

**PUBLIC COMMENT SESSION
JEKYLL ISLAND, GEORGIA
MARCH 5, 2025**

MR. ZALES, II: Bob Zales II, Southeastern Fisheries Association. The thing this afternoon at 5:00 saved me a lot of time here. I'm not going to talk about 59 right now. The rock shrimp issue, and that was kind of new to me, with my just coming to these meetings a little over a year ago. I would encourage you all to fast track trying to get the rock shrimp area to where the guys in northeast Florida can fish again. Apparently, it was promised to them that that would be fixed, and be done, and so I don't know, and we're a few years down the road since that happened, and so it would be nice, because a lot of those people depend on that fishery.

I'm going to get into some of the data stuff. Amendment 46, for the private rec permit, I would encourage you, rather than trying to do this thing for a fishery, like for snapper grouper, wahoo, dolphin, whatever, but do a permit for federal fishing, regardless of what you're fishing for. If you're going to fish in federal waters, you're going to have to have that permit.

You could -- In the Gulf, they're kind of playing with this, and you could, I think, tie this into state licenses, to have the state licenses just have a requirement that, if you're going to fish in federal waters, you have some kind of addendum, or some kind of endorsement on there, so that you do that, because the key to that, in my mind, is to be able to have a way to determine the effort in federal waters for fishing for whatever species is out there that they're fishing for, so that we can improve the data for all that, and that would help try to eliminate some of the problems that we're in with 59.

On for-hire permitting, I'm going to still encourage you to require limited access, limited permits, for the for-hire fishery, which would include charters and headboats, because you need that limited access. That program has worked extremely well in the Gulf of Mexico, and I think it will work here. Those kind of permits -- It doesn't reduce effort, but it simply caps it. It keeps it from increasing, so that you limit the effort that's out there, because clearly the problems that you're experiencing with snapper grouper now is because of excess effort, and the same thing needs to be done with the private fishery.

I would also encourage the Fisheries Service, and you all, to work to expedite the SEFHIER program, to try to get that up and running, so that you have a very easy, simple cell-phone-type thing that people can use. Everybody has got a cell phone in their pocket, and so that's an easy way to do that, and that would help provide the better data to do it. You need the hail-outs, and you need to hail-in. People need to know when you're out there fishing, to be able to get that data, and, other than that, I'm almost done, and so thank you all very much.

MR. WILLINGHAM: I'm Darrin Willingham. I'm the Vice President of the Jacksonville Offshore Sport Fishing Club down in Jacksonville, Florida, and my comments are not to be anything towards any individual. It's more of the concerns of organizations that we have been fighting with over the years.

So I -- About three years ago, or maybe two-and-a-half years ago, I was before this council down in St. Augustine, Florida, and I asked you guys to help me get back to the members of our club to not despise the members of this council. I will say that the South Atlantic Fishery Management

Council -- When you guys stood up to the pressures of NOAA Fisheries and would not make a decision, back in -- Was it November or December of 2023, but when you guys held steadfast and realized that the data that's out there for the red snapper is flawed, and we applauded you.

We still applaud your decisions to this day. I know there are new faces on this council right now, but the people that were before you were amazing, and there's still folks on this council that were steadfast and not being pushed into those decisions.

I realize that NOAA Fisheries is being sued. They got sued, and they had to come up with something, because they had five of these commercial fishermen that got a good lawyer, or some kind of lawyer, up in North Carolina, and then they forced them to go into a settlement agreement.

Please, guys, understand that, when you guys make a recommendation from the South Atlantic Council, we know that NOAA Fisheries has been pushed into this, that they must, must, must have a decision made and have something in place to stop the overfishing of red snapper, and mainly reduce the dead discards.

The concern, with us, for the dead discards, is that we had Congressman Rutherford go to Washington and sit in front of one of the NOAA, you know, higher ups and talk about this, that there was 40 percent overestimation in this in the recreational fishing effort, and then that just extrapolates to a 40 percent overestimation in dead loss. You guys know that, which is why you wouldn't give a decision forward, and so now NOAA Fisheries has to circumvent you guys, at the mandate of the Biden administration Secretary of Commerce, and force them to come up with something by June, but that's not fair to the recreational anglers that you guys protect as well.

