

**PUBLIC COMMENT SESSION
ST. AUGUSTINE, FLORIDA
JUNE 10, 2026**

MS. GUYAS: Good afternoon, everybody. Just a couple of comments on some of the things you all have been talking about this week. We support moving Amendment 61 forward. I couldn't agree more with Jessica's comments about the need to modernize the snapper grouper complex and its management. You know, most of these species are not actively managed. The ABCs and ACLs, when they were set for those species, they were not set very well informed, and we'll say it that way, and the catch data that we have on many of these species is also very uncertain.

I'm very supportive of the concept conversations about looking at ecosystem component status and removing species from federal management outright where it's appropriate, and so I just appreciate the committee's discussion on that.

On Regulatory Amendment 38, I thought the presentation by Allie was great. I appreciated the mean girls reference. If you know, you know. I suggest one thought was just to handle this similar to how HMS handles swordfish, and I was looking at their regulations, and it looks like headboats and charter boats are not explicitly defined. They kind of handle it more in a capacity-based situation, and I kind of think that will you'll find, when you're trying to define participation based on being in the headboat survey, it's going to present some issues, because you're going to boats that you would consider to be headboats that are not part of that survey, and I think it's going to create some confusion for customers, for enforcement, just keep it simple, right?

I'm okay with looking at exploring options looking at this across the recreational sector, but I'm also comfortable where the committee left this discussion, and, in the case of applying to all recreational, it will be helpful to know how that would affect stocks that have vessel limits.

On the spawning special management zones, I'm comfortable with the options that you all talked about there, and it would be nice to continue to get more robust information to document how area protections may be benefiting fish populations as a whole, similar to what FWC has done with Riley's Hump and the work that they're doing now at Western Dry Rocks.

I mean, if these areas are working, and providing benefits to fisheries, I mean, that is an important story to tell, and you need the data to do that, and it's a great opportunity also to collaborate with fishermen to gather that data, and so I do support keeping the sunset in there as well, to keep the urgency for getting that work done.

On dolphin, I know you all are going to talk about that tomorrow. We continue to hear concerns about changes in this fishery, and we now have a few scientific papers that provide evidence of some concerning trends, and so looking forward to the MSE discussion tomorrow, but I'm also a little concerned that waiting for the MSE process to run its course before considering management options means that it's going to be several years before any potential adjustments to regulations are made and actually go into effect on the water, and so that's all. Thank you.

MR. MOSS: Thank you, all. David Moss, from south Florida, and thank you for listening. I'll be brief. Really quickly, on Reg Amendment 38 -- I'm also a Snapper Grouper AP member, and

so hopefully -- I'm going to try to provide a little bit of clarity on 38, that you guys were talking about earlier, and also voice my support for this amendment.

One of the things on the AP that we had talked about was almost like a step-up, and so, basically, for every six people, you kind of get like another allowance of fish, and so, if you have eleven, you're still at two fish, but then, if you have twelve, you're at four fish, and so on and so forth, with a cap to twelve fish. That was the idea from the AP anyway.

Then we had some discussion on headboats, and how to define that, and it was basically, if you pay by the head, i.e., headboat, and that's how it's defined as a headboat. At any rate, I want to voice my support for that moving forward, and then the other thing I would like to talk about, very briefly, is the SMZ work, looking at that.

I know it's kind of a weird human socio thing to look at nice round numbers of every five to ten years, but perhaps if we could look at like a number like seven years, and that would be really nice, because it would still put it at the forefront to be able to investigate these areas, and see how productive they are, but then it also still serves that whole term limit, and, again, I'll emphasize the need for funding for that stuff.

As was talked about earlier, unfortunately, the funding cycle, it takes a good two to three years between looking for funds, processing the funds, and then actually going out to do the work, and then probably another year so to process all the science that you get from it, and so, if you could put that sunset at seven years, and look at that as an option, that would be great as well. Thank you.

MR. HORTON: Thank you, Madam Chair and council members. My name is Chris Horton, and I'm with the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, and my comments will be brief today as well. We support Councilman Spottswood's suggestion of exploring whether private vessels should also be included in the vessel limit discussion as it pertains to the number of anglers onboard. There should be equity across the recreational sector, whether you access the fishery from your own boat, a friend's boat, or pay a charter or head boat to take you to the fish. The premise of a public trust resource is that it belongs to us all equally.

Secondly, while I know it's neither the council nor NOAA's fault for the ill-timed and counterproductive lawsuit, of course, I have to mention our frustration with the EFPs and where they currently stand. They represent the best opportunity we have ever had to get out of an unacceptable management box by gathering the data we desperately need to better manage this fishery moving forward. They're also perhaps really the only chance I see to get instant angler buy-in to a state-led management system that they can trust.

Hopefully there's still going to be an opportunity to move the EFPs forward this summer, but, regardless, I urge the council to continue working on Amendment 62 and state-led red snapper management. As I've testified before this council, at least beginning three years ago, it's been hugely successful in the Gulf, and, with the close coordination between the states on their data collection programs from the beginning with these EFPs, I'm confident will be equally as successful in the South Atlantic, and we'll get there even faster, and so, again, thank you so much for your time and all that you all do for our fisheries.

