

Attn: House Committee on Natural Resources and Tourism
Re: House Bills 5801 & 5802 – Commercial Fishing
Date: May 20, 2026
Position: Oppose

Dear Chairman Martin and Honorable Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, I am writing to express our strong opposition to House Bills 5801 and 5802. The unjustified expansion of commercial fishing effort using indiscriminate gear proposed in these bills presents a serious threat to Michigan's fisheries resources, recreational fishing opportunities, and the state's economy.

Founded in 1989, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) is the informed authority across outdoor issues and serves as the primary conduit for influencing public policy. Working with the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus (CSC), the Governors Sportsmen's Caucus (GSC), and the National Assembly of Sportsmen's Caucuses (NASC), CSF gives a voice to hunters, anglers, recreational shooters, and trappers on Capitol Hill and throughout state capitols advocating on vital outdoor issues that are the backbone of our nation's conservation legacy.

These bills would authorize expanded commercial harvest of walleye, yellow perch, and lake trout in Michigan's waters of the Great Lakes using gill nets and other commercial gear types that have historically contributed to the collapse of these fisheries. The Great Lakes fishery resources are held in public trust for the benefit of all citizens, and the long-term public value of these fisheries overwhelmingly outweighs the short-term private profit opportunities that would result for a limited number of commercial operators under these bills.

The history of the Great Lakes provides a clear warning. Commercial overharvest, much of it conducted with indiscriminate gill nets, drove lake trout and other species to near-extirpation during the twentieth century. These fisheries were rebuilt only through decades of public investment, including hatchery programs, habitat restoration, fisheries management, and substantial contributions from recreational anglers through license fees and federal excise taxes known as the American System of Conservation Funding. Today, Michigan's recreational fishing economy generates approximately \$3.9 billion annually, including roughly \$2.7 billion tied directly to Great Lakes recreational fishing activity. By comparison, at \$5.4 million annually, the commercial fishing industry generates only a small fraction of that economic value.

Gill nets are widely regarded as "dirty" fishing gear because they do not selectively harvest only the intended species. Instead, they indiscriminately capture fish of similar size classes, often resulting in unnecessary bycatch and mortality of non-target species. This type of fishing gear is fundamentally inconsistent with modern fisheries conservation principles and risks undermining decades of successful restoration efforts. The Great Lakes recreational fishery supports thousands of jobs, tourism businesses, charter operations, marinas, hotels, restaurants, bait and tackle retailers, and coastal communities throughout Michigan. A live fish caught repeatedly by recreational anglers contributes exponentially more economic value to the state than a fish sold once into commercial markets.

Particularly concerning is the inclusion of crappie species in HB 5801 as commercially exploitable fish. Commercial harvest of crappie is prohibited throughout the rest of the United States because crappie are highly valued recreational sport fish that are vulnerable to overexploitation. Establishing a commercial market for crappie in Michigan could incentivize illegal harvest and black-market sales of crappie taken from inland waters in Michigan and neighboring states. Once commercial demand is created, distinguishing

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legally harvested fish from illegally sourced fish becomes extraordinarily difficult for conservation officers and fisheries managers.

The allocation framework proposed in these bills is also deeply troubling because it prioritizes “market demand for human consumption” and commercial profitability when determining harvest opportunities. Such a framework inherently disadvantages recreational anglers and encourages increasing commercial allocation as restaurant and market demand grows. Public fisheries resources should not be managed primarily as commercial commodities when the broader public derives significantly greater economic, social, and conservation benefits from recreational use.

Michigan’s Great Lakes fisheries are one of the state’s most valuable public trust resources. They were restored through public investment and careful management, not through commercial exploitation. Reintroducing expanded commercial gill net fisheries for these species risks repeating the mistakes of the past while jeopardizing the economic engine created by recreational fishing and tourism.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to reject House Bills 5801 and 5802 as drafted and instead pursue a collaborative stakeholder process that prioritizes conservation, sustainable public access, and the long-term health of Michigan’s Great Lakes fisheries.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Robert Matthews

Manager, Midwestern States

Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation

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