

**PUBLIC COMMENT SESSION
JEKYLL ISLAND, GEORGIA
MARCH 9, 2022**

MR. KELLY: Chairman Bell and council members and staff, my name is Bill Kelly, and I'm the Executive Director of the Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen's Association, and I'm here representing the permit holders in the king mackerel gillnet fishery of the southern sub-zone in the Gulf of Mexico and asking for your support.

We are cautiously optimistic that Amendments 33 and 34 will yield positive results and provide for a substantial increase in quota for the commercial king mackerel gillnet sector. We have worked diligently with the Gulf Council, over the past thirteen years, to improve and streamline the fishery. We provide real-time data on a daily basis, instead of a two-week lag time in dealer reporting that usually resulted in harvest overruns.

For example, landings from 2015 through 2022 resulted in just over 40,000 pounds in overages, but more than 240,000 pounds in underages, and, while we are the only sector that volunteered paybacks for overages, we have received not one pound of credit, or carryover, for those underages.

As we continue to improve the fishery, we will be asking the Gulf Council to implement the following, and we ask for the support of the South Atlantic Council as well. Number one, an increase in allocation of the commercial sector, based on the positive results of the recent stock assessment. Number two, reallocation from the recreational to the commercial sector, based on more than a decade of unused quota and more than thirty million pounds left unharvested, and to comply with the Magnuson-Stevens National Standard 4.

Number three, equal representation on the CMP Advisory Panel. Out of seventeen members in the Gulf, only one is a gillnet fisherman. Finally, eliminating the prohibition on fishing on Saturdays and Sundays and national holidays. This will essentially reduce the fishery to a four-day workweek, since catches on Fridays must be weighed-in and all fish removed from the vessel no later than 6:00 a.m. on Saturdays, or you're in violation. The average time to unload and process a catch is four hours, and one fish house alone in Key West has six vessels that it needs to service.

Because of the Gulf weather patterns this year, if we had been able to fish on weekends, the 2022 season would have closed in two weeks, instead of five, costing stakeholders significantly in operating costs. Thank you again for your time, and, again, we would appreciate your support for these initiatives at the April meeting of the Gulf Council. Thank you very much.

MS. GUYAS: Hello, everybody. I am Martha Guyas, representing the American Sportfishing Association. Thanks for the opportunity to speak with you all today, and I'm glad to be here with everybody in-person. It's been nice to catch up. Okay, and so I've got a couple of things that I want to talk about.

Let's start with allocations, and so the council is at the point where you all are getting lots of new assessments, and we talked about several of them today, that include the MRIP-FES data and consequently change the currency of quotas. The MRIP-FES data indicates that recreational

catches, in FES units, are greater than those in CHTS, and, consequently, in a lot of cases, stocks are larger than previously thought, because recreational catch is historically underestimated, and so it is vital that the council moves into using FES for assessment and management.

Then, as you're doing that, that sector allocations are also converted to this new currency, to ensure that quotas and landings and allocations are all set in the same units. This is critical for maintaining the status quo of who is catching what on the water, and failure to do so is a de facto reallocation, and not doing so could unnecessarily trigger early season closures and other accountability measures for one sector at the expense of another.

I mean, I know the council may be interested in looking at allocation changes, and I'm not necessary trying to discourage that, but you guys have been working on this allocation decision tool, and it seems to me that the thing to do is to convert to FES and then, if you want to consider the allocation tool, or changes, look at your decision tool, have the conversation, so that you can consider all the economic information, social implications, et cetera, et cetera, and make those changes.

Release mortality reduction, John Carmichael, I thought your presentation yesterday was awesome, and it was really illustrating the struggle that this council has in front of them and how regulations can have unintended consequences, and you all touched on that a couple of times today, and really the challenge that's in front of this council as you start thinking about how to deal with release mortality, and just wider management of snapper grouper in general. It's going to be really tough conversations, and I appreciate the discussion yesterday, and I look forward to digging into the options with you, as we get more information about how those might play out.

More tough stuff is Amendment 46, and so ASA is supportive of, and I am really excited about, the discussion you all had yesterday about developing a permit and improved data collection system for private anglers for snapper grouper. I think the recommendations that came out of the workgroup led by Spud are excellent. You all know that I can probably talk about that amendment and my experiences with similar situations all day long, and I'm not going to do that, but I will leave you with a couple of, I guess, points to think about, as you go into Full Council and keep talking about this.