MS. AINES: Good afternoon. I'm Alex Aines from Oceana, and I know you all will talk about this amendment tomorrow, but I want to first begin by thanking you for your work on Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 40. Oceana supports the continued development of this amendment to allow the use of black sea bass pots equipped with on-demand retrieval systems and seasonal nearshore closed areas.

We strongly support Alternative 2 under Action 1, including Subalternatives 2a and 2b, which altogether would remove the seasonal prohibition on harvest and possession of black sea bass in nearshore areas for pots equipped with on-demand retrieval systems and allow the use of these systems annually from November 1st through April 30th throughout the seasonal management area in the Southeast.

We appreciate the council's efforts to advance solutions that support both fishermen and marine wildlife. Amendment 40 represents an important opportunity to utilize innovative fishing practices that reduce entanglement risk for North Atlantic right whales, while still allowing fishermen continued access to important fishing grounds.

We also supported the recent recommendations from the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel regarding commercial trip limits. We agree there is no need to reduce the commercial black sea bass pot trip limit as part of this amendment. As discussed by the advisory panel, the fishery is unlikely to become a derby fishery, given the limited number of active endorsements, and reducing trip limits could make participation economically unviable for fishermen. For that reason, Oceana supports Alternative 1 under Action 2, maintaining the current 1,000-pound gutted weight trip limit.

Given the advisory panel discussion and support for maintaining existing trip limits, we also recommend revising the purpose and need statements to remove references to reducing commercial trip limits for black sea bass pots. More broadly, we encourage the council to consider removing Action 2 entirely from the amendment. The current record shows little support or need for reduced trip limits, and removing Action 2 would help streamline the amendment process and allow limited staff resources to remain focused on necessary alternatives and actions.

We appreciate the collaborative work on Amendment 40 among council members, staff, fishermen, and advisory panel members on what we see is a strong win-win approach for both marine wildlife conservation and fishing communities. Thank you for your time and consideration.

MR. MERRIFIELD: Good afternoon. My name is Mike Merrifield. I own a commercial seafood dock, seafood processing and distribution facility, and a retail market. Everything my company does revolves around receiving seafood from commercial fishermen and providing quality seafood to American consumers. It's often overlooked that the commercial sector and seafood consumer, whether at home or at restaurants, are directly connected. We work every day to provide fresh, local, wild-caught seafood to the public.

I'm going to kind of address the elephant in the room here, and this is regarding the red snapper EFPs. I submitted public comment in support of the EFPs, but only if they included catch limits and accountability measures. The MSA requires catch limits and accountability measures to

prevent overfishing and ensure long-term sustainability. Without them, overfishing becomes inevitable and risks setting this fishery back another decade.

Since the closure of the red snapper fishery in 2010, I have consistently advocated for cooperative research and greater use of state-collected data. The states have the boots on the ground to collect the recreational information, and recreational fishermen should be willing and required to report their catch and fishing efforts. Accurate data is essential to good management.

Our goal should be to maximize sustainable harvest, while working towards zero discards and eliminating the waste of this valuable resource. Cancellation of the recreational EFP just hours before the opening was a travesty, and I sympathize with the many small businesses who, like my own, depend on these fisheries for their livelihoods, and it's unfortunate that management failures brought us to that point.

It's also important to recognize that the red snapper annual catch limit is reduced by dead discards, primarily from the recreational sector, before allocations are made. After that deduction, 28 percent is allocated to commercial, and 72 percent to the recreational. These sectors should be accountable for their own dead discards. The current system has cost the American seafood consumer millions of pounds of seafood, and commercial fishermen millions of dollars over the past fifteen years.

I support the Magnuson-Stevens Act and its principles of accountability. Everyone who accesses this shared resource should be accountable to it. We must continue improving the science, utilizing the best available data, and holding managers and scientists accountable, so we can achieve maximum sustainable yield and provide lasting benefits to all fishermen and the American public. I would like to thank all of you for the hard work and time that you put into this council process, and thank you for the time listening to my comment. Thank you.

MS. STEPHENS: Hi. I'm Herlinda from PowerPoint, here to talk to you about headboat vessel limits. I'm just kidding. My name is Haley Stephens. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to be here today.

We truly appreciate the council's continued consideration of Amendment 38. We support the alternative of two fish for every six paying passengers for gag grouper. It is a modest reasonable solution that works within the numbers, while recognizing the realities of our fisheries. If you think back to the original advisory panel recommendation, which is before I came along, this was brought forward as a headboat economic rescue initiative.

There is a saying that hurt people hurt people, and right now there is a lot of hurt in our fishing communities, for a lot of different reasons, and I've seen it on your faces this week, and I've heard it in your voices, too. Just a few short hours before our red snapper season was set to begin, I had the privilege of telling hundreds of customers that it was no longer happening. These are families who had taken time off of work, and they had booked hotel rooms, made travel plans, and, most importantly, trusted us.

Then I was the one standing on the dock taking the yelling, the frustration, and the anger. My customers didn't deserve that. My business didn't deserve that, and my family definitely did not

deserve that, and the truth is you guys were stuck in an old way of thinking, an old way of managing, and an old way of fighting with each other.

It's not working. It's not working. I understand that my perspective is not a common one. I'm a thirty-year-old mom in this fishery who is trying every day to raise good humans, while also bending over backwards to do the right thing by the resource. I've welcomed cooperative research aboard, even when it's inconvenient. I show up to meetings, and I encourage others to get involved, and I drive my rusty truck, with almost 300,000 miles on it, across state lines because I still believe this process can matter.

