

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is Mark Ray and I am a long-time member and volunteer for Coastal Conservation Association, and I currently serve as Chairman of the CCA Texas Chapter. CCA was established in 1977 and is the largest marine resource conservation group of its kind in the nation, with more than 120,000 members in 19 state chapters along all three coasts. Comprised of recreational anglers and concerned conservationists, CCA has been active in state, regional and federal fishery issues ranging from forage species at the bottom of the marine food chain to pelagic, apex predators at the top. CCA's advocacy philosophy seeks to promote both the proper conservation of marine resources and the availability of those resources to the general public.

The commitment of anglers, and indeed of all sportsmen and women, to act as stewards of the wildlife resources they cherish is at the heart of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which is built on the premise that all fish and wildlife are held in public trust and belong to the people -- not designated individuals for personal gain. That being said, I am not here to speak against commercial fisheries. The majority of recreational anglers are not advocating for the elimination of commercial fishing, despite many in that industry attempting to muddy the water with claims to the contrary. We simply want a system of management that provides appropriate access to the resource and nowhere is such a system more lacking than in the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery. Federal management dysfunction of red snapper in the Gulf continues to push recreational fishing away from the extremely successful North American Model and toward privatization schemes meant to limit the public's access to abundant public resources in public waters.

At a recent Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council, a comment was made by a commercial harvester advocating for limiting access for anglers that recreational red snapper fishing needs to be managed according to a plan like duck hunting. Ironically, recreational fishermen would be much happier if snapper were managed like ducks, where state and federal wildlife managers share information and set remarkably consistent seasons and limits according to long-term population trends, not simply on best-guesses about harvest effort based on outdated information. There is not a Congressional hearing every six months or so on how to fix duck hunting because the system works for its stakeholders. In most states, duck hunters have had consistent seasons for a decade or longer. Over that same period, federal seasons for red snapper have changed more than a dozen times. In 1996, anglers enjoyed year-long access when the population was beginning to recover. Last year, the season was just 9 days and is likely to be as short as 2 to 4 days this year. All this despite the snapper population being at what is likely an all-time high. One of the reasons given by NOAA Fisheries for these shortened seasons is that the fish are so abundant they are too easy to catch. In no other fisheries or game management system is abundance used as a reason to shorten seasons and restrict access. But, somehow federal fisheries managers justify it for Gulf red snapper.

Recreational anglers are regularly accused of irresponsibility, having a lack of accountability and even of being too numerous. Incredibly, anglers are often berated for not producing their own management program within a system that gives them no tools to work with. This charge is particularly exasperating. Commercial harvesters engaged in the Gulf Council process have willingly chosen a path that results in massive consolidation of their sector. The "winners" are those who end up owning the largest shares of the public red snapper resource to sell for their own benefit; the losers are everyone else. This type of management program that picks a few winners at the expense of many losers is clearly favored by NOAA Fisheries and it is one that we are seeing emphasized more and more in the Gulf of Mexico. It is

clear that NOAA Fisheries believes some variation of a limited entry system that picks winners and losers for the recreational sector is necessary to properly manage the stocks under its authority.

We reject any premise that in order to successfully manage federal fisheries we must devise a system that determines which lucky few anglers get to fish while leaving the vast majority tied to the dock. As a result, we find ourselves on the outside looking in at a federal management system that is attempting to force such a program upon us. It doesn't have to be this way.

One need only look at state-managed fisheries to see the resounding success of their management approach, both in fresh and saltwater fisheries. State fisheries managers use the same model, whether managing primarily catch-and-release trophy fisheries (like some largemouth bass, trout, snook and tarpon fisheries) or harvest intensive fisheries (crappie, catfish, red drum, sheepshead, spotted seatrout, walleye and yellow perch), because it works well regardless of management goals.

