

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources

Written Testimony of Wayne Werner
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Introduction

Chairman Hastings, Ranking Member Markey, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on management of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. My name is Wayne Werner and I am owner-operator of the fishing vessel Sea Quest. I have been a red snapper and reef fish commercial fisherman since 1982, and I've participated actively in the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council process since 1988.

Commercial management success

There are a lot of negative headlines coming from the Gulf, but I want to explain there is good news that people are not hearing. Most commercial red snapper fishermen think we have a successful system. It's not perfect, but it is by far the best we've ever had. We designed a lot of it, and we approved it through a referendum that passed with over 80 percent of the votes.

When I first started fishing, our management system was badly broken. The truth is, there were too many of us chasing a rapidly dwindling resource. We were forced to participate in what was called a derby system. We would be told which days we could fish, and how many fish we could catch. Being forced to fish on specific days when the derby was open had a devastating personal impact on me. I missed 30 of my kids' birthdays; I buried my mother on the opening day of a derby; and one year I was out fishing when my father lay on his deathbed. I had no choice but to fish on derby days to feed my family.

Short seasons during which all the fish were brought to the dock in a glut kept prices low and had buyers turning to imports to satisfy demand. Red snapper was overfished; and for many, fishing was no more than a low-paying part-time job. It was a very dangerous job at that. If seas were high during the derby season boats would work anyway. One year, my vessel sank. My crew and I spent 10 hours in a life raft before we were rescued. I am

lucky to be alive.

Many of us fishermen worked for years to fix that broken system. And Mr. Chairman, I'm proud of what we've built: an accountable, sustainable and profitable fishery. Since the inception of our individual fishing quota system, overfishing has ended and the stock has improved. In the seven years since the system was put in place, the commercial sector hasn't gone over its quota once. We discard a lot less fish—in fact, we've reduced wasteful bycatch by seventy percent. Fishing jobs are better. Businesses we work with are thriving. We supply red snapper year-round to help serve the growing US markets for sustainable fish.

Mr. Chairman, I'm part of a fishery that is a jobs engine. Commercial fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico landed 1.4 billion pounds of finfish and shellfish in 2009, earning \$629 million in landings revenue. But that is only the start of the benefit my industry brings to our region and our nation. For example, in my home state of Florida, the seafood industry generated 65,000 jobs and \$2.4 billion in income. I'm proud of that fact. I'm also proud to be the access point for up to 300 million Americans who don't fish in our oceans but want to enjoy delicious, healthy seafood. Americans from Spokane, WA to Springfield, MA can cook fresh, sustainable, wild-caught Gulf red snapper—or enjoy it at their local restaurant—because of commercial fishermen like me.

The commercial red snapper management system we designed in the Gulf is working, and we want to build on that success—not tear it down.

The false promise of regional management

So why all those negative headlines? The unfortunate truth is that while the commercial fishery has been a Magnuson-Stevens success story, the recreational fishery is a study in ongoing mismanagement. It is stuck in a derby fishery like the one we used to have. The recreational fishery routinely exceeds its quota, discards a lot of dead fish, and has really short seasons. It's also unsafe: six people have died in the recreational derby this year alone—four in Texas and two in Florida. Fixing the problem is going to take big changes, just like we in the commercial fishery had to face.

The recreational sector has the opportunity to rethink their fishery from a position of strength: with a rebounding stock that science-based management under the Magnuson-Stevens Act has made possible. Some private anglers and charter boat captains have risen to that challenge and are coming to the table with innovative management proposals—ideas such as sector separation, fish tags, and days at sea. These and similar ideas should be given urgent consideration by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council.

Unfortunately, too many are avoiding the tough decisions, and are looking for scapegoats and easy answers. One predictable rallying cry is to take some fish from the commercial sector through reallocation. That could obviously be a catastrophe for fishermen like me, for thousands of commercial-related businesses, and for millions of seafood consumers. It could also hurt the stock, by giving more fish to management that doesn't have accountability measures. Moreover, it wouldn't even start to tackle the recreational management challenge: even if 100% of the red snapper quota was given to the recreational sector, it would extend their season by just a few short weeks.

Others want to ignore the best available science and raise quotas more quickly than the stock can take. This must be firmly rejected. Allowing overfishing would risk returning us to the dark days when many anglers simply couldn't catch red snapper because of its depleted status.

This brings me to the growing calls for "regional management".

Mr. Chairman, let me be very clear: the push for "regional management" is nothing less than a back-door attempted coup d'etat. It represents an orchestrated effort to undermine science-based management under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and to decimate the commercial sector. Regional management does not fit the commercial fishery. It is opposed by all commercial fishermen I know. And it must be rejected by this committee.

Some participants in the recreational fishery and irresponsible managers are refusing to face the truth. They don't want to roll up their sleeves and reform a system that has failed. They don't want to front up to a systematic failure to comply with the law, observe annual catch limits, and be accountable for overages. They don't want to grapple with what it means to have a growing number of private anglers exploiting a precious and finite public resource.

The regional management plan the Gulf Council is working on now doesn't propose to fix the problem; it just divides it up state by state. There is no innovation in the "regional management" plan that holds out hope for more effective management—nothing but the same old ideas. It is not clear whether the states will agree that each should pay overages back if they catch too much. Except for Louisiana, it still isn't clear how the states will provide more fishing days or other benefits. They aren't adding new ways to count the fish better or faster. So, tell me: how is this "regional management" going to fix anything?

Many of us believe that it's actually likely to be a lot worse than the status quo. Dividing authority between five different governments is hardly a tried-and-true recipe for efficiency and success on anything. We are already seeing infighting over allotments between the states. How much worse will that get if this plan is implemented? How will the states agree on enforcement responsibilities? On overages?

But far more troublesome for commercial fishermen is the fact that state agencies in the Gulf have a track record on commercial fin fish fisheries that can't be ignored. In the past, I've watched as my friends in the red fish and trout fish fisheries have been put out of business and American consumers have lost the chance to enjoy those species of wild-caught Gulf seafood. And that's what we fear is really at the heart of this plan. Certain special interests in Gulf state capitals will stop at nothing to ensure that my friends and me are put out of our jobs, and American consumers lose access to the sustainable Gulf red snapper that they love.

Reform

As Congress considers the next reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, I look forward to working with this committee to provide commercial fishing perspectives on amendments.

One of the ironies of this "regional management" proposal is that devolution of authority to the regions is at the core of the Magnuson-Stevens Act's council system. Employees of the Gulf States hold five of the seventeen seats on our council, and governors nominate almost all the remaining council members. Although I support the council system as created in the Act, there are problems with the way our council is currently operating. Congress should examine those problems as they consider council reform through reauthorization.

I respectfully urge Members to reject reauthorization proposals that would undermine the successes we have secured. In addition to turning back "regional management" plans that could decimate the commercial fishery, this committee must reject efforts to weaken or dilute Annual Catch Limits and Accountability Measures that ensure sustainable fishing.

Fishermen should also continue to have the ability to vote directly on big management changes in their fishery. Section 407 of the Act should, however, be updated, and we look forward to providing specific language to committee members as the reauthorization process moves forward.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the chance to offer my views today and I look forward to answering your questions.