I've done everything that is asked of us, and somehow it still isn't good enough, and so all I ask of you is to put yourself in my shoes. Our summer season is totally shot because of this, and continuing down the same path is not going to solve anything for anyone. We need something different.

I've always believed there's a simple way to create change, and that is leave things better than when you found them. You can interpret that however you would like. When I think about it, it's about this process, and it's about our brothers and sisters in this room and who are working in our fishery every day. Leave things better than when you found them. I know it's not going to get -- It's not easy, and it's not going to be easy, and it's never been easy, but it's time to get to work. As always, thank you for your time.

MR. MALONE: I'm Paul Malone with the Jacksonville Offshore Sportfishing Club. I'm also the reef director of that club as well, which we just got their first reef is going to be deployed here soon, and so that's some good stuff for us.

I just got it from Fort Myers, and so I didn't have a whole preparation here, but I do want to make a few comments, that you're going to hear about the economic impact of what the fisheries do for us from plenty of the people here, what that last-minute cancellation, how many people took off work, time, the thousands of dollars they spent, to just be canceled the day before, and so there's a lot of commitments by people in our community to join this season, to just be shut down the last minute.

One of the -- I really want to kind of speak on the commonsense of it, and so I was lucky enough to be participating in a few of the exempted fishing permits that we've had over the last couple years, and our red snapper fishery is not suffering by any means, I think -- Now this is a loose quote, but we had thirty-six fish twenty-seven minutes, and these were all healthy, healthy, healthy fish, and these were fifteen-pound-plus fish.

I know the goal is to get old fish, but we were able to provide that data to the FWC, and so my comment, and my question, to the closure of this is that the FWC's exempted fishing permit put forward for more data collection. It's a study to get more accurate, real-time data, and so why would there be a closure to this, to get more accurate, real-time data through our fishing communities, and not just studying the fish themselves, the age of the fish, the size of fish et cetera, and it also was put together to study our fisheries, how many fishermen are going, who is fishing, what boats are fishing on. It's an all-encompassing study.

The comment I have is coming back to why is there a closure when this EFP was put together as a study to get more data, to hopefully open up fisheries, and/or better management of our fisheries under its current design, and that's all I've got for today. Thank you.

MR. WILLINGHAM: I'm Darren Willingham from the Jacksonville Offshore Sportfishing Club. I have been with that club for over twenty years, and I'm the president at the current time. I'm going to be talking about the exempted fishing permit loss that we took recently. The most recent 2026 exempting exempted fishing permit idea was a well thought-out plan to give recreational anglers along the South Atlantic new opportunities to harvest red snapper while providing new data.

The thirty-nine-day Florida and the sixty-two-day North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia season was being approached from a data collection fisheries scientific standpoint. It was part of the exempted fishing permit design to keep annual catch limits and overfishing concerns in mind, regardless of what this lawsuit that was put forward has said to that judge.

FWC, through NOAA Fisheries research grant funding, had already proven that the exempted fishing permit data collection techniques were working. FWC used the first-year EFP data to adjust the second-year EFP parameters, dropping -- As an example, dropping the fifteen-fish bag limit to a ten-fish bag limit. I mean, that data was working. It was being assessed in real time, and so you would think the next logical approach was to increase our 2026 South Atlantic recreational angler season and collect clean, non-biased, non-flawed data, versus using the old admittedly flawed data, free from commercial fishing prejudices and then the continued non-provable assumptions of the amount of dead discards.

Nobody can say exactly what is dying out there, unless you count the ones on the surface, and you know that Return 'Em Right has been working strongly, over the last couple years, to teach us how to return them right, and then you take that good data and fine-tune -- You take that 2026 good data, and then you fine-tune the 2027, and then the 2028 red snapper seasons.

The commercial fishing groups that sued NOAA Fisheries during the Biden era -- Back in 2023, they found a judge to side with them, and tried to force NOAA Fisheries to impose a three-month bottom fishing closure, which almost worked, and had it not been for the President Trump-era Secretary of Commerce stopping that.

The same disgruntled group of commercial fishermen, with the same California-based lawyer, teamed up with the Southeastern Fisheries Association, claiming that there was a perceived hardship, and negative outcomes. Well, we have real, not perceived, hundreds of thousands of dollars of loss to our for-hire captains, fishing charters, and our local bait and tackle shops. This process reeks of political motivations, corruption, and personal hidden agendas. We ask the South Atlantic Council to please be there and support us. Thank you.

MR. YOUNG: Good afternoon. Captain Dennis Young with Sea Dancer Charters out of Jacksonville, Florida. I'm an eighty-year-old captain. I've been doing this for sixty-one years. I've been with this red snapper fishery for that long. I've seen it come and go. Matter of a fact, the first meeting I had with the council was in 1987, when there are three members. It has grown, hasn't it?

Anyway, our red snapper population then was almost zero. The fishery council kept telling us that their size limit at twelve inches was great, and we kept seeing a continual depreciation of the fishery. It took five years before they gave us twenty inches, and two years -- By 1994, we were swimming in twenty-inch red snapper. By 2008, they were all over the place. In 2010, you guys closed it, because they said we were overfishing it.