The first thing is the council should focus their time now on the purpose and need, and, as you're doing this, I encourage you to focus on the why, and so there's been talk about how we need to better define the universe of anglers. Why? So we can sample the people that are fishing for snapper grouper species that we need better information on and, ultimately, get more accurate, precise, and maybe timelier, data on the recreational fishery. Why is this important? To improve the assessment and management of red snapper. That is the end game here.

Once you refine your purpose and need, keep it close to your heart. You are going to be tempted to go down rabbit holes, and, when you do, you need to get that purpose and need out and go back to it and focus.

Number two, setting up a permit and data collection system that moves the needle on improving assessment and management is going to be really hard work. It is doable, but the council is going to need help from a lot of partners, like SERO, the Science Center, the MRIP people, the states, law enforcement, and a whole host of characters that you all haven't even talked about

yet, and all of those people are going to need to commit to the success of developing and implementing this program upfront. They're going to have to talk a lot, and they're going to have to work together towards this common goal. The ad hoc AP you all talked about -- I'm at red, and I will stop, and I have a lot to say, and so, anyhow, I will come back maybe at the end, Mel.

MR. HITE: Good afternoon. So Martha is the professional, and my notes say to wing it. I appreciate you giving me a second to just come here and talk, and a little bit about my background. I was a professional bass angler, freshwater, for twenty-four years, and I fished bass tournaments, and I got lucky, and I had days where I didn't want to tell anyone, but I knew that I was not going to catch a fish, but then some days I did catch some, and so I was able to make a living and win a couple million dollars fishing bass tournaments.

Why am I here? Well, my hobby, and what I love to do, when I'm not bass fishing in freshwater is saltwater fishing, and so I'm truly speaking to you just from a recreational angler aspect, and I just wanted to just emphasize that the grouper snapper stuff -- I know it's tough. I mean, I really do.

You've got to have fish before you can fish for fish and harvest fish, and I understand that, but then, to me, the three-day season just doesn't work for the average recreational angler, and there are so many, and I thought about it, when I was coming here, to talk about more data and more research, but I will be honest, and, after sitting back there for about three hours, you guys have got more data than Dr. Fauci did on COVID, no doubt, and, I mean, you have nailed that, and so you have all that, but I just really want to emphasize that the recreational angler -- To have just a couple-day season, it's so tough, and I don't know what the answers are, and you have the data.

I know, when I've gone recently, that I seem to catch a lot of small fish, and I've heard you all discuss that, but then, with my schedule, and so many other people's schedules, if you miss that one weekend where you can go, you have to wait another year, and then you might miss that one, and it just makes it really, really tough, and the recreational angler -- They are conservation oriented, and they really are. They want to be more educated, and how we can improve on that -- Maybe talk groups, or maybe online commenting, and you can't get hundreds of thousands of people in here, and I understand that, but it's a lot of people that really just sit back and be silent, and I know each and every one of you have their interests in mind, because, to sit here Monday through Friday, you have got passion for this, and I do appreciate that, but I just ask that -- You know, I love to fish and I made my living fishing.

I love to saltwater fish as a recreational angler, and, you know, I just hope and pray that I can take my -- I just became a grandfather, and I've got a three-month-old granddaughter, and I just hope that she has the opportunity to go fish for and harvest these fish. Thank you.

MR. DOZIER: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's hard to follow-up a Bassmaster champion, but, anyway, that's pretty cool. I'm Paul Dozier, and I'm from Jacksonville, Florida, and I'm a recreational fisherman as well, and I run the Northeast Florida Wahoo Shootout, and it's a fishing tournament and the old school kingfish shootout based in northeast Florida, and I'm just going to speak to the economic impact that the snapper closure had on fishing tournaments, because I can speak directly to that, in the late 2000s and mid-2000s.

This is one example, and the greater Jacksonville kingfish tournament, on the snapper closure, was hurt by 60 to 70 percent. They went from 700 or 800 boats to 200 boats, and a lot of the reason for that is because these guys had twenty-three or twenty-five-foot center consoles, and they go king mackerel fishing in the summer, and then, in the fall and winter, they go catch snapper and grouper. Well, you take snapper and grouper from them, and they sold their boat and quit fishing, which is unfortunate, and so that's just part of the economic deal.

