



December 7, 2009

The Honorable Bill Nelson
United States Senate
716 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

**Florida Fish
and Wildlife
Conservation
Commission**

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*Managing fish and wildlife
resources for their long-term
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people.*

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Dear Senator Nelson:

It was great seeing you recently. On behalf of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), thank you for all that you do for Florida and its natural resources. We applaud your support for the wise management of the State's world-class saltwater fisheries and value the close working relationship we have in the effort to maintain healthy, sustainable fisheries for our citizens.

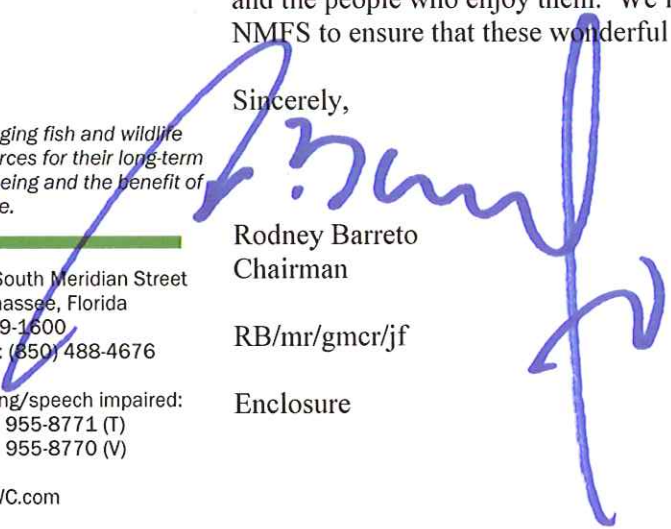
As you know, recreational saltwater fishing in Florida has an economic impact exceeding \$5.3 billion annually and supports over 54,000 jobs. Our saltwater anglers take over 35 million fishing trips annually. That is nearly five times the number taken in any other state. In any given year, Florida's saltwater angling represents one third of the effort for the entire nation.

Unfortunately this economic engine is in jeopardy. New regulations require tight deadlines to end overfishing, rebuild stocks, and implement annual catch limits for all federally managed species. Meeting these tough new standards also requires increasingly sophisticated data collection and research efforts to ensure that our resources continue to thrive while federal and state managers provide exceptional recreational opportunities for our residents and visitors. In addition, as we are seeing with the current controversies over snapper and grouper in the South Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico, the public perceives that management decisions are being based on incomplete or incorrect data. FWC and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) are working cooperatively to improve data collection and stock assessment models, but there is an urgent need to provide greater support for this science in order to keep pace with the rapid management changes occurring today.

Attached is our assessment of the essential scientific need that would benefit Florida and the entire region. We believe that these recommendations would satisfy the National Research Council's conclusion that recreational fishing statistics is needed on a much finer scale than is currently being collected. Our strategy hinges on enhanced collaboration among the fishing industry, recreational anglers, FWC, and NMFS. Once implemented, we believe it will bolster public confidence in the data used to determine management actions.

Senator Nelson, we greatly appreciate your leadership in protecting Florida's saltwater fisheries and the people who enjoy them. We look forward to our continued partnership with you and NMFS to ensure that these wonderful resources are protected for future generations to enjoy.

Sincerely,


Rodney Barreto
Chairman

RB/mr/gmcr/jf

Enclosure

Florida's Saltwater Fisheries Research Needs

The importance and urgency of adjustments to fisheries data collection programs simply cannot be overstated. The need is for enhanced efforts to survey fishermen along with parallel scientific surveys of reef fish populations. Comprehensive assessments of the status of these fish require both approaches

The following programs would support new and expanded cooperative data collection programs among the fishing industry, recreational anglers, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission:

- \$3 million annually (with \$1 million specified for Florida) for scientific surveys of snapper populations in waters of the South Atlantic. These surveys are critical for improved data collection and analysis of this important Atlantic Ocean fishery.
- \$4 million (with \$2 million specified for Florida) for scientific surveys of snapper and grouper populations in waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Likewise, these surveys are critical for improved data collection and analysis of this important fishery. Recurring funding at this level would ensure long-term funding for a reef fish monitoring program that FWC and NMFS are currently developing in a pilot mode for Florida. Through your support and that of Congressman Putnam, FWC has received two years of federal funding (approximately \$1 million/year) for sampling in the Gulf of Mexico. A request is pending for a third year of appropriation. This project has identified the most effective combination of sampling gear and survey design for sampling these species. Permanent funding will ensure that state and federal managers have access to essential long-term status and trend information to support science-based and proactive fisheries management decisions for snapper and grouper in the Gulf of Mexico.
- \$3 million annual, recurring federal funds for implementation of the following permanent enhancements to Florida's recreational angler surveys:
 - 1) Increase the number of dockside angler interviews to better account for regional differences in recreational fishing: Through your support for a \$1 million appropriation, current dockside surveys have been improved. No other state surveyed by the national angler survey covers anywhere near as large and diverse an area as Florida. Within the two survey regions in Florida (east coast and west coast), recreational fisheries vary greatly. Additional enhancement to our current surveys will provide regional detail on fishing catch and effort necessary to manage Florida's unique and diverse fisheries.
 - 2) Statewide At-Sea Observer Coverage on Charter Boats and Headboats: Short-term studies where fisheries observers work cooperatively with the for-hire fishing industry to observe and record recreational fishing as it occurs on the water have been very well received in Florida. A statewide at-sea observer program requires long-term, stable funding to conduct surveys on charter boats and headboats (for-hire vessels carrying large parties) in every region of the state.
 - 3) Expand a Logbook Reporting Program for For-Hire Charter Boats and Headboats that fish for federally-managed species: Through your support, FWC received \$500,000 to implement a logbook reporting program for charter boats and headboats. The recreational for-hire industry is important to tourism and Florida's economy. Permanent implementation of logbook reporting combined with statewide at-sea observer coverage would provide the best possible data for this segment of Florida's recreational fisheries.