April 19, 2010

Roy E. Crabtree, Southeast Regional Administrator
NOAA Fisheries
263 13th Avenue South
St. Petersburg, FL 33701

Robert K. Mahood, Executive Director
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place, Suite 201
North Charleston, SC 29405

Re: DEIS for Snapper Grouper Amendment 17a

Dear Dr. Crabtree and Mr. Mahood,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Snapper Grouper Amendment 17a. The American Sportfishing Association has serious concerns with the management of red snapper in the South Atlantic, including the lack of economic data on the impact of the preferred alternative on the recreational fishing industry, and opposes widespread closures to the entire reef fish complex in areas of the South Atlantic. We assert that such a draconian management measure after a ten year span between stock assessments is not the fishery management envisioned by the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

The American Sportfishing Association (ASA) is the nation's recreational fishing industry trade association. ASA represents sportfishing manufacturers, retailers, and angler advocacy groups, as well as the interests of America's 60 million recreational anglers. ASA also safeguards and promotes the social, economic, and conservation values of sportfishing in America which result in a $125 billion-a-year impact on the nation's economy.

ASA has serious concerns about the lack of an economic impact analysis of the preferred alternative on the recreational fishing industry and its related businesses. In a study sponsored by Big Rock Sports, LLC and ASA, Georgetown Economic Services assessed the impact of a ban on all bottom fishing off the south Atlantic coast that was presented by NOAA Fisheries as a possible long-term measure for reducing red snapper mortality in the region. Georgetown Economic Services surveyed bait and tackle sellers in the region. The responses to these surveys provided a qualitative description of the bait and tackle industry as well as a measure of the impact of the closures on the revenues, profits, and employment levels of the business in this region. The data also shows that roughly 1300 stores selling bait and tackle will be directly affected by the proposed bottom fishing ban. These businesses will lose an estimated $78,000,000 in sales in the first year of the ban. This equates to an average loss of $60,000 in sales per store. In addition, the survey found that 578 jobs will be affected.

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However, this study does not reflect the true impact of such draconian management measures. The true impact would be reflected by including sportfishing and boat manufacturers and wholesalers, boat sales, hotels, restaurants, marina and other onshore related businesses. According to NOAA Fisheries Data[1], expenditures at bait and tackle stores accounts for only about 10-percent of all annual angler trip and equipment expenditures. Given the vast economic impact of recreational fishing in this country, it is incumbent upon NOAA Fisheries to not only understand the economic impact of management decisions on the entirety of the recreational fishing sector, but also take this into consideration when deciding on preferred alternatives.

In addition to our concerns regarding the economic impact of the preferred alternative on the recreational fishing industry, ASA also has concerns regarding the implementation timeline and fishery management decisions regarding the DEIS. It is our understanding that an updated stock assessment is being prepared for South Atlantic Red Snapper, the results of which will be available in December 2010. Unfortunately, the DEIS does not provided adequate and detailed explanation as to how the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) will integrate the December 2010 stock assessment into this amendment if passed and have not given any timelines for implementing any change in fishery management measures if the assessment warrants. Therefore, ASA recommends one of the following, 1) the passage of Amendment 17a be delayed until the stock assessment can be used to revisit preferred alternatives; 2) the passage of an alternative in June that mimics the current emergency regulations put in place by NOAA, with any additional changes made after the December stock assessment; 3) the inclusion of a clear statement of timelines, potential emergency orders, and how the Council will work with NOAA to rapidly implement any changes positive to the fishermen and the industry; or 4) give the regional administrator authority to adjust the regulations based on the December benchmark stock assessment.

The Council is using a FMSY proxy of 40% as recommended by SEDAR and the Science and Statistical Committee (SSC.) ASA contends that the Council has the latitude to maintain the current FMSY proxy of 30%. This is a policy call as to whether to be more or less conservative with the FMSY and the recommendation by the SSC should not be considered the benchmark that the Council must adopt. The State of Florida agency representative argued for 30% based on the state's experience managing many healthy fisheries at 30%. ASA is concerned that other council members did not respect the wishes of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The Council must be careful not to consider scientific recommendations by the SSC as a policy decision by the Council.

It is clear that the State of Florida has the most to lose from a socioeconomic standpoint. The impacts of the MSY proxy are clearly pointed out in the socioeconomic discussion on FMSY, all of which was concluded with a very subjective statement that the FMSY 40% may be of greater long term benefit. ASA disagrees with that statement and recommends that this fundamental building block be revisited and Florida's wishes be respected with a FMSY proxy of 30%. With such draconian measures being proposed the Council should not take the most conservative approach and should do all within their legal constraints to soften the blow to fishermen and the industry. Although this will provide only small gains if any in the short term management scenarios, it will provide a faster reintroduction of fisherman in the harvest of red snapper and would likely reduce the time necessary for closure of the

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[1] *The Economic Contribution of Marine Angler Expenditures in the United States, 2006.* Brad Gentner and Scott Steinback, National Marine Fisheries Service, November 2008; revised December 2008

snapper complex. The Council can always revisit this as the stock rebuilds and change to FMSY 40% if the fishing public and public policy dictate such a change.

In addition, ASA requests that the Council reevaluate the selectivity determinations used in the assessment and align with what the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council used in their red snapper assessment. We also ask that the Council reevaluate the initial recreational landings that were used in the assessment and consider the unlikely scenario of such high landings so very early in the recreational fishery based on numbers of fishermen, technologies available, and the poor state of data collection at the time.

Finally, ASA believes that the Council and NOAA have done an inadequate job of explaining the amendment to the public, have fully neglected to consider how they may soften the perception of the fishing public that bottom fishing is ending in south Atlantic, and have only served to fuel public misperception and fears of the full impacts of amendment 17A.

In conclusion, the failures of the DEIS to conduct a thorough economic impact analysis on the recreational fishing industry and the failure of NOAA Fisheries to consistently manage the red snapper fishery over the past decade are doing significant damage to the industry that will prove difficult to repair. We urge the Council and NOAA Fisheries to not adopt an alternative that includes closures of all bottom fishing.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Patty Doerr
Ocean Resource Policy Director