The current two to three-day snapper season is tough, and I experienced it firsthand. It's dangerous, and I believe the FWC people would say this, but you create a frenzy, and everybody goes to the boat ramps, and they're fist fighting at the boat ramps, and they're arguing over spots, and they're throwing stuff at boats. There is dozens and dozens of boats on each spot, and it's reckless.

I've been fishing for thirty-five years, and I've never seen anything like what I saw last year on the three-day -- It was two or three days, and I don't remember, but we caught them, and the fish are thick as fleas, and you guys have all the stuff, but I think you're making a good progress with the devices. We use the device successfully, and I do think that all the tackle shops have them, but nobody knows how to use them, and it actually took a little bit of a trial and effort to figure it out, but I saw less fish floating last year than in previous years, and so I think you're doing good.

I think, instead of the two or three-day weekend, I think -- Hopefully one day we get to an expanded timeframe, and I think you guys are aware of that, but I just -- It just concerns me that somebody is going to get killed out there, because everybody, in less than seaworthy vessels, are going snapper fishing, because of the craziness that's being done like that, and, if the weather is iffy, they're going anyway.

I think that recreational fishermen want to be part of the solution to the problem, and I think that we are all conservationists, and we understand why the snapper season, or the snapper, were closed, but commonsense tells me, when I go fishing, and I run wahoo tournaments, and these guys are catching red snapper on high-speed lures. You can't go out to the reefs without catching a red snapper, and you can't target anything.

My friend was sheepshead fishing five miles off of St. Augustine the other day and catching red snapper on fiddler crabs, and so there's a lot of red snapper, and we all know that. I respect what you guys are doing, and I just think that maybe a tagging program, or a permit, or a boat permit - - There has got to be a better way to do it than cramming it all into three days and doing that, but I appreciate you guys' time, and I've been sitting back here for a couple hours as well, and you guys are thorough, and I have gained a lot of respect today for you guys. Thanks for having me.

MR. CENCI: Hello, everybody. I'm not the best speaker, but I'm going to try and get my point across. My name is Chris Cenci, and I was born and raised in northeast Florida, and I'm an avid offshore and inshore fisherman. I'm also a tournament angler, both offshore and inshore, and I've been fishing our waters in northeast Florida for over thirty-five years.

I also own my own lure-manufacturing company, and we produce inshore and nearshore lures. I'm here to speak about the allotted time that the recreational anglers get to fish for red snapper, and I feel like Paul does. I feel like three days out of 365 is not enough, with the amount of

snapper that are basically overtaking our local inshore and nearshore structure, be it artificial reef system or natural bottom.

With the implementation of the fish descending device, the mortality rate has substantially decreased, from going off the science I've read, your science, and the science says that, before the fish descending device was implemented, and every boat had to have it, be it commercial or recreational, mandatory, if a hundred fish were caught, forty would end up dying. After the implementation, only twenty would end up dying, and this is the science that I've read on the website, because it's you guys' science, and it went from a 60 percent survival rate to an 80 percent survival rate.

With this survival rate up so high, the recreational anglers should have more than three random days per year to fish for snapper. With the amount of red snapper that we have on both artificial and natural bottom, it's hard to even catch a legal sea bass or grouper within thirty miles of the beach here in northeast Florida.

I have also been an avid kingfish tournament angler. I've been fishing kingfish tournaments, both recreational and tournaments, since 1989, and never, until just a few years ago, had I caught a red snapper while slow-trolling a poggy on our nearshore wrecks, live bait slow-trolling, in sixty to eighty feet of water.

With all that being said, please open it up to more than just a three-day period. Please figure out a way that you can regulate the days that we can go fish. Randomly picking days in the summertime, you can never tell what the weather is going to be like, and everybody knows this, and I know the three days are in July. We have everybody on the east coast, from probably the Carolinas all the way down to central Florida, and we have afternoon thunderstorms, and, like Paul stated, we all go out there, be it small or big boats, because they want to catch these fish, and, if you get caught in an afternoon thunderstorm, it's very dangerous.

I would like to figure out a way where you could -- I don't know how you would do it, because I'm not good at doing that, but I would think that there's got to be a way that you could offer permits or something and say, hey, these are the three days and I feel like there should be definitely more than three days, but not just a random three days, because the weather in the summertime can get nasty quick. It can go from flat to big seas, and these guys are jeopardizing themselves, plus it's crazy. It's crazy. It's just out of control, with everybody, and I would back Paul up. It can be unpredictable and unsafe, and I simply feel like I speak for all recreational anglers that we need more than three days, and it would be greatly appreciated.