Okay, and we then we ran into a data problem. Everybody kept saying data, data, data. Okay, and, a couple years of ago, if I'm not mistaken, the council came out and said we're probably 40 percent off on our estimates. Our fishermen kept telling you that the fish were there. Okay, and then, all of a sudden, we have a dead bycatch issue.

Okay, the discards, and so they kept it closed, and they keep our days open only two days a year, and, you know, the two days a year came in the middle of the reproductive cycle. It doesn't make sense. It's not common sense to open the fishery in a reproductive cycle for the fishery.

We handle the fish every day, and we draw those fish down. We see the roe. I have dove, in 1988, in seventy feet of water, and watched the reproductive cycle occur. I've seen the eggs come out of the females and the males spray the eggs. I understand how the fishery works, and July is not the best time to do an open fishery for red snapper.

Another thing is we have a problem with dead bycatch, okay, and I'm a retired Navy officer. I drove a ship. If we saw a problem on the ship. we fixed it. You guys are driving this ship. If you see a problem, let's fix it. Education, educating the general public on how to take care of those fish, once you get them in the boat and get them back in the water, and why not have yourself a team that goes around the east coast and do that? Educate the general public on what they need to do to save the fish.

The biggest thing was we've always tried to protect the large fish, because we understand that is the engineering department for the reproductive cycle. They produce the most eggs of anything out there, okay, and why we want to kill those fish when we have red snapper tournaments coming open and when they open up?

I know you've probably seen the Oh Snap! thing advertised on Facebook, and I think those people need to be shut down, and the way you can do it is by giving us what we asked the FWC to do years ago, was the twenty to twenty-eight-inch slot limit for red snapper. That would allow the big fish to reproduce, fill in the bottom end of the slot, and then the slot would -- The fish would go in the slot. It makes common sense to do that.

MS. MURPHEY: If you could wrap it up, please?

MR. YOUNG: I'm sorry, ma'am?

MS. MURPHEY: If you could wrap it up, please?

MR. YOUNG: I can't hear you.

MS. MURPHEY: Could you wrap it up, please?

MR. YOUNG: Wrap it up? I'm sorry. I didn't know. I didn't know how much time limit, but, anyhow, why not be more aggressive what you're doing, and educate the community, open the seasons at up the right time, okay, and let these fish reproduce, and that fishery will sustain itself. Thank you.

MR. HARDESTY: Good afternoon. My name is Mark Hardesty. I come to the table owning a bait and tackle store locally. I also have a business in Venice, Louisiana, and so I can see the difference between the Gulf of America and the Atlantic management.

I will tell you that, this lawsuit, I kind of look at it from a different perspective, because I have an unlimited snapper grouper permit as well. I'm a recreational fisherman, and I have a commercial license, and I have these businesses involved, and I'll tell you the mismanagement, the legacy of the mismanagement, of the federal fisheries has been astounding over the years. It has cost business owners, and it has cost residents, citizens, and commercial fishermen dearly, all across the board.

This lawsuit I believe has ripped the band-aid off of what the problem is in a political setting now, and I am hoping that our politicians, along with our citizens, and we see a groundswell of uprising now, in my opinion, will help make a playing field where we can repeal or significantly amend the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

I will tell you that the chaos and confusion of the regulations that have come down from federal fisheries has been astounding over the years, and that has contributed to the entire mess that is going on today. This lawsuit, and why it was caused, by the mismanagement of the federal fisheries, has put this thing in full perspective, and has cost my bait shop dearly, because of lost sales.

It has cost charter captains dearly, because of lost bookings and that sort of thing, and there are real people involved in this. It is not simply a game of numbers. It is also a personal thing to many of us here, and that's why you see a crowd here, and then you can just go on social media and get a real snapshot of the impact that lack of serious management has as caused.

I will tell you watching the State of Louisiana navigate this has been an inspiration, and I think it's been an inspiration to the State of Florida, to finally cast an eye on what does work, and how it does work, and I am hoping that you guys either get the act together, so that we can go ahead and have a season such as Louisiana does in the Gulf of America. Otherwise, we're in a failed system, and so thank you very much.

MR. HAGEN: Hello. My name is Dave Hagan. I would like to thank the council for all the hard work they do. I have several comments. In case you think I don't know what I'm talking about, I've got twenty boats that fish from Key West all the way to south of Manteo, and I keep a close eye on what all my boats do. I have several dive boats, and, way back when, there used to be a thing of the silent heart attack that was killing everybody.

Well, I can tell you right now that, if you all don't get a hold of these lionfish, you're going to lose your jobs, because they are ravenous. They spawn six times a year, and they eat everything in sight. I've been working with a PhD biologist at South Florida University, and it -- I'm telling you that I had one boat harvest 265 pounds in one day. They're out there everywhere.

Speaking of menaces, we've got the tax man, and that's the sharks. The recreational fishermen will tell you they hook up, and, as soon as that red snapper starts making that circle, that first circle, bam, the tax man gets him, and so it's a waste of fish, and that's all political too, because some federal senator got it passed that you can't move shark fins across state lines, and so there's no shark fishing, and so you can't make a living without selling the fins. There's no demand for sharks.

I would also like to see, and I've heard it might be, and I would also like to see if the council can get approved 1,500 pounds of beeliners. That would greatly help all my fishermen's financial situations.

