

Testimony of Chris Brown
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Before the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Energy
Regarding the Management of Red Snapper Fishery
May 2, 2017

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the management of Red Snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. As President of the Seafood Harvesters of America, I represent an array of commercial fishing organizations and fishermen across the nation, including those who use pots to crab in the Bering Sea, others who use hook and line to catch Red Snapper in the Gulf of Mexico, and those like myself who use a net to fish in the waters of Southern New England. While we may use different gear and target different species, we all have in common a desire and commitment to manage our fisheries sustainably. The Harvesters bring together fishermen from across the nation to learn from each other's successes, as well as our failures, and collectively champion policies to ensure that we have well-managed fisheries so that we can deliver healthy, safe and delicious seafood to citizens throughout the nation.

I recognize that Red Snapper is a hot button issue and there are many in this room today that will point to Red Snapper management as a failure. I am also aware of the concern that some may have about the value of testimony coming from someone who has never participated in the commercial Red Snapper fishery and never will. But while every fishery is to some extent unique, today's Red Snapper situation shares some common features with crises in other regions, including my own.

I arrive at your door, wearing from the road, withered but wiser from the blows of every hard lesson that could possibly be learned along the way. My early preparation for this testimony began some 50 years ago as a young boy, alongside my grandfather on the deck of a small trawler out of Point Judith, Rhode Island, in the relatively pristine waters of Block Island Sound. 40 years ago, I was but one of many young men, confident, steeled in our collective resolve, that the wealth laid before our feet was inexhaustible and that success was ours for the taking. Our future was certain. Sadly, time has fatefully revealed otherwise and my grandfather's ocean has shown her limits, bared her soul and bowed her head, un-majestically to an unyielding and careless onslaught at the hands of those who did not understand the fragile nature of the relationship with which they had been entrusted. 30 years ago, a young father with mouths to feed and no visible way to make ends meet. Humbled now, a firsthand witness and participant in our failure to manage the riches of our nation. My once held youthful dreams of great and inexhaustible wealth, forcibly reshaped into middle aged prayers for simple economic survival.

I am here today as the voice of a nation's fishery that has travelled this very same path. It can start in Alaska, Oregon, California, Texas, Florida or Maine. Geography is irrelevant. In this journey and subsequent evolution, lies the credibility of my testimony.

Roughly 10 years ago we had witnessed, what appeared to be a significant recovery in Cod and Yellowtail Flounder. These are two of the most historically significant species in New England. Those hard-earned gains were squandered in the years prior to management reform in my region. Input control measures dictated daily possession limits of Cod. These limits were easily obtainable in only an hour's trawling or a panel or two of gillnet. Soon it became difficult to not catch more than one could possess. Discarding fish became an unfortunate feature of regulatory compliance. With each event, fishermen became increasingly numb to the pain and futility. Out of this, a culture of disregard emerged. Discarding of fish became culturally tolerated. With Yellowtail Flounder, the political will of the council advanced ahead of the confidence in the science. A special Yellowtail program was devised and gave rise to a derby where 30,000 pounds could be caught in a special area. It was unprofitable from the start, as derbies usually are, but vessels continued to participate simply because they wanted their share.

The diminished state of our fishery is the result of overfishing unknown to the council and poorly constructed, outcome irrelevant management structures. The biological ineffectiveness of these management plans reflected annually in smaller limits and fewer days to fish each year due to wastefulness of the plans. In an ecosystem that is challenged by environmental compromise, it is essential to deliver data that is of the highest quality and contain mortality to that which supports the ongoing recovery of the stocks.

As I look upon the Red Snapper management, I see glaring issues that pose a threat to its continued recovery. Specifically, the general uncertainty associated with the recreational fishery poses a real threat to the integrity of the very science that should drive every management decision. With such a large component of the annual fishery dedicated to recreational use, it seems highly unlikely that the fishery will continue to recover unless management of the recreational sector improves. Uncertainty saps the growth of stocks over time. Fisheries need to be governed by science, not politics. This is not unique to the Gulf.

The proposed expansion of management authority by the surrounding States in the Gulf is a proposition that does not bode well for the citizens of the United States. Increased access to Red Snapper by the consuming public, throughout the nation is a function of continuing stock recovery. Increased authority in the management of Red Snapper should be based on success not want.

State managers are poorly suited to manage this stock. In a politically charged arena those who are appointed by elected governors are forced to consider the fate of those who employ them in resource decisions. Management that values popularity serves only itself and is of no lasting value to the fish or fishermen of any state. Decisions should instead be steeped in sound current, well informed science.

Additionally, the economic burden associated with the complete and effective management of Snapper by any state seems daunting and scarcely considered in their quest for control. The financial burdens associated with management of Snapper, independent of the Federal Government, calls into question the value proposition represented by such a quest.

We look upon all fishing, both recreational and commercial as a privilege, not a right. With privilege come responsibility. The Magnusson Act is our contract with America that we will do no harm. The responsible utility of our nation's natural resources is an expression of peace time patriotism, second to none. The unethical use of the same is something far less and falls below any standard of public service.

We should all be thankful that the Red Snapper fishery is in much better shape than the codfish fishery. The commercial sector consistently harvests its annual allocation and does so in a way that is flexible, safe and profitable. The federal for-hire charter boats are now using electronic reporting systems to be more accountable and improve their yields as well. Better, more accurate and more reliable real-time data from the private recreational sector would vastly improve the ability to set quotas and develop better management regimes for all sectors, ultimately improving access for all. Consequently, for the first time ever, a private recreational angler advisory panel will be meeting next week in New Orleans to advise the Gulf Council on how to improve red snapper management for the private angler sector.

The Seafood Harvesters' mission is to develop sustainable fisheries, using accountability as the sword and the shield. We are the fishermen who rose out of the ashes of overfishing and are using the hard lessons we learned to chart a path to prosperity and environmental health. We have an obligation to make wild-caught fish a viable, enduring, dependable source of food. Accountability is the common element found in all great fisheries and will lead to success over time.

Thank you for your time and consideration as we discuss the best ways to improve the management of Red Snapper in the Gulf of Mexico.