That's not fair to us, because we didn't have a dog in the fight. We never had a day in court, and now that is having an effect on us, because of a settlement agreement that was done between NOAA Fisheries and this group of five folks you guys call the Tilman Gray. I know I'm over time, but I will say that, again, no negativity to any of the members at NOAA Fisheries, but it is our hope that Congressman Rutherford, and that President Trump's new Secretary of Commerce, will pretty much negate any of the things that are going to be coming out in Amendment 59. I wish you guys well.

MR. GENTNER: Brad Gentner, representing CCA here today. I have to figure out what my tablet just did to me. My comments are short though, and so, after seeing Andy's presentation today, and listening to the discussion by the council, I want to thank the council for taking a hard line on red snapper and refusing to cave to the agency's desires to reduce opportunities for recreational fishing.

With the stock assessment update used to form the secretarial amendment showing that the stock is not overfished any longer and an action within Amendment 59 that ends overfishing, it shows that the council was right to stand up to NMFS on this issue. I think it would be very illustrative to have NMFS provide a presentation on the exact method for calculating discards, including what exact domains are used from the MRIP.

This presentation should also include any analysis of digit bias and other biases from unvalidated discard data within the MRIP. I've tried to answer this question. I've talked to just about everybody I know, and I can't get a solid answer on this.

Finally, regarding the SPR discussion that went on today, I thought that was a really great discussion, and I have a suggestion regarding the defaults and moving forward with the precautionary -- Or the moving of the precautionary goalposts that are being suggested. Some other management councils, and RFMOs, attach probability of success to each parameter, with multiple levels that are being under consideration, and there was some discussion here around the table about how could we evaluate different SPRs.

This allows managers to move MSY proxies towards MUIs, using risk and the probability of success as a tool to judge their actions. These types of estimates come out of stock assessment models naturally. We should let the council decide on the risk tolerance, and the risk tolerance of those they represent, tempered by the social and economic or conservation goals that their constituents require.

Tim Griner brought up the recent situation in the Gulf looking at grouper SPRs and the difference between 35.7 percent, or whatever it was in there, 38 percent, and 40 percent SPRs that changed that particular fishery from overfished to not being overfished. It's likely that the probability of success is very minor, that the difference between the probability of success is very minor between those two parameters, and that's information the councils could use to judge these decisions, and I really think those decisions should be being made by councils, and not by the unelected SSCs, or unappointed SSCs, and that's all I have for us today. Thanks, guys.

MS. GUYAS: Good afternoon, everybody. I will just jump around a couple of topics, and so I guess, just like overall, thinking about how this meeting opened, at least the public comment, or the public part of it, you know, there was discussion that, you know, we have this new deregulatory environment, and we've got this ten-for-one.

The ten-for-one includes not just regulatory issues, but also ensuring that regulations don't -- Or I guess regulations, new regulations, don't have negative economic impacts, or it needs to be a net economic positive, and I feel like all that information, you know, should help frame the council on how to move forward.

There's a lot of things I feel like the council are working on that are just going to be maybe not worth the squeeze in that environment, and so, at least for the time being, I've got concerns about specifically for-hire reporting, the limited entry component of that, and I feel like the costs of that are probably going to outweigh benefits. It's going to be difficult to recoup those and make that a positive. It's probably a tough one for ten-for-one.

You know, I do think there could be improvements to for-hire reporting, but I think just the council is going to need to figure out how to like work smarter to get at the goals, and maybe reprioritize some things, right?

Florida Keys, I would love to see the council's, FWC, the sanctuary, and NOAA work towards agreement on the fishery management protocol. I definitely support the habitat support structures permitting language that was suggested by Robert yesterday. Having that being added

to the protocol would facilitate enhancement and restoration of fisheries, habitat, and coral in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, and really is an innovative concept, that, you know, has been discussed for several years now, through the restoration blueprint process, that would be great to move forward.

You all are going to talk about Spanish mackerel I think tomorrow. It looks like feedback from the port meetings on recreational is mostly, hey, we've got a good thing going on here, and don't mess with it. I would agree with that. I have some concern about bringing back CMP Framework Amendment 13. For those of you who are on the council at the time, you may remember the assessment, and the projections for that, that went into that, were pretty fuzzy.