Another thing is a two-for-one. I don't know where you all stand on two-for-one, or leaving the original permits and making them transferable, and I've got no reason one way or the other about that. You all do what you want, and, whatever you do, I'll take it to heart, and I'll make it work for me.

Then you've got the commercial versus recreational, and what a lot of these recreational people do not realize is that, however many fish the recreational people catch, and catch over the limit, that amount is subtracted from the commercial end. They're already getting from -- I may be wrong, but I think -- Don't the recreational get like 72 percent of the red snapper harvest, and the commercial people get 28, and they're saying, hey, it's the commercial, it's commercial, it's commercial.

Well, the last two or three years, Florida opened a season for recreational fishermen, and they had three days to catch their limit, and then they want to raise hell because they didn't get thirteen-times the amount of fish, which would have directly confronted all my boats. I've got a lot more I can say, but I see I'm red. Thank you so much.

MR. BROWN: Thank you very much. My name is Brian Brown. I'm a recreational fisherman, boat owner, and avid angler, and I'm in support of moving the ARS management back to the state level. Data is the most valuable commodity now. Every grocery store collects your data, all your online clicks is your data, and so our fisheries data is important to the fisheries management, and how is this data obtained? It's collected by FWC.

The last couple of years, I've been fortunate enough to have one EFP permit one quarter, and had a couple friends get it, and, each quarter, we were very successful in obtaining red snapper and providing that data to FWC. The EFP, that was a great opportunity to get real-time data back into the models, to better your management decisions.

Florida has shown that they can manage these ARS stocks on the Gulf side, and are more than qualified to run management and data collection on the Atlantic side. The closure in 2010 has definitely increased not only the quantity of fish, but also the quality of the fish, so good that it's starting, in my opinion, to affect other fish stocks.

Just this past week, and we were pre-fishing for a kingfish tournament coming up this weekend, and, while slow trolling across most inshore wrecks, all we could catch were red snapper, and that's on live topwater baits, ribbon fish down, and everything was red snapper.

Just yesterday, I was offshore fishing, in 110 feet of water, and we watched red snapper come to the surface and feed under the baits and crabs and shrimp floating underneath all the sargassum out there. Floats would drift by, and they would come up. It would go down, and they would go down. We've got too many of them, and we need to collect the data, and we need to get it into the right models to make better management decisions. I thank you for your time, and I'm done. Thank you.

MR. JOHNSON: I'm Captain Robert Johnson, Jody Lynn Charters here in St. Augustine, and I've been involved with this process for almost twenty years. I first got involved when the council was considering implementing Amendment 17, which would have been a complete closure to bottom fishing off of St. Augustine, and here, years later, we're talking about Amendment 59. It always seems like it's where I live, and I'm being penalized for living in a great place, with a great red snapper fishery.

I really have tried to work within the framework of the council and the process, and I was on the AP, and I did a bunch of different SEDARs, for everything from menhaden to red snapper, and I really think it's time to move beyond the council. I think Florida really needs to take control of its own fishery.

We have 63 percent of the South Atlantic federal for-hire permits, and we also have 67 percent of all commercial snapper grouper permits. Those are huge numbers, yet -- Not to pick on the states to the north of us, but many times I've watched council members vote in favor of these closures that would penalize where I live, and no effect to their fishermen and their economies.

I also would like to point out, and it's just my opinion, and I'm not an attorney, that it seems like National Standard 1 is being violated, because it routinely blocks meaningful harvest, while allowing dead discard mortality to continue, and I feel like National Standard 2 is also in play there, because the best scientific available data is the FWC's reef fish survey, and why aren't we using best scientific available? I mean, I heard that time and time again, that that's required.

National Standard 4, fair and equitable allocation, I don't think closing fishing where I live is fair and equitable at all. I could go on and on. The bottom line is it's just not working. Florida is the backbone of the fishery, and not bragging, but we are the fishery.

We are the majority of the stakeholders, and it's our -- The dollar amount to our economy is almost double the other three states combined, and yet we're always the one taking the brunt, and so maybe it's time for our state to take the lead and manage it, and I'm not just talking about red snapper. I'm talking about all of the reef fish. We have the ability, and we have law enforcement, and we have programs in place. I think it's time. I think the fishermen will be willing.

I mean, this lawsuit that closed down this EFP, which was going to be more restrictive -- I mean, we went from a twenty-fish recreational bag limit to a ten-fish reef fish limit, and fishermen were willing to do that. They were willing to declare their trips and say, hey, this is when I'm leaving, and this is when I'm coming back. All of these things that this council has always wanted was right there, and I know you all didn't do the lawsuit, but I'm telling you it's time for a change of course. Thank you.

MR. WELSH: Hello, council. My name is Robert Welch. I'm a commercial fisherman from Ponce Inlet, Daytona Beach, and I hold an unlimited snapper grouper permit as well as a king mackerel permit. I've been commercial fishing for over forty years, and so I've been here for quite some time. I've longline sharks, and I've longlined tilefish, and I've wreck fished, and I've snapper fished, until 2009, and now I primarily target king mackerel.

I support the Magnuson-Stevens Act. I would not support state management of fisheries in federal waters. The fisheries need to be fair and equitable. I feel that, if the state gets control of the fisheries in federal waters, it would be the end of commercial fishing as we know it. I understand that this council is no longer involved in the EFPs, but I don't support them, and I do hope the law continues to be upheld.

