmingly supported it. LA CREEL has been widely championed by anglers, fisheries managers and environmentalists as a dramatic improvement to recreational fishing data collection and management and it is being paid for by anglers who supported an increase in their license fees.

I'm certain the members of this subcommittee have heard from those who are happy and appreciative of the deal struck between the Department of Commerce and the five Gulf of Mexico states to extend this year's red snapper season in federal waters in the Gulf as well as those who believe the season has jeopardized the long-term rebuilding process and health of the Gulf's snapper population. Louisiana used LA CREEL to closely monitor recreational harvest and effort during the 39-day season. Louisiana has historically harvested between 14-15 percent of the total Gulf recreational red snapper quota and it was estimated before the 39-day season that 1.7 million pounds of red snapper would be caught by Louisiana anglers.

LA CREEL, which does not utilize lotteries or individual quotas to limit access to the fish, showed that Louisianans actually harvested less than 1 million pounds, about 100,000 pounds less than Louisiana's historic percentage and self-imposed quota. About 300,000 pounds of red snapper were caught in Louisiana state waters between February 1 and early June before the 39-day federal season. If the fish harvested during that state season had been applied to a snapper season in all state and federal waters, it is conceivable that Louisiana could have had a 60-70 day red snapper season this year out to 200 miles. Graphs of LA CREEL Red Snapper harvest have been attached.

LA CREEL is alternative management and is a shining example of what can be accomplished when anglers support and participate in innovative data collection efforts and when management approaches are designed to fit into how, when and where anglers fish. It is also an example of what can be accomplished when anglers trust who is managing their fish and they feel like they can participate in the management process. Using LA CREEL as an example, the bills before you would finally give state and federal fisheries managers the opportunity to work together to develop other innovative management approaches.

Far too many anglers have thrown up their hands when it comes to federal fisheries management and subscribed to the belief that they are ignored by regional councils, federal fisheries managers and the law. To a certain extent, they are right to feel that way. The passage of the bills before us today can go a long way in helping build confidence among anglers that their concerns are being addressed and their economic and cultural contributions matter on a federal level.

NOAA estimates there are more than 9 million saltwater anglers in America who create more than \$63 billion in annual sales. Anglers also pay for better fisheries management, habitat restoration and invasive species control through excise taxes on tackle and gear that have totaled nearly \$9 billion since 1951. Fishing license fees have generated another \$21 billion for resource conservation and management and anglers donate millions annually to improve habitat and resource conservation.

The conservation ethic among anglers goes beyond dollars and fees, however. Recreational fishermen have pioneered and championed significant conservation efforts including catch and release fishing, the use of barotrauma reduction devices on Pacific Rockfish and now on Gulf Reef Fish, the use of circle hooks to avoid gut hooking fish to improve catch and release survival rates and assisting state agencies on fish-tagging efforts which are helping account for migratory patterns and better determine how fish respond to seasonal and other changes to habitat and environment.

It is in the best interest of all involved to have anglers involved and engaged in management. An important path to growing confidence among anglers and having them as allies for federal fisheries managers exists in the bills being considered today.

The TRCP and its sportfishing partners urge the members of this subcommittee, the Natural Resources Committee and others in the House to continue to work with anglers and with the Senate to agree on language that gives the Modernizing Fisheries Management Act a clear path to becoming law. We thank you and the Administration for listening to our concerns and appreciating the importance of recreational fishing to America's culture and economy and for crafting legislation that will finally help us work toward better fisheries management. And, finally, I thank you personally for the opportunity to be here today to represent my organization, myself, my children and anglers and conservationists across the country.

