United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0168

May 4, 2017

Mr. Benjamin Friedman
Acting Administrator
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW, Room 5128
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Acting Administrator Friedman,

We are writing regarding this week's announcement that the 2017 Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishing season will be nearly a week shorter than last year's season. For the anglers, boat captains, and related industries dependent on access to this fishery, this is deeply concerning.

According to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the 2017 Gulf of Mexico red snapper federal season will be limited to just three days for recreational fishermen and 49 days for charter fishermen. We also understand that NMFS is likely to keep the South Atlantic closed for another season as well.

In years past, we have raised concern that setting a rigid fishing season of consecutive days may put anglers in harm's way due to Florida's unpredictable and frequent summer storms. We continue to believe that allowing more flexibility in the season to accommodate dangerous weather would help fishermen avoid hazardous conditions.

Once again, we ask that you consider incorporating all available reliable data to ensure anglers can safely fish for an appropriate season, which contributes valuable tourism revenue to coastal economies and ensures access to this public resource.

Sincerely,

Bill Nelson
U.S. Senator

Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

March 21, 2017

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Mr. Secretary:

Congratulations on your confirmation as the Secretary of the Department of Commerce. We are pleased to have a fellow Gulf State resident heading a Department that is so important to our region.

As you know, commercial and recreational fishing in state and federal Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) waters is very important to the national and regional economy and the Gulf region's customs, cultures and traditions. Access to these fishing resources is vital for our communities.

In particular, the Gulf red snapper fishery is an economic powerhouse. According to a report released by the American Sportfishing Association, the recreational red snapper fishery alone supported upwards of 2,600 jobs and generated $395 million in economic output in our region in 2011.[1] Despite such importance, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has used outdated and one-dimensional science to manage the red snapper fishery in federal waters. Specifically, the lack of real-time and use of state-generated data along with inadequate coordination with the Gulf states in general, has led us to believe that federal government is under-counting this fishery resource. The result has been a significantly reduced number of recreational fishing days in federal waters. As an example, there were 193 days in 2006[2] compared to eleven days last year.[3]

This declining trend is especially troubling as the Gulf red snapper fishery experienced an all-time high quota set at 14.3 million pounds for 2015.[4] We believe that the federal government can take immediate administrative steps to help benefit red snapper recreational fishing opportunities as we continue to work with stakeholders on a long term solution. As such, we respectfully urge you to work towards the following:

- allow the Gulf States, through the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, to act as the entity responsible for providing the stock assessment for the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council for fisheries managed under the Reef Fish Plan;[5]
- direct NMFS – in conjunction with the Gulf States, the Gulf of Mexico Council, and the charter and recreational fishing sectors – to certify existing state programs[6] such as LA creel, Mississippi's Tails n' Scales, and Alabama's Snapper Check;

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[1] American Sportfishing Association: *The Economic Gains from Reallocating Specific Saltwater Fisheries*. May 12, 2015.
[2] Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council: *The History of Recreational Red Snapper Management*. February 16, 2012.
[3] 81 FR 38110. June 13, 2016.
[4] Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council: *Framework Action to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources in the Gulf of Mexico including Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Impact Review, and Regulatory Flexibility Act Analysis*. March 2015.
[5] H.R. 1335, *Strengthening Fishing Communities and Increasing Flexibility in Fisheries Management Act*, Section 18, introduced by Congressman Don Young on March 4, 2015.

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- reevaluate the counting of red snapper mortality that is a result of the removal of offshore oil rigs against the total allowable catch of that fish and from counting those fish toward the quota for U.S. fishermen for the purposes of closing the fishery when the quota has been reached;[7] and
- direct NMFS to expand upon existing partnerships with states to develop best practices for implementing state recreational fisheries programs and to develop guidance that detail best practices for administering state programs.[8]

We welcome the opportunity to work with you on these initial administrative common sense reforms that would greatly improve the science and management of all species in the Gulf, including red snapper. We also respectfully urge you to use any and all means within your purview to ensure that our recreational anglers are afforded the maximum amount of time on the water for the 2017 federal recreational red snapper season.

Sincerely,

Garret Graves
Member of Congress

Randy Weber
Member of Congress

Bradley Byrne
Member of Congress

Steven Palazzo
Member of Congress

Daniel Webster
Member of Congress

Clay Higgins
Member of Congress

John Carter
Member of Congress

Mike Johnson
Member of Congress

[6] Id. at 5, Sec. 13.
[7] Id. at 5, Sec. 21.
[8] Id. at 5, Sec. 17.