The public deserves access to fresh local seafood. Last year, the President issued an executive order to restore American competitive seafood competitiveness, and I support these efforts to reduce burdens on domestic commercial fleets and increase production.

Switching gears, as for Amendment 60, I support doing away with the two-for-one permits. I hold a corporate unlimited snapper grouper permit, and, although I have nothing to gain from this personally, I feel the need to allow more access to the snapper grouper fishery, to help support what little bit of infrastructure we have that currently exists in the commercial fishery. That being said, a minute and forty-five seconds, and that's it.

MR. DASH: My name is Mark Dash. I'm a native Floridian, sixty-nine years old, and I have been fishing and diving since I was a wee lad here in Florida. I know it very well. I fish both coasts, primarily the Brevard County area, Sebastian Inlet, Canaveral, and up into Ponce, but, to a lesser extent, I do to go to West Palm occasionally.

I know scientific evidence of fish population is something that we all need, especially this council, and I can't give you that, but I can give you anecdotal evidence, and I'm going to give you that now.

MR. SMILLIE: Mark, it appears we have lost your -- We lost your connection for a second, but it just popped back up.

MR. DASH: Okay, and so I don't know what you heard, and maybe you can give me another twenty seconds then.

MR. SMILLIE: You were starting with anecdotal evidence.

MR. DASH: Yes, and I have anecdotal evidence. I'm primarily a spear fisherman, and so I see this with my own eyes, as does the rest of my team, and so, number one, red snapper. The population has absolutely exploded. In the 1990s, we would catch them occasionally in very deep water, 150 to 300 feet, and we would never see him less than a hundred feet.

Today, and over the last ten to fifteen years, it's incredible how many of there are. About half the fish, I would say, and, again, I'm seeing these with my own eyes, they're in the three to ten-pound

range, but the other half is just tremendous fish, ten to twenty-five-pound fish. They're the dominant predator on the reef, in terms of what I'll call a gamefish.

The next one is sharks, and I'll talk about sharks. Their population has exploded. In the 1990s, we would rarely see a shark. We would see a few nurse sharks, but, bulls and sandy, we would see very few, one out of every ten dives, and now we see them on every dive, and they're extremely aggressive, both while spearfishing and fishing. If you don't get that fish to the boat, or in your hands, and in your bag, they'll take it away from you. They have become dangerous, and we have to abort dive sometimes, because there's so many of them, and they get so aggressive.

Goliath grouper, that population is crazy. I was out there diving yesterday, and I probably saw twenty goliath on three different dives. They're huge, and there are some small ones, fifty to a hundred pounds, but most of them are 200 to 400 pounds. A dramatic increase in that population.

What is a dramatic decrease is the black sea bass population, and I guarantee it's linked to the growth of the populations in red snapper, sharks, and goliath. We used to see them all the time, and now they're very rare. There very few black sea bass.

I'm not really going to talk about lionfish, and somebody else did, and they're absolutely right. That's a foreign invader, and we kill as many as we can, but there's just a ton of them, and so I just wanted to give you that view, that anecdotal data if you will, from a diver standpoint, who can -- Who sees this first hand, and I hope that you will consider extending the catch, both limits and season, on red snapper, and on sharks as well. They're out of control.

I also offer, from the diving community, if there's any way we can help provide scientific data to you, count fish, or whatever is required, and we see them with our own eyes, and we could do it photographically, and with logs and charts, et cetera. Thanks for listening.

MS. HARRISON: I just want to say a big congratulations to the council for probably making the biggest mess that I've ever seen you all make. It is honestly astounding to be where we're at right now with this EFP red snapper issue, and you all had it on the table, was it four years ago now, to solve the issue, and you all couldn't make the tough decision, and so the commercial industry had to make the tough decision and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, that we really don't have, to fight it in court, because you all won't listen to the law staff that you have sitting around the table, and you won't listen to your own people. You guys just listen to the people who benefit you the most, and it's getting to be so frustrating.

I was in the Law Enforcement Advisory Panel meeting, trying to get somewhere with the tournament king mackerel issue and the safety regulations, and I was told, by my law enforcement panel, a direct quote, which you all can go look in the minutes for, that they did not know what to tell me about the council making regulations that were in direct violation of federal law, and I should consult an attorney, and so you all get scared now that you know that somebody went and consulting an attorney, and pushed back against you, and now you have this giant mess, because you did something you shouldn't have been doing.

Why can't you all just help the fish, help the fishermen, help people go out and access these fisheries, instead of making giant messes and causing us to be hated? You know, I can't go out in town, and I can't go out to dinner, and I can't go to the docks, because I'm associated with the commercial industry, and we're hated, because we stood up for what was right, and we stood up for the fisheries, and we stood up for our communities, and now we are the bad guy, and you all just sit there in your fancy meetings saying you don't have resources to do anything.

Well, you had the resources to put us out of business, over and over and over again, and so my question to you all is when are you going to get everything taken from us? When will it be enough for this council? Do you want every commercial boat tied to the dock forever? What is your angle, because that's where we're headed, and it's so, so sad, and I don't have anything else to comment on, and I really -- Like I can't even look at the agenda anymore, because it's just smoke and mirrors.