In the end, we have all the same intentions, a healthy and vibrant fishery that preserves the environment and provides for our families. We need to use our efforts to find a middle ground in these challenges that we all can agree on. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Every action has a consequence for someone, and so, as a fishing community, let's work together to find the middle ground that keeps all of our goals in reach, and that's pretty much all I have to say.

I think, with all the science, there's enough snapper out there that we can have more than three days. Give us six days, or give us five days, or give us whatever you can allot us to be able to get out there and do it safely and not have eight-million boats at the boat ramp fighting and arguing and people -- When they get on certain structure, and certain spots, it's not a good scene,

and it can be very dangerous, the weather mostly, and then people -- Not everybody -- Just because they own a boat -- It's easier to get a license for a car than it is for a boat, and some of these people don't really know what they're doing, and it's not safe, and I feel like, with all the science that's involved, the snapper are thick.

I would imagine -- I don't even think having six days, but six days would at least give these guys, and give us, a decent weather window to be able to target the species, and that's all I have to say, and so hopefully it was okay, because I'm not used to talking in front of a bunch of people, and so thank you very much.

MR. GARRETT: My name is David Garrett, and I'm a spearfisherman and diver here in the Daytona Beach area. I want to comment on Amendment 53 and other type of actions. I've seen all the effects of the closure of red snapper and the seasonal closure for grouper and the rebuilding program of goliath grouper, and, really, no statistical model can predict all aspects of one fishery. Therefore, I submit to you that the actions you need to insist on are more efforts to control the lionfish populations, reopen the red snapper and the goliath grouper seasons, and though gags are not the targeted fish.

Thank you for the staff's work today on eliminating the gear type restrictions and the slot size limits. That being said, I want to expand on my interest in lionfish. This committee and NOAA have taken no action to reduce the efforts that lionfish have had on the effects of the fish populations, and I believe Florida is the only state which has a concerted effort to reduce lionfish populations to help the ecosystem.

During the scoping meeting, lionfish were brought up several times. Your staff compiled the scoping comments, barely mentioning lionfish, and commented during the scoping meetings that lionfish were not regulated, and thus not an impact of this amendment. Much research has been done on lionfish, and more research is not needed. Action is needed to prevent their harm and the effects on the ecosystem and the fishery.

Action in the way of funding to reduce lionfish populations, while Florida has implemented lionfish harvesting over the last six or seven years, hundreds of thousands of lionfish have been harvested, either commercially or by the use of tournaments. Unfortunately, these efforts have only been limited to where spearfishing is allowed, and most recreational divers do not exceed the 130-foot limit, and very few technical divers spearfish to the depths below 180 feet, due to the harvesting, because spearfishing is illegal with rebreathers.

Florida has funded much research on the trapping of lionfish. While some lobster traps may be getting lionfish at a deeper depth, it's not a significant amount, all over the state. Some traps have been approved, and I have not heard of any major results of efforts of traps for harvesting any quantity of lionfish down there in a thousand foot of depth, where lionfish supposedly could be able to survive. Additionally, traps in the Atlantic are highly regulated, due to the right whales.

If you look at the historical growth of lionfish in our area, you would conclude the reduction of most species that your committee is mandated to manage were affected by lionfish. Lionfish were first identified in the South Atlantic around 1985, and lionfish populations exploded between 1990 and 2005, about the time you say the red snapper and grouper populations started

to be overfished. Between 2000 and 2010, changes to the gag and red snapper fishery were implemented, but there was no effect to reduce lionfish.

Only the lionfish derbies and Florida tournaments have lionfish numbers which reduce in shallow waters, but more effort is needed to be taken. Dollars must be allocated to eliminate more lionfish at all depths and all sizes. Smaller lionfish are still prevalent in shallow waters, due to their not being marketable. As a scuba diver and spear fisherman, I have witnessed the efforts to control lionfish in Florida. Our red snapper population in the area has now exploded, and it needs to be reopened. A seasonal closure for grouper has also made some impact, since the increased number of grouper I've seen in our area.

The report for SEDAR 71, as far as I can conclude, stopped looking at the actual numbers in 2019, and it has only improved the survey data to account for statistical overfishing. While I am not able to attend the SSC and APs and SEDAR meetings, I plead with you to take a stronger look at the efforts of lionfish and take monetary action to reduce their numbers. Thank you.