Christopher Holmes - NOAA Federal <christopher.holmes@noaa.gov>

Byrne Letter on Red Snapper

2 messages

Topher Holmes <christopher.holmes@noaa.gov> Mon, May 15, 2017 at 5:13 PM
To: Linda Belton <linda.belton@noaa.gov>
Cc: Robert Moller <robert.moller@noaa.gov>, "Branson, Ross (Federal)" <RBranson@doc.gov>

Hi Linda - Rep. Bradley Byrne's (AL-01) staff sent a co-signed letter on red snapper management, attached, to Earl, Ross, and me. It's addressed to the Secretary, and asks that he re-evaluate the Gulf red snapper season for private anglers.

Since it's addressed to the Secretary, could you please control with Exec Sec?

Co-signed by Reps. Graves, Weber, Palazzo, and Carter (TX).

Thanks!

--
Christopher (Topher) Holmes
Congressional Affairs Specialist
NOAA Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs

P: (202) 482-2272 C: (240) 723-6319
Christopher.Holmes@noaa.gov

Follow up letter to Secretary Ross.pdf
957K

Linda Belton - NOAA Federal <linda.belton@noaa.gov> Mon, May 15, 2017 at 5:24 PM
To: Topher Holmes <christopher.holmes@noaa.gov>

Will do. thanks
[Quoted text hidden]
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Linda D. Belton
Policy Advisor for Intergovernmental Affairs and Tribal Liaison
NOAA Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
6th Floor, Room 62006RB
Washington, DC 20230

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202-302-7148 (mobile)

Christopher Holmes - NOAA Federal <christopher.holmes@noaa.gov>

Follow up letter on Red Snapper

2 messages

Fry, Miriam <Miriam.Fry@mail.house.gov> Mon, May 15, 2017 at 3:35 PM
To: "rbranson@doc.gov" <rbranson@doc.gov>, "EComstock@doc.gov" <EComstock@doc.gov>, Topher Holmes <christopher.holmes@noaa.gov>

Good Afternoon,

Please see attached letter from Mr. Byrne, Graves, Weber, Carter, and Palazzo on the recently announced Federal Red Snapper season.

Miriam

Miriam Fry

Senior Legislative Assistant

Congressman Bradley Byrne (AL-01)

119 Cannon House Office Building

202-225-4931

Follow up letter to Secretary Ross.pdf
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Topher Holmes <christopher.holmes@noaa.gov> Mon, May 15, 2017 at 5:08 PM
To: "Fry, Miriam" <Miriam.Fry@mail.house.gov>
Cc: "rbranson@doc.gov" <rbranson@doc.gov>, "EComstock@doc.gov" <EComstock@doc.gov>

Thank you, Miriam. Received.
[Quoted text hidden]
--
Christopher (Topher) Holmes
Congressional Affairs Specialist
NOAA Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs

P: (202) 482-2272 C: (240) 723-6319
Christopher.Holmes@noaa.gov

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 15, 2017

The Honorable Wilbur Ross
Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20230

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write today to express our disappointment in the recent announcement from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) of a three day recreational Red Snapper season. It is unacceptable. We ask that you reevaluate this decision and extend the number of days for the 2017 season.

On March 21st, we wrote to you about the importance of access to adequate fishing resources in the Gulf of Mexico, and namely Red Snapper. You responded that the Red Snapper fishery is a high priority for you and your department, and therefore it is time for more than three days.

Our recreational fishermen are being penalized by NOAA for a statistical anomaly. Currently, NOAA's data says that recreational fishermen exceeded last year's quota by 129,906 pounds. However, 129,000 pounds represents less than .02 percent of the recreational quota. This decision has no bearing on the health of the stock, and there is no chance NOAA is representing the number with any degree of accuracy.

At the state level, we continue to see report numbers that do not match NMFS's data, caused by the lack of real-time information. For example, in Alabama, preliminary estimates for 2016 show a total of approximately 821,000 pounds counted by Alabama's Snapper Check Program. NOAA's estimates for the same time show approximately 2 million pounds accounted for. Mississippi's data shows the opposite problem. According to data from Mississippi's Tails n' Scales Program, almost 40,000 pounds were accounted for, yet NOAA's data claims there were zero pounds taken. It is time for recreational anglers to stop being penalized for NOAA's bad science and lack of coordination.

In short, there is serious doubt that federal data is accurately reflecting the number of Red Snapper in the Gulf. For that reason, we feel revaluating your agency's decision for the 2017 season is warranted, and we urge you to continue working with us to develop a long-term solution to address these issues impacting our recreational fishermen and coastal communities.

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Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to hearing from you.

Bradley Byrne
Member of Congress

Garret Graves
Member of Congress

Randy Weber
Member of Congress

John Carter
Member of Congress

Steven Palazzo
Member of Congress