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*Managing fish and wildlife
resources for their long-term
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March 1, 2019

Jessica McCawley, Chairman
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
North Charleston, SC 29405

RE: MRIP Calibration

Dear Jessica:

Accurate information about angler effort, harvest and catch rates is necessary for proper management of our marine fisheries. The sustainability of these stocks is essential to provide for the economic and social benefits that are derived from them. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has concerns about the immediate use of the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES) effort estimates to calculate catch for the species managed by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAMFC). While the survey methodology underlying the FES is clearly an improvement from that used for the Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS), the initial effort estimates based on the FES are dramatically higher than historical estimates and implausible based on our understanding of Florida fisheries. Also, it is important to note that the magnitude of these effort estimates differs dramatically from those generated by NOAA Fisheries certified surveys conducted by the Gulf states. Due to concern over these differences, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) has recommended a cautious approach when utilizing potentially conflicting estimates of harvest in stock assessments until these differences can be reconciled and corrected if necessary.

It is important that fisheries managers use the best available science when making decisions that impact fish stocks and the stakeholders that use these stocks. We believe that this process should include taking the time necessary to ensure that a newly implemented survey approach is generating plausible results free of bias. Although the National Academy of Sciences conducted a critical review of the methods used in the FES, we do not believe that the results of the survey are reliable. Fisheries managers already face a lack of confidence from stakeholders. It is important that the public is confident in the results of our data collection techniques so that managers' credibility is not further eroded. Additionally, the effect of the magnitude of changes of estimates of effort and harvest from the CHTS and FES to stock status and the allowable biological catch is unknown.

The magnitude of differences in new catch estimates generated from FES compared to those generated from the CHTS and some observations that we have made in Florida make us question the accuracy of these estimates. Some of these observations include:

- Different independent surveys conducted by Gulf states consistently generate substantially lower estimates of effort and catch than those generated from the FES. The Florida Gulf Reef Fish Survey, certified by NOAA Fisheries, and using a mail survey similar to the FES, estimated 1.2 million private/rental boat trips targeting ten reef fish species in the Gulf of Mexico in 2017. The FES generated estimate for **total** private/rental boat trips on Florida's west coast in 2017 was more than 18 million trips. Given the popularity of reef fish as target species off Florida's west coast, it is difficult to believe that only 6% of the boat-based trips in 2017 targeted these reef species on Florida's Gulf coast. Leading us to believe the FES greatly overestimated the number of trips.

- 2.3 million saltwater fishing licenses were sold in 2017 in Florida. Moreover, there may also be up to 40% of our anglers who are exempt. This would mean that we have about 4 million saltwater anglers. The number of trips estimated using the FES in Florida is approximately 80 million, meaning that on average, anglers fish 20 days per year. We do not believe that an average angler takes 20 fishing trips per year.
- FES generated statewide estimates of effort for shoreline anglers are four times as high as those estimated from CHTS. These estimates were seven times higher than those generated by CHTS on the Atlantic coast of Florida. The FES statewide estimates indicate that in 2017, there were **51.4 million shoreline trips** in Florida. This FES generated estimate equates to an **average of 4,000 trips per day** for each of Florida's 35 coastal counties or an **average of 65 trips per day for each mile** of tidal shoreline. We do not believe these estimates reflect reality.
- The 2016 National Survey of Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife Associated Recreation conducted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that anglers 16 years old and older completed **61 million** saltwater trips **nationwide**. FES generated effort for 2017 indicates that there were over **80 million** saltwater fishing trips in Florida alone. The extreme lack of corroboration with this independent survey alone is enough to warrant further investigation into the veracity of the FES.

For the period 2000-2017, the estimates from the FES indicate that statewide trips are 2.8 to 3.9 times higher than previous estimates. This dramatic difference in fishing effort results in estimates of harvest that are far greater than what we had been managing for previously. For example, the new statewide estimate of the harvest of red snapper is double what it was for the old estimates. For inshore species, such as common snook, harvest estimates are more than triple those calculated previously.

In summary, we believe that there is ample evidence that the FES may be over-estimating fishing effort. We also believe that there should be a thorough analysis of the effect of these estimates on stock status and allocation before they are used for management of our fish stocks. Utilization of these estimates, that in some cases appear to be non-sensical, will affect management decisions and further erode the public's confidence in a management process that already has lost public confidence. These estimates need to be reviewed thoroughly by a panel of statistical experts to ensure that the FES design is **functioning** as intended. Also, the implications of using these estimates for management should be examined thoroughly through an extensive data workshop process on an individual species level. We plan to send a letter to NOAA to request that they embark on an analysis of potential biases associated with the FES that may be causing unrealistic estimates of effort.

We urge the SAMFC to pause in the use of FES generated estimates for management until the results of the FES can be fully reviewed and important issues are resolved.

Thank you for your considerations. Please feel free to direct any questions or comments to Jim Estes in our Division of Marine Fisheries Management at (850)-617-9622.

Sincerely,



Thomas H. Eason, Ph.D.
Assistant Executive Director