

Exploring a New Direction to Improve For-Hire Red Snapper Fishing

What's happening? – The 2008 red snapper season was the shortest on record. This was due to the NMFS's commitment to making sure that all sectors stay within their allotted allocation. Additionally, new government accountability measures will require that any future overages are compensated for, which could result in even shorter seasons in the future. The continued loss of fishing time and subsequent loss of business revenues highlights the desperate situation facing our industry.

It has become clear that we must reevaluate the position of the for-hire recreational fisheries sector. If negative trends continue, we stand to lose all the investment and years of labor we have collectively put into making our profession an industry. **Something has to change.**

Until this year, many of us thought that we could get by with shortened seasons and fewer fish. Some of our industry leaders have even suggested the solution is the status quo and have promoted the continuity of the relationship we have with the private recreational fishers.

This is no solution at all and the reason is simple: **We are professional fishers who operate for-profit businesses.** Both the National Research Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service agree on this point. Sure, we may all fall under the recreational sector allocation umbrella for fisheries management purposes, but we approach fishing from an entirely different perspective. Our opinion is simply that we can no longer afford to be attached to a recreational sector of unknown quantities, effort, landings and unregulated growth.

The time to become involved is now – Several for-hire businessmen are exploring how to better serve our customers, count and conserve fish, and build equity in our businesses assets. We realize the consequences of inaction: longer fishery rebuilding, fewer fishing days, and lost economic potential for our businesses. Any profitable business must have stability so owners can plan for the future. It is imperative that we all take a leadership role in developing common-sense management options to obtain stability, sustainability and give us hope for a better future. The NMFS and the Gulf Council have both indicated that they are ready to roll up their sleeves and work for better management. We believe they will be receptive to an industry led effort to make positive change.

Getting started – To begin, we want to develop a set of goals to guide our discussions and the development of this proposal such as:

- Provide a reliable platform for the public to access and enjoy sport fishing.
- Improve service to customers with year-around access and the ability to custom-tailor trips.
- Build stability and equity in for-hire businesses.
- Achieve high accountability by counting all fish caught.
- Rebuild and maintain a viable for-hire fishery.
- Gain fair and equitable management.
- Increase industry control over management.

Achieving our Goals – Changes in recreational management will require compromise by several parties, including our industry, and it will neither be easy nor pain-free, but it is an opportunity to put our industry back on track to recover what we have lost, rebuild our investment, and eventually recover equity in our fishery. There are a lot of steps to a new management program, including a proposal, Gulf Council plans, and implementation by NMFS. This is a daunting task, but the alternative – the status quo – equates to nothing more than rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Here is a summary of our proposal:

1. **Secure our allocation.** We would begin by obtaining a “control date” from the NMFS which would freeze the current percentages of recreational sector allocation between the private recreational anglers and the For-Hire Sector based upon landings history. We don’t want anything more than our fair share: only that what we have historically caught. Then we would obtain an agreement from NMFS that the percentages will remain fixed for a minimum of two years to provide enough time to get the proper monitoring tools in place by NMFS and the industry.

2. **Put monitoring tools in place.** The next step is to decide what monitoring tools we want. For starters, we think just two: VMS and electronic logbooks. These tools will provide us the opportunity of real-time catch reporting and will determine, at a high level of accuracy, who is fishing and what they are catching.

3. **Professionalize the industry:** Monitoring tools such as VMS and electronic log books will give scientists and managers better data for management decisions and will give the industry accountability, so that when fish stocks rebound, the information can be trusted and catch levels can be increased. Increasing the fishermen’s role in data collection and management of the fishery will instill a positive stake in data collection and foster a proactive attitude and participation to further enhance fisheries management.

4. **Create a Red Snapper Endorsement:** As our new sector begins to collect accurate, real-time data through the implementation of VMS and electronic logbooks, a clear picture of who is dependent on red snapper for their livelihoods will immerge. This information can then be used to determine eligibility for any future management plan for the red snapper fishery. Fishermen who have implemented VMS and electronic logbooks and have snapper landings can then be given an endorsement for red snapper and will be eligible to participate in the fishery. Fairness is of utmost importance, whether you have been in business for 6 months or 50 years, have a six-pack boat or a party boat **all** participants start on the same date with the same access dictated by the NMFS current opening and closings that we are fishing under now.

5. **Support law enforcement.** Throughout this process, we will support law enforcement, which will authenticate our honesty in record keeping. Through VMS, enforcement officers can easily contact vessels and verify catch, and catch composition, with random, unannounced inspections. We support strict penalties including disqualification for anyone caught cheating or “cooking the books.” We also encourage the apprehension and prosecution of individuals illegally conducting a For-Hire business.

Hopefully, you’ll agree with us that failure to do nothing is certain failure. We welcome your participation in changing the current direction of our industry into a productive business where our sons and daughters have a future in the fishery.

For more information on these ideas or to share your viewpoints please contact:

Destin, FL

[Gary Jarvis: gjabd@aol.com](mailto:gjabd@aol.com)

[Kelly Windes: kelly@destin-real-estate.com](mailto:kelly@destin-real-estate.com)

[Mike Eller: mike@fishdestin.com](mailto:mike@fishdestin.com)

Panama City, FL

[Jerry Anderson: fishingsilver@knology.net](mailto:jerryanderson@fishingsilver@knology.net)

[Billy Archer: bigtrig@aol.com](mailto:billyarcher@bigtrig@aol.com)

Orange Beach, AL

[Tracy Redding: tredding@gulftel.com](mailto:tredding@gulftel.com)

[Eugene Coley: capt.eugene@yahoo.com](mailto:eugene@capt.eugene@yahoo.com)