The frequent inability of federal fisheries managers to effectively manage recreational fisheries is a product of how they are required to approach fisheries management. States have a responsibility and mission to manage a fishery for maximum health so that they can provide ample opportunities for the public to enjoy their resource. To do this, they rely on actual, timely population data in addition to robust estimates of angler harvest. State management success is measured on both a healthy fishery and a satisfied public, with no incentive to do otherwise. Unlike the states, federal managers are required by law to manage a fishery, in part, on the concept of maximum sustained yield (MSY), which by its very definition causes managers to decrease the abundance of a population and squeeze the most pounds out of a fishery while trying not to collapse it. Because of the inherent variability in their assessments that rely heavily on harvest estimates, they must include conservative buffers to keep from exceeding the overfishing limit. The fewer the fishermen in the fishery, the easier it is to achieve this goal.

Essentially, NOAA Fisheries has built their management model around the commercial management model of managing or constraining the fishermen to attempt to keep a fishery from failing. In contrast, the states' model manages for a healthy population and a robust fishery in order to optimize access for fishermen, both commercial and recreational. From a species conservation, harvest sustainability, and overall public satisfaction perspective, the state approach is simply a better methodology.

In the case of red snapper, federal management tools are predicated on the ability of managers to count every single fish that spawns and is caught in the Gulf of Mexico. Even with today's technology, that ability simply does not exist and trying to achieve it will cost untold millions of dollars. Instead of acknowledging that easy-to-spot shortcoming, the federal system has tied itself and the fishery in knots trying desperately to reach an unfeasible goal. The state management philosophy succeeds because their fisheries management systems fit the data they have available and they have made the investments to obtain current information to apply to that management. With current information in hand, state managers have more flexibility to adjust fishing rates and seasons to reflect current conditions. Whereas the federal system is trying to impose on millions of anglers a quota system designed for several hundred commercial shareholders, the states have achieved a better balance between sustainability and quality fishing opportunities.

The Gulf red snapper population is a public trust resource, and the American public deserves an accountable management system that maximizes access to their resource. Insisting on a management

system that does otherwise is a rejection of a wildlife conservation model that has fueled some of the greatest conservation victories in the world. In the Gulf of Mexico, recreational anglers have stepped up to build world-class hatcheries and worked with universities to build world-class science centers. They have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for law enforcement equipment and other support for state game wardens. They have been the driving force behind habitat projects ranging from marsh restoration and oyster shell recycling programs to offshore artificial reefs.

In addition to the license anglers buy just to go fishing, every time we purchase a package of hooks, a fishing rod, reel, lure, tackle box, depth finder, trolling motor, fuel for our fishing boat and other supplies we gladly pay an excise tax that goes into a fund called the Sport Fishing and Boating Trust Fund. The majority of those funds go back to the states for fisheries conservation, angling and boating access and boating safety. It is all part of the American System of Conservation Funding - paid for solely by anglers and boaters - and it's the lifeblood of the North American Model.

Anglers have taken on these challenges because we have gladly accepted the responsibility of being stewards of the resource. Gulf anglers regularly ask state agencies to reduce creel limits when stocks show signs of decline or are affected by weather or other environmental factors. Gulf-coast anglers also led the charge in the 1980s to end the use of destructive fishing gear like gillnets and purse-seines that were decimating speckled trout and redfish stocks, pushing these iconic species to the brink of collapse.

The angling community is also largely responsible for the miraculous recovery of Gulf red snapper. In 2005, a lawsuit brought by concerned anglers forced implementation of arguably the single most significant action in the history of red snapper management. After years of inaction by NOAA Fisheries and a relentlessly depressed red snapper stock, a federal judge finally ordered a 79 percent reduction in red snapper mortality from shrimp trawls. After almost 30 years of failed policies and half-measures, this landmark decision finally set the stage for the incredible recovery in red snapper stocks that we are seeing today. Indeed, information presented by the Gulf Council consistently reflects an almost meteoric rise in Gulf red snapper populations beginning in 2005, coinciding exactly with the reduction in shrimp trawl bycatch mortality. It is the only elemental change in the management of this fishery over the past 30 years and it was brought about by recreational anglers. It is questionable whether federal managers fully grasp or appreciate the impact it has had on the red snapper stock.

Anglers have a critical role to play in the management of our federal marine resources and we are willing to fulfill it if given the chance with a federal system that takes into account the inherent, fundamental differences between recreational angling and industrial harvest. I am here today to ask this Committee to give us that chance.

Thank you.