There were some data issues there, and one of the consequences for putting the catch limits that came out of that in place was that, all of a sudden, for the recreational fishery, we would go from a year-round season to a season that potentially closes in early August, and I have serious concerns about that, and so I just wanted to flag that for your conversations tomorrow, and that stock is in good shape.

Great conversation this morning on the snapper grouper FMU. I thought that was really productive, and then I definitely agree with the discussion this morning on federal permitting for the private rec, to kind of take it slow and hold off. There's a lot to figure out on that one, and so thank you.

MR. HORTON: Thank you, Madam Chair and members of the council. I'm Chris Horton, with the Congressional Sportsman's Foundation, and I'll hold my comments on 59 until the appropriate time this afternoon, but I did want to comment on one thing that you all were discussing this morning, and that had to do with the golden tilefish assessment response.

I was disappointed that the council simply dismissed the question of whether the sector allocation should be reviewed. I mean, since the early 2000s, when recreational landings estimates seemed to stabilize, probably because there were more encounters, as more recreational anglers began to access this fishery, the recreational catch and effort has been increasing ever since.

That's not surprising, given that newer technologies are allowing more anglers to access their public trust resource for themselves, while, at the same time, other fishing opportunities, for traditionally more sought after recreational species in the South Atlantic have steadily been declining, and we've got less opportunities, and so it's maybe an effort shift for some.

The 2017 NMFS Fisheries Allocation Review Policy calls for determining whether an allocation review -- Whether there's an allocation review trigger, which can be simply public input, or it can be a time trigger, or can be an indicator-based trigger, and that's the first step of the allocation review, and I would argue that the steady increase in demand, and the fact that the recreational sector has consistently exceeded its ACL, sometimes substantially, in all five of the last years of assessment, constitutes an indicator-based trigger and warrants a genuine review of whether the allocation, the current allocation, provides the greatest overall benefit to the nation, and so I strongly encourage you to implement an allocation review of the South Atlantic golden tilefish fishery. Thank you.

MR. STEPHENS: Hello. My name is Nic Stephens. I'm the owner-operator of the last headboat out of Ponce Inlet, Florida, the Sea Spirit. In regards to headboats, I would like to ask for separate considerations as future amendments are created. The fact is that headboats are not commercial, and we are not recreational. We are a dying sector, and consideration must be made specifically for headboats when creating amendments.

Last year, I came here to speak on Snapper Grouper Amendment 36's vessel limit of two per person on grouper, or two per vessel rather on grouper. Vessel limits for private boats do not work for headboats with twenty-plus passengers. Please consider headboats when making future amendments. I do not know what the answer is, whether it's sector separation or limited entry. I don't know if that would even be a good thing for our fleet, but something has to be done to consider us separate in the general private rec.

Also, goliath groupers in our area are a problem. I know you can't do anything about the sharks, and the predation, but you guys are in charge of goliaths, and they are a big problem for us. They eat a lot of fish, and something that could be done with that. I know the state is doing stuff with that, but a little slot size goliath grouper does -- In a \$500 lottery, it's not something that's going to work to help mitigate the amount of goliath grouper that are on our reefs tormenting us, and, as far as depredation goes, there's no way for me to record when a fish gets eaten.

We do our surveys every year, and, last year, I mentioned this to you at this meeting. There's no way to record for depredation. I don't know what that means for dead discards. I'm sure it will increase the dead discards, if we're recording it, but I think it needs to be recorded, that it's important what type of fish is eating, whether it be sharks or goliaths. If we see it, we should be able to record it, and that's pretty much it.

MS. STEPHENS: Good afternoon, council. My name is Haley Stevens. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today. I'm going to reference the term "headboats" several times during my public comments, and so please let the record show that, when doing so, my intent is to refer to federally-permitted, Coast-Guard-inspected, multi-passenger headboats that are active and in good standing of the Southeast Region Headboat Survey.

It's difficult to believe that we sat in the same room together for the first time over a year ago. As we drop off into an era of uncertainty in the fisheries management world, particularly surrounding budgets, I cannot reiterate the importance of utilizing the headboat fleet as a cost-effective tool to continue access to fisheries-dependent data. In other words, there is simply no better bang for your buck.