Nothing on that agenda means anything, and it's what you all discuss at the bar after the meeting that means something, and, you know, we're not privy to those discussions, and so I believe that now is the time for the council to stand up and say, you know, we're going to do what's best for the fisheries, even if people get mad at us, if we get bad comments, and we are going to do what's right for the fisheries.

I'm thirty-two years old, and you all haven't done anything in my lifetime that's going to benefit me in the next thirty years, or benefit my children, and it's really sad, because I don't think there's going to be anything left for them. I guess you all have a decision in front of you now on how you want to proceed, and history -- Do you want to be on the right side of history or the wrong side of history?

MR. REESE: My name is Dylan Reese, and I'm a recreational fisherman. I live in South Carolina. I also do a lot of fishing out of Ponce Inlet, and I just wanted to comment today about, you know, the mismanagement of red snapper, and then also the EFP situation going on, as well as a couple of different things.

I think it's definitely time for us to look at trying to be able to harvest sandbar sharks, as it was a -- One of the other commenter said something about the shark fin market, and, you know, that that is something that is important to look at, because it is very, very difficult to get a fish up to the surface without having it predated on by a shark, and then, when you look at the dead discard issues, you know, that kind of plays into it, and it really just compounds the facts.

You know, I've got two young children that both love to fish, and the situation with red snapper has been extremely difficult and frustrating for them to understand, you know, hey, this is all we're catching, but we can't keep a single one of them. They both love to eat fish, but we can't keep anything, because really all we can find, a lot of times, is red snapper, or we can try to push that a little bit further and try to catch grouper, but now we can't even keep many grouper. You know, it's really frustrating, as a recreational fisherman, to spend all that money and time and everything only to be, you know, kind of shut out.

Then, also, you know with the black sea bass situation, you know, the black sea bass holes have all been taken over by red snapper. You know, luckily, we find a keeper here and there sometimes in the wintertime, but, in the summertime, it's hard to find the fish.

You know, it's hard, as a parent, and as somebody who has grown up fishing, and has had children that have been fishing, since they were young ages, on, you know, party boats such as the Sea Spirit or other charters down in the Florida area, to where, you know, they -- They grew up doing that, and they're getting discouraged in fishing, because we can't figure out a way to manage this one fish, and it has compounded the entire fishery, you know, between snapper, grouper, and black bass, and it's all it's all tied in together.

It's really frustrating to hear people complain about, oh, well, the commercial fishermen only get 28 percent of the catch, but look at the ones where they have 90 percent of the allocation, you know, with the wreckfish, the golden tilefish, and I think snowy grouper is another one. You know, there's a 90 percent allocation to one sector, but our getting a 70 percent of allocation is an issue, you know, and it's -- We spent money to go down to Florida for the opening of the red snapper season, and, the day before we left, we can't even fish for them anymore, and so it's like what are we even doing here? It's just kind of like pissing in the wind, and I appreciate the work that you guys do, but we really need to figure this out, and that's all I have to comment.

MR. LOCKE: Charlie Locke here, and I'm a commercial fisherman from Wanchese, North Carolina. I guess I'm one of those disgruntled commercial fishermen, and I just want my comment -- You know, I'm trying not to lose hope in this process.

I've been very involved with the council on Spanish mackerel and other issues, and I'm a snapper grouper fisherman as well, and, you know, we had these port meetings recently, and I talked to Chairman Murphey, and I asked her point blank about the EFPs, and I said are we going to get anything on the commercial side, and she hesitantly said no, but she said it in a way that I could tell she probably thought it was a raw deal we were getting, or at least I'm hoping that's what she was thinking.

I guess my comment is I'm from Florida originally, and I've been up here thirty-four years in North Carolina. I have a lot of roots still in Florida. I used to go down there and fish a lot. I got my license from, you know, the FWC, and you've got Chairman McCawley, who is a state representative, but she represents the commercial and the recreational fishermen of that state, just like Chairman Murphey represents the commercial and the recreational fishermen of my state, and I feel like, you know, we were left out of this process. The commercial industry was left out of this whole EFP discussion, and that's why this lawsuit happened, and that's where the fair and equitable part is.

It's not really a quota thing, and it's not really allocation and all this and that, and it's that it just wasn't fair, and, you know, I represent not only commercial fishermen, but the seafood consumer that that depends on the product that I produce, and I feel like -- You know, you had one commenter talk about a public trust resource, and it is, and I'm the access to the public that doesn't harvest their own snapper, and doesn't have a boat, and doesn't have the means.

There's a lot of people, and there's a lot of stakeholders, that are left out of these -- You know, when you have state representatives, like McCawley and Murphey, pushing forward an EFP that only is going to benefit the recreational sector, you're not talking for all of your constituents, all the people that depend on fishing.

It's the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, and it's the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, and it's commercial and recreational, and it's all user groups, and so I will challenge this council to go back to the drawing board, and do your EFPs, but include us in it. We can get good data from the recreational. I was for these EFPs, and I spoke up for them. We can get good data for the EFPs, and go back to the drawing board and present something that's going to work for both of us.

I will take observers with me on every trip, and give us an increased trip limit on the red snapper, and let us compare the discard rates, recreational and commercial, but just don't leave us out of the equation again. That's what this is really -- It's really the crux of the lawsuit, is we were just completely left out of the equation, and we've all suffered under this. We've all suffered since 2009.