MS. HARRISON: Hello. Good afternoon. I live in Hatteras, North Carolina, where my family has a retail store and fishing boats. Off of Hatteras, there are only a few species left that we target commercially in the complex. Our trilecta is snowy grouper, blueline tilefish, and golden tilefish. These have all traditionally been commercial species. The recreational fishermen did not want to hand-crank a fish from 500 to 800 feet, and so they never took the time to explore the bottom. Instead, they trolled for mahi or billfish.

As technology advanced, bottom machines and electric reels made bottom fishing a snap for even the greenest fisherman, but perhaps it's our own fault, and we proudly brought a high-quality product to the dock for decades, unknowingly creating a following, and, unfortunately, creating a massive competition for ourselves. I see it play out every year at my market. Customers who have loyally purchased golden tile or snowy grouper for years show up one summer with an outboard and asking for numbers. They usually come back though, and not to buy fish, but trying to sell it, typically saying they can't eat it all and don't want to waste it.

We kindly give them a free crash course on why it doesn't work like that, and then tell them they do not have to catch every fish, and they can throw some back, and so it has become a challenging workplace for fishermen and retailers.

As a retailer, I must compete with imports, from shops down the street claiming their grouper was caught by my boat, and I'm charging so much because I am greedy. I have since put out old permits, redacted federal logbooks and dealer tickets, and put them on display, to prove my fish is really local, and I rarely share photos online or promote my bottom fish, because my boat will be followed the next day, and the harassment has got to the point where, about five years ago, my boat had to plan trips around everyone else. He would leave at midnight, so he could fish in the early morning, usually avoiding summer weekends and holidays, and never going on Memorial Day, July 4th, or Labor Day, despite the heavy market demand.

While we have been on limited entry for twenty years, and our participation continues to decline, and therefore our landings have declined, we are losing our marketplace. It is unreal to see these high prices, but also very sad. So many people cannot access the public resource that their tax dollars go to managing, because they've been priced out and said their purchases go to fund

foreign fisheries, who have seemingly little no regulations, using gear that we banned decades ago, and so now we're talking about reallocation, or basically making it even harder for the average American to harvest domestic fish.

Trip limits and reallocation will not rebuild a species, especially grouper. We need to end open access on the recreational sides, and we need an accurate and timely system for tracking landings. The blueline tilefish shows that better than any species in recent years, and it's not a restriction, but this an opportunity for recreational fishermen to be able to plan their trips. They will know when their quota is getting close to being filled, and they can visit the Outer Banks to catch their tilefish before it closes. This is an opportunity for them, and an opportunity for us, to end overfishing. Thank you.

MS. EMORY: Thank you. My name is Meaghan Emory, and I'm a spear fisher in the State of Florida. I am actively involved in several spearfishing organizations, including the Florida Skindiver's Association and the Spearfishing Alliance, and I have competed in many spearfishing tournaments across the state, at the state and national level. I don't know how much that means, but at least you have a little bit of a sense of who I am and what my interests are.

I am calling in to comment on Amendment 53 for gag, and I first want to take the opportunity to thank council staff for hosting the series of scoping webinars last month and taking the time to listen to our comments and seriously consider the concerns of the spearfishing community. I also greatly appreciate, as I'm sure many others do, the council approving the removal of Action 6, restricting spearfishing gear, from Amendment 53 this afternoon. I am really excited about that, and I appreciate the council's discussion on that topic. The overviews presented in the scoping summary and in today's presentation are very telling of the spearfishing community's position, and I just really greatly appreciate all the work that you all are doing on all of this.

As a community, we do, however, have ongoing concerns that banning spearfishing will continue to be brought up as a potential management strategy, and we will continue to stand up against these types of management actions, unless there are evidential data which point to specific gear types disproportionately contributing to overfishing these populations.

I was really surprised to learn that gear type is not collected as part of MRIP data, and I agree with Martha's comment earlier that improved collection of recreational data is really needed for snapper grouper. Collecting information on gear could really help assess the true proportion of spearfishing take in the recreational sector, and so it may be helpful to explore the potential to include gear type of part of the APAIS and FES surveys, especially if gear-specific restrictions are to be considered as potential management actions in the future.

Council staff pointed out, earlier today, that spearfishing gear accounts for about a quarter of commercial harvest for gag, but that number is likely much lower in the recreational sector, but we won't know until we try to collect that information.