Reports and presentations by staff validate that the headboat fishery is not a growing user group, only a dying one. All the hard work, in my mind, is done. We have a nearly 100 percent reporting compliance rate. Our universe has been identified, and our efforts and catch is validated through the SRHS since 1972. That's longer than any of us around the table have been alive, right? Pause for laughter break.

Oftentimes, on the science side of things in SEDAR reports, the data is already broken up into three sectors, commercial, headboat and recreational. Why on earth can we not get a well-deserved break? We are once again formally begging the council, or the agency, or somebody to please stand up and take emergency action to salvage what remains. Make a motion to revise the

vessel limits on grouper, and just please consider headboats when you're making new regulations in the future. I don't know what the answer is, but, if anyone is willing to have a transparent conversation with me following this, I am all ears.

Constant increases in operational expenses, the need to provide our crew a livable wage, decrease in working waterfront access, and federal fishery regulations are all factors that are slowly but surely tightening the chokehold on us, and now, if Secretarial Amendment 59 should pass in its current preferred, a three-month bottom closure off of northeast Florida, it will be the nail in the coffin, okay? The SEDAR 73 update proves that headboats are responsible for the lowest amount of dead discards, 1 to 2 percent, out of any user group, commercial and recreational included.

Headboat stakeholders have formally requested that we be exempt from discard reduction areas, based on BSIA, and, just to wrap it up here, you know, these lawsuits were never about red snapper. They were just used as the kingpin in this weird chess match. The lawsuits were about unrecoverable faith in this outdated process, and what Secretarial Amendment 59 is doing is destroying businesses, economies, and communities, and it is devastating and erasing years of heritage and tradition and access to fisheries data. It's wrong, and it's destroying families. It's destroying my family. I know that, deep down, at the end of the day, you all know that it's wrong too. Thank you for your time.

MR. SHAFFER: Good afternoon. My name is Charles Shaffer. I am a headboat operator and captain of the Orlando Princess, Kanawha Princess, Port Kanawha, Florida. I think Haley made a lot of good comments. I'm not going to say the same thing over twice. These permits that are given out for headboats and charter boats, we need to limit them, any center console just getting a charter boat for fifty-bucks.

You're hurting us. I'm the third generation in the partyboat business. I want my son to be the fourth generation. What are you guys doing for myself that I can prove to my son that he can actually do this? I've been running a headboat for twenty-five years, and, the last ten years, I gave up. Haley -- Just talking to Haley for a couple of weeks, she has brought life back to me, a lot of fight back.

I want this industry to be for my son. I am all about a regulation for red snapper, all about it. I want the fishery to be there for him. I want the fishery to be there for anybody that has any kids in this room. I think there's better ways of handling this than -- Actually, that's Amendment 59. I'm sorry. Someone said this is going to be a short-term plan. Come on. I'm so sorry. Someone said this is going to be a short-term plan. We've been dealing with red snapper since 2009, and what is it going to be short-term about it?

I'm glad someone did bring up black sea bass. Taking hooks out of the water is not going to bring them back, and, if we take hooks out of the water, how long is it going to take for black sea bass to come back? Black sea bass has been gone since 2010 in Cape Canaveral.

Red snapper, we do have a larger quota of red snapper. Back in the early 2000s, we never really saw too many red snapper past 180 feet. Now we see them abundant over 180 feet. Discard rate, fatality rate, catching them in that deep water, is very high, but the thing is that we created this problem, to have a bigger problem in the long run. Like I said, I've been doing this for twenty-

five years. The last sixteen years -- A large fish in 2008 was twenty-five or thirty pounds. Now it's fourteen pounds and so the only question I have for Andy is -- This is the only question I have. How can you have a population that is growing, but it's also decreasing the size of them in the larger population? Thank you.

MR. GROSS: Good afternoon. My name is Steve Gross. I run a small charter operation out of St. Mary's, Georgia, along with my son. I've been fishing for well over fifty years, some commercial rod-and-reel fishing up in the Northeast, recreational fishing my entire life, and charter fishing since the late 1990s, and I'm listening very cautiously to what went on today.

I have an application in to sit on this board as a Georgia representative for the recreational sector, and I hear so many things, and I didn't hear what I thought was a lot of facts, and so I want to throw some things out there, and the first one I want to talk about is the numbers being used to assess the stocks.