It was as good red snapper fishing as it's ever been in northeast Florida, and I will reiterate this too before my minutes run out. In July, they're spawning. They're full of roe. Having this EFP during a full-on spawn is crazy to me, when we're trying to rebuild the stock, and so I would reiterate what another person said about that. They're spawning in July, and we shouldn't be fishing for them. I'm out of time, and I appreciate everything you all are doing for us. Thanks.

MS. BRUGER: Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to comment. I'm unable to travel this week, and I'm sorry that I couldn't be there with you in-person. I'm Catherine Bruger, and I'm manager for Fish Conservation for Ocean Conservancy, based in Florida, where my work focuses on ensuring sustainable fisheries and fishing communities, recreational management, and data modernization.

I have just a few comments that I wanted to speak out loud to the council, and, for the record, first, Ocean Conservancy supports efforts to improve data collection, including the RAPID initiative to transform the data collection enterprise. We reiterate that the National Recreational Fishing Survey and data collection standards are critical for any new program to achieve.

Turning to red snapper, we share the SSC's concerns regarding the downward catch per unit effort trends across a number of species from the Southeast Reef Fish Survey, especially as discussions about managing red snapper evolve. To be clear, this is in contrast to the highly-publicized claims that red snapper abundance is at a lifetime high, which has already occurred, and is likely in decline.

The council's own SSC explicitly states, quote: "Overall, the team did not identify anything that could explain the downward trend in CPUE other than a reduction in the fish abundance in the survey region", end quote. In addition, there are long-standing concerns about overreliance on high-recruitment events that are unlikely to persist. Combined, these trends indicate that the stock cannot support extremely high catch levels.

Ocean Conservancy would also like to underscore that, with respect to integrating new data, the fact is the 2025 season projection included Florida data in replacement of the MRIP general survey, and this has been the case for several years. The same Florida data source that was used to predict a two-day season also estimates that landings from private anglers alone were 23,734 fish. The catch limit is 22,797 red snapper.

Florida state data was used to predict the 2025 season, and state data shows that the 2025 catch limit was exceeded in just two days, before including landings from charter boats and other states, and without accounting for the impact of the three discard reduction EFPs that operated in 2025.

In conclusion, because future management remains uncertain, Ocean Conservancy urges a precautionary approach, in order to head off the prospect of overfishing and secure access to the fishery in future seasons. That's all I have, and thank you for your time.

MR. JONES: Good afternoon to all in attendance. Captain Chris Jones, Jacksonville Offshore Sportfishing Club, Past President, and I just want to start with the comments from Captain Dennis Young. I absolutely agree about that July may not be the best time for all the tournaments, snapper and everything of that nature.

I most anglers understand the need for conversations, and want to do what's right for the fishery, in my opinion. I think, instead of continued closures, let's find a way that we can gather better information and work together. The people who do find time on the water, and many of them are in attendance, from in and out of state, should be part of the conversation and the alignment of trying to get this right. More anglers input, continuing with the data collection and willingness to adjust management, would be available, I believe.

You know, at the end, and listening to the comments, I believe we're all in it, and that we want the same thing, a healthy red snapper population. However, that's fair opportunity for all of us to enjoy, and, as the young lady has said, in the generations to come, and, in closing, I don't think the answer is keeping the fishery closed year after year. It's continuing to listen to anglers that you have today, and finding a better balanced approach that protects resources, while allowing responsible access. Thank you all, and I was excited for my comments, and so the Christopher Jones and Chris Jones is the same person. Thank you.

MR. PARSELL: Good afternoon, council. My name is Steven Parsell. I'm recreational angler, basically fishing most of my time out of Ponce Inlet, Florida, and I fully support Amendment 38, increasing gag grouper limits. The headboats utilize the best fishing practices, with descending devices and venting equipment, and so there's really no reason, you know, not to support this amendment give the headboats -- People like me, you know, when you go on a boat, it's -- You know, you've got fifty people, and, you know, if you're only allowed to gag grouper, that really ain't fair to the rest of the people on the boat.

I was also on the receiving side of the red snapper EFP closure. I had spent a lot of money on fishing gear, bait, food, and booked multiple trips, and, all at the last minute, it was just all yanked from me, and it just wasn't right. I just wanted to share my opinions. Thank you for your time.

MR. GARDNER: I just want my opinion to be known that, down here where I'm at, we're throwing back twenty or more gags a day, and it's very difficult, with fifty people on the boat, to have to keep doing this over and over, when there's nothing wrong with the gag population here.

(Whereupon, the public comment session was adjourned.)

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PC 6/10/24

First	Last	Suffix	Affiliation
Trish	Murphey	✓	NC Division of Marine Fisheries
Jessica	McCawley	✓	Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Robert	Beal	✓	Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission
Carolyn	Belcher	✓	GA DNR Coastal Resources Division
Gary	Borland		
Amy	Dukes	✓	SC DNR Marine Resources Division
Judy	Helmey	✓	
Francis (Dewey)	Hemilright	✓	
James	Hull	✓	
Kerry	Marhefka	✓	
Tom	Pease		Seventh Coast Guard District
Charlie	Phillips	✓	
Tom	Roller	✓	
Robert	Spottswood	Jr. ✓	
Andy	Strelcheck	✓	NOAA Fisheries Southeast Region
Deirdre	Warner-Kramer		Office of Marine Conservation OES / OMC
TBD	TBD		U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Representative

John Natter

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