



August 16, 2023

Dear Chairman Frazer and Members of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council:

Thank you for your time and dedication to our fisheries resources in the Gulf of Mexico. As you well know, we have several challenges before us in managing important recreational species. However, the key to successfully meeting many of those challenges begins with having reliable information on recreational catch and effort. The fact that we are looking at the third major revision to the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) in a little over a decade is not only concerning, but also a likely indication that it may never be suitable for managing some species and especially those that require timely and accurate information for in-season management.

Members of other sectors routinely and wrongly accuse the private recreational angler of being “unaccountable”. Individual anglers are accountable. We fish to the seasons and bag limits we are given and report our catch and harvest when asked to do so. Rather, the accountability of MRIP to the private recreational sector and to fisheries management is what continues to be in question. While additional pilot studies on MRIP effort surveys will eventually help us get to new estimates, the reliability of those estimates will continue to be a question for many.

Instead, we should seize the opportunity to build upon the state-federal partnerships that have already begun for red snapper and expand the state programs to replace MRIP for all reef fish species. It is clear the state programs have provided recreational anglers with consistent, reliable access to the red snapper fishery while efficiently staying within a state’s harvest allocation. Furthermore, recreational anglers simply trust their state managers more than the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Though we recognize there will be a need for the states to work together to reach agreement on sampling methodologies that are similar across regions, they will need some flexibility in how they administer their surveys in order to collect the most timely and accurate information from their anglers. NMFS should provide the necessary guidance on the data needed to be acceptable for stock assessments, but the states need to be the clear lead in expanding their programs to incorporate more species.

While it is unfortunate that the current FES surveys are not providing reliable estimates of angler catch and landings, this discovery presents an opportunity to take a step back, re-evaluate data needs, and identify the best path forward for obtaining the necessary information. We strongly believe that pathway clearly rests with the states, and we urge the Council to support the expansion of state data collection programs to replace MRIP and provide more consistent, reliable information. Doing so will finally make federal fisheries management of reef fish species in the Gulf of Mexico more accountable to recreational anglers.

The Sportsman’s Voice in the Nation’s Capitols

Again, thank you for your time and your service on behalf of our Gulf of Mexico fisheries resources.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Chris Horton".

Chris Horton
Senior Director, Fisheries Policy

The Sportsman's Voice in the Nation's Capitols

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