All the questions that were asked of National Marine Fisheries about the questions regarding the stocks came back with answers like we assume, we think, maybe, possibly, but never a number of, hey, this is the number, and this is what we've got for red snapper, but what we know -- Those of us that have boots on the ground, what we know is that there's more red snapper here in southeast Georgia than there have ever been in our lifetimes, way more.

What studies have been done to determine what these large numbers of red snapper are doing to the other reef fish that they're pushing off the reefs? Where is all this data coming from, because we're not seeing -- We're not seeing observers, we're not seeing divers, we're not seeing creel surveys, and we're not seeing boardings, and so where is your data coming from? Is it all computer-generated data, that has no basis in reality?

What questions about the stock can NMFS answer with a solid definitive answer? What can you tell me about how many red snapper there are in the South Atlantic, and the answer is, as far as I can see, we can't give you a definitive answer. We can give you our guesses, our best guesses, and so you're basing -- You're basing changes in our seasons, that affect our livelihood, on your best guesses, and not on any reality, and that does not work.

Your closure, and you say you don't want to call it a closure, but your so-called closure of bottom fishing in the northeast, in the Jacksonville area, well, let me give you a little impact from that. You've got about maybe fifteen charter operations working out of St. Mary's. Of those fifteen, there are probably five that go outside the jetties. The rest are all inshore.

You're going to take every single charter boat that comes out of Mayport, of which there are at least 200, and, every day during those closures, they're going to make the thirty-five-mile run right across that Georgia line. They're not going to stop fishing. They're not going to change, and put themselves out of business, because you close what's on their doorstep. They're going to run, and they're going to put tremendous economic pressure on a small group that's working hard enough as it is to survive in St. Mary's.

How long until you have accurate data? Can you give the public an answer and say, hey, we'll have accurate data in two years, or we'll have accurate data in three years, or is it we'll never have accurate data, because we don't know how to get accurate data? So, anyway, my point

here, and I'm sitting here, and I'm going to say to the council to resist what National Marine Fisheries is telling you to do. Do what you know is right. Refuse to abide by these regulations that they're trying to force you into, and let's have a reasonable season of thirty days, say, and see how we come out after a thirty-day season, and maybe next year we could have a sixty-day season. Thank you.

MR. COX: Okay. Good afternoon, council members. I've been listening to the meeting most of the week, and I just want to speak a little bit about the Snapper Grouper Subcommittee that met on Monday. You guys were having some discussions on permits, commercial permits, and some latent permits that are not being used.

I've been in the fishery for forty years. I've got one of the original permits that was ever issued from NMFS, and I still use it, and I had some health challenges the last five years, and so I hadn't been able to fish a lot. I put my boat on the hill, and spent more time at the doctor's office than I did the tackle shop, but, anyway, I just want you to know a lot of those permits that not being fished right now are going to be, and, you know, there's probably more people that are not fishing that are in the same situation that I've been in, and so I finally got my boat in the water, got some good results here, and I'm going to go fishing.

I just want to let you know that, that a lot of people that are not using a permit -- It doesn't necessarily mean that they don't need them, and, as far as the two-for-one, I think that's a great thing, that we're finally getting around to moving forward with that, and I hope you guys will do the right thing there and make it a little bit easier for some of these younger folks to get in it.

I took my permit. while I wasn't fishing, and was kind of grooming some twenty-five-year-old guys that were interested in the fishery, and let them use it, and so there's a lot of that going on with these corporate permits, because it allows us to do that. It gives us a flexibility to let somebody put it on their boat, and, also, it removes our personal liabilities, and so it's not so much a loophole, but it is a good common business practice to have a corporation when you're in a high-risk business like this.

Anyway, I'm a Snapper Grouper AP member, and I enjoyed the conversations this week. So far, the one about the -- What was it called? The spawning stock ratio, the proxies, that you had earlier today, was very interesting, and I hope that AP gets a chance to hear some of that, and kind of learn about it. Anyway, thank you for your time.

DR. RUNDE: Thank you for the opportunity to comment. My name is Brendan Runde. I'm a marine scientist with the Nature Conservancy. I would like to comment on Amendment 46, which was discussed earlier this afternoon. This is the private recreational permit. The Nature Conservancy supports advancing this amendment for public hearings. The amendment has been a huge investment of time and money for council members and staff, not to mention APs, including one for which I'm a member.

