March 20, 2020

The Honorable Wilbur Ross, Secretary
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave. NW
Washington, DC  20230

Dear Mr. Secretary,

The nation is facing extraordinary challenges as a result of COVID-19. We, the millions of America’s anglers and recreational fishing and boating industry leaders, sincerely thank you for your leadership and work on behalf of all Americans in this moment of crisis.

We are striving to do our part, as well, which includes both health safety measures and steps to keep the fishing/boating/marine recreational economy working in the U.S. From our prior interactions with you (on Gulf red snapper, for example), we know you would want us to let you know when the Department can do something that would significantly help. So, that is why we are writing now, acutely mindful of the pull on your time to focus on COVID-related problems.

We are writing today to ask for your swift approval of Regulatory Amendment 29 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan approved by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) in September 2019—and which we support. Amendment 29 would require anglers fishing for snapper grouper species in South Atlantic federal waters to have a descending device onboard and ready for use.¹

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¹ A descending device is a weighted hook, lip clamp, or box that will hold the fish while it is lowered to a sufficient depth to recover from the effects of barotrauma (a condition where a buildup of gas pressure in their bodies makes it difficult or impossible to swim back down) and release the fish. There are a variety of options in the marketplace and even homemade options like weighted hooks that would be permissible under this rule.
Since 2008, South Atlantic red snapper anglers have been frustrated by NOAA Fisheries’ very short seasons (3 days this year) notwithstanding science-based data showing a significant increase in red snapper abundance. In fact, red snapper stocks have so rebounded that 2018 NOAA Fisheries’ Marine Recreational Information Program estimates of dead discards exceeds the annual catch limit by 30 times (904,672 dead discards versus 29,656 allowable catch). This is wanton waste. Reducing the mortality rate of snapper grouper species by requiring descending devices in federal waters is simply a best fishing practice and responsible conservation of our natural resources.

Many recreational fishery stakeholders have partnered to educate the angling public on best practices for releasing fish including descending devices. The FishSmart Conservation Project found at www.takemefishing.org and ReleaSense found at www.relesense.org are two examples. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission also has a series of videos on their YouTube channel (FWC Saltwater Fishing) demonstrating how to use descending devices to treat barotrauma.

From an industry perspective, these devices have been in production and are ready to be used in the field. Various descending devices have been manufactured for years and are available for retail sale. Thanks to the aforementioned educational efforts, thousands of anglers and guides have been provided with descending devices at no charge.

Tackling waste of fishery resources has been a priority for anglers and industry for years, and as America’s original conservationists, recreational anglers have long advocated for the use of descending devices to improve the survivability of released reef fish. We pioneered descending devices to help address the needless waste of deep-water fish. We rallied our community around their use. And we lobbied SAFMC to approve Amendment 29.

We respectfully urge you to implement Amendment 29 as soon as possible to reduce discard mortality for released fish once anglers are using descending devices in the South Atlantic. Thank you for your leadership and commitment to the issues affecting America’s marine recreational anglers and boaters and the outdoor recreation economy.

Sincerely,

Glenn Hughes, President
American Sportfishing Association

Jeff Crane, President
Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation

Chris Edmonston, VP Government Affairs
BoatU.S.

Guy Harvey, President
Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation

Jeff Angers, President
Center for Sportfishing Policy

Jason Schratwieser, President
International Game Fish Association

Patrick Murray, President
Coastal Conservation Association

Frank Hugelmeyer, President
National Marine Manufacturers Association