In addition, the council should be aware that other regions are watching the South Atlantic closely on this issue. Every council, the ASMFC, and all state agencies are plagued by problems with recreational data. This is an opportunity for the South Atlantic Council to set an example by advancing an amendment that would be an innovative step towards better quality recreational data, and therefore better and less uncertain management of our shared resources.

Abandoning, or continuing to prolong this action in its current phase, after such a significant investment, has been made would also set an example, but a bad one. Deliberating over the finer points of this amendment has gone on for too long, and it's time for the public to weigh-in. Thank you.

MR. BROGAN: Hi. Good afternoon. My name is Gib Brogan. I'm a Campaign Director at Oceana. Since 2019, Oceana has worked to protect North Atlantic right whales from their two biggest threats, entanglement in fishing gear and vessel strikes. Entanglement is the greatest threat to North Atlantic right whales, and, since 2017, nearly a hundred entanglements have occurred across the range of the species from Florida to eastern Canada.

Oceana submitted written scoping comments on Amendment 56, and is here today to encourage the council to move forward with Amendment 56, including a range of alternatives that will provide access to seasonal nearshore closures to vessels that are using on-demand, or ropeless, black sea bass pots that don't have a persistent vertical line.

If included in Amendment 56, on-demand gear would allow fishermen access to areas currently closed in times which target fish are more readily available close to shore. Amendment 56 will support on-demand gear expansion, while also expanding opportunities to fish for black sea bass, including benefits associated with increased seasonal access, more profit, with fewer direct costs to the fishermen, and access to new and expanded markets outside of the current seasonally limited fishery.

The South Atlantic Council would be a positive example of how on-demand and ropeless gear can be adopted at the fishery scale and an important model for other fisheries in the U.S. and Canada.

Support for on-demand and ropeless gear was featured prominently in the scoping comments to the councils in the recent scoping period, and, when the council meets to consider the scoping comments and planned development of Amendment 56, Oceana encourages the council to include a range of alternatives for on-demand and ropeless access in its range of alternatives. Oceana looks forward to working with the council as you continue with Amendment 56 and look forward to the adoption of ropeless gear across this fishery. Thanks very much. I appreciate your time. Have a good afternoon.

MR. HEMILRIGHT: My name is Dewey Hemilright. I'm a commercial fishing vessel owner. My boat fishes out of Wanchese, and I live in Kitty Hawk. Listening this week to the Commercial Subcommittee, I'm glad for the support for the two-for-one, finally doing away with it, after twenty-five years, and making it easier for maybe new entrants into the fisheries and people that are aging out to be able to get out of the fisheries.

I also think that the priorities of the two-for-one. and the trip efficiency. is the most urgent, pressing need of how to utilize the ACLs that were not -- A couple species that, over the last couple years, have not been fulfilled, the greater amberjack, the vermilion, and, this year, there was 9,000 pounds of snowy grouper left on the table, and so we need to figure out better ways of efficiency there.

Also, if we would have real-time eVTR reporting, maybe we could have more timely reports, that would allow for increased trip efficiency, if our ACLs are not getting caught. This is vital to folks that are left in the industry.

I heard a lot of comments here today, or in this presentation here, about the MRIP, and how we don't believe the data, or we do believe the data, all these other things, and I hope that, when the private rec permitting, and possibly reporting, would come out, is we always hear from folks that don't like something, but they don't -- In my understanding, and in my time, I never hear how to fix nothing, and so I don't like a lot of things, and I can bitch and complain with the best of them, but it would always be good, once in a while, to tell how you think to fix it within the process, because that's the difficult thing.

A lot of these resources are shared by the recreational industry, some in the majority of them and some in minority of them, but, if you can't count the fish in the ocean, then we got, you know, problems, and we both suffer from that, but I'll leave my comments on Amendment 59 for another time, and will make them to National Marine Fisheries Service. Thank you all for your time.

MR. COLBY: My name is Barrett Colby. I've been involved in commercial fishing from the early 1980s. The comment I would like to make is on Amendment 59. If you go through with it, and do the closed areas, I think that it's really important that you give a waiver, or a pass, to let the partyboats go into those areas and fish.

You know, there's a lot of older people, and single people, that can't afford to take a regular, you know, charter boat, which charges a lot of money, but they can afford to go on a partyboat, and I think -- I don't know if it's possible, and I don't know what it would do to your numbers, but it would be really -- I think it's a really important thing to do, and it would keep them in existence.

I would really hate to see no more partyboats, because -- You know, because you guys got sued, and so, anyway, that's that, and I don't -- You know, I don't have a fight in the game anymore, because I'm like Jack, and I had health issues, and I sold my permit. I was issued a grouper snapper permit, the unlimited one, when I was very young, and, well, there's no sense in bringing up the past, but, anyway, good luck with it, and really think about giving them access somehow, if it's possible. Thank you.

CONGRESSMAN RUTHERFORD: Thank you. Council, thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to you this evening. I'm sorry for my lateness. I just ran back to the office from the House floor, but I join you today to share my deep concern with NOAA's Secretarial Amendment 59.

In its current form, Amendment 59 would prohibit recreational anglers from bottom fishing from December to February, blocking anglers access to fifty-five different species, including red snapper. All of this off of Florida's Atlantic coast for three months a year. Now, this wide-reaching closure would span over 180 miles of Florida's coastline, from the Florida-Georgia border all the way south to Cape Canaveral.

This closure would be an economic disaster for Florida and many of our businesses that support our very robust fishing, tourism, and hospitality industries, and the timing of this closure hurts

Florida acutely, falling during our winter tourism season, and so in my district alone, the recreational fishing industry supports 4,500 local jobs and contributes more than \$500 million to the economy.

Now, imagine that industry brought to a halt for a quarter of the year. No one wants our fisheries to thrive more than our anglers, but the South Atlantic fishing community has worked hard to rebuild that red snapper stock over the last decade, and the evidence clearly shows that it has worked, but Amendment 59 now threatens to implement sweeping, sweeping, restrictions, based off the faulty models and assumptions used by the last stock assessment, just with a few additional years of information, but the same improper model.

Even though NOAA stated that their new data shows the red snapper fishery is no longer overfished, they now conclude that, due to discards, it is still subject to overfishing. I'll just leave that, but this discard data is self-reported, unvalidated and unreliable, and it should not be used to guide any management decisions, especially a devastating and drastic as a full bottom closure is.

NOAA has also stated that recreational data effort estimates, and this is their words, could be off by as much as 40 percent. 40 percent. The red snapper stock is large and growing. I regularly hear, from constituents, that red snapper is so abundant that it's all they can catch.

Plain and simple, we do need better data, and it's coming soon. Congress recognized that need, and we've acted. Over the last few years, Congress has provided \$8.7 million to improve management of red snapper stocks, including \$3.3 million for the South Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count that began back in 2021. Now, the Great Red Snapper Count is going to provide independent data on the red snapper population, and it will be completed in the second half of this year, yet NOAA intends to implement a final Amendment 59 before this study is complete.

The Great Red Snapper Count, and recent FWC exempted fishing permits, will provide valuable information on the population size, distribution, density, catches and discards. This information will help inform alternative management strategies. If, with our current bad data, NOAA agrees red snapper is no longer overfished, imagine what we'll learn when the Great Red Snapper Count is complete.

Secretarial management decisions for the red snapper fishery must be based on accurate and up-to-date science, period and that's why I recently reintroduced the Bipartisan Red Snapper Act, with twenty-two of my colleagues here in the House, to rebuild -- I'm sorry. To stop NOAA from unilaterally closing the bottom until this independent data is completed and incorporated into their stock assessment.

Listen. Good decisions require good data. Taking secretarial action without incorporating the soon to be available data goes against years of work that we've had to improve the red snapper fishery data, and so I urge NOAA to suspend consideration of the three-month bottom closure in the South Atlantic, and I look forward to working with the Trump administration to protect access to the red snapper fishery. With that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back, and thank you again for this opportunity.

(Whereupon, the public comment session was adjourned.)

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Barbieri

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Chris

Beckwith

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Alan

Blough

Heather

Bogdan

Jennifer

Borland

Gary

Bristle

William

Brogan (Oceana)

Gib

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Myra

Bubley

Walter

Bunting

Matthew

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