As was pointed out in the discussion today, fisheries management decisions should be made based on the best available data, and, if gear-specific data for the recreational fishery isn't available, gear-specific decisions shouldn't be on the table. I would like to request, respectfully of course, that the council avoid proposing unjustified solutions, like banning spearfishing, based solely on anecdotes. Let's work together to get the data that we actually need. I hope that we

can work with the council, in the future, to provide information needed to better understand the impact of our very small sector on recreational harvest for gag and for other species. Thank you.

MR. HULL: Good afternoon, Mr. Chair and council members. First, I want to congratulate the council members and the staff on how you handle this multitude of very complex management issues that we're all facing. I mean, it is enormous, and it's very daunting. I would like to comment -- Jimmy Hull, Ponce Inlet, Florida, commercial sector.

I would like to comment on the snapper grouper briefing book agenda items, starting with the exempted fishing permit information, and I fully support all of that, and, last week, I participated in a black sea bass pot retrieval gear with Sustainable Seas Fisheries Technology, and I just wanted to report that the gear worked flawlessly. It worked as expected. It's easy to use, and I think it's a game-changer, and I appreciate you all letting that happen.

Next would be the South Atlantic red snapper recreational season update, and, obviously, we need to turn discards into landings on the recreational sector. How do we do that? Well, that's what the discussion is about. We know that we need private recreational permitting with reporting, and there needs to be accountability in that sector, but, to immediately turn the discards that are reported, we need to have a season, and a season for the private recreational sector could be to limit by space, with a depth limit, or by time, and, you know, most recreational fishermen fish in good weather. They fish on the weekends.

There is many, many days of the year that -- Most of the days of the year, private recreational boats are sitting at the dock, and so there's got to be a way to look at that, and you would think that we can find a solution, so that we can turn these into landings. The private recreational fishermen that I talk to say that the days that they spend offshore, and this is the majority of them, and I know that some spend more, but the majority of them fishing in good weather in the summer on the weekends, and so maybe there's a way to fine-tune a season to fit the majority of them, and we can turn those recreational discards into landings. It has to happen. That's really the only way that I can see to make it happen.

Next would be the -- Again, it goes to the reduction of the snapper grouper fishery and the comments made and the reduction of the release reduction, and so all the items that have come forth from your AP, and from others, obviously, they will all be helpful, but most of them are not something that is going to really change it, other than one of the items in the list, which is timed openings and seasons, which I just spoke about, or some type of depth closure. That's something that has to happen.

The other item that was discussed was a weight limit per person, and, during the mini-season, that would be something that would probably be very helpful in high-grading. If it was a weight limit, then some people would probably keep some of those smaller fish. If you can only catch one fish, you're obviously going to discard everything except the biggest fish you can catch.

I fully support the private recreational reporting working group. You're on the right track. You have to develop a federal permit for the recreational fishery. The data that needs to be collected has to happen. We need more good, timely data and reporting. We need to know the universe of anglers, and you're on the right track, and I support it.

You're headed in the right direction on Amendment 46, and all of these things are talking about the recreational industry, the MRIP, and your Snapper Grouper AP has been recommending a permit and reporting requirements for many, many years, and I know you're working on it, and you need to do it faster. We need to move. You're headed in the right direction.

You know, one of the reasons that you state is that recreational data is not meeting the council's needs for management. Yes, and sometimes the best available science is not usable, and so, just because it's labeled as best, I don't think a lot of it can be used, and I see that I'm out of time, and thank you very much.

MR. NELSON: I'm Paul Nelson, Ponce Inlet, Florida. I'm a commercial fisherman and a for-hire fisherman. I'm talking about Amendment 49, the greater amberjack. They're not overfished, and overfishing is occurring, and I am all for the preferred alternatives that the council has recommended, with a 2,000-pound trip limit on both seasons. I'm also in favor for an immediate opening once the amendment is passed, and I don't know if that's possible or not, but I'm for it. I'm also in favor of keeping all of the allocations the same, throughout the snapper grouper complex, until there is some accountability on the recreational sector. Thank you.

MR. SURRENCY: My name is Ron Surrency, and I'm a commercial fisherman, for about forty years, out of Jacksonville, Florida. I've done some charter fishing, and I just wanted to ramble for my three or four minutes about some of the changes that I've noticed, and I've been talking with some of my bandit fishermen buddies, and I've mainly a commercial spear fisherman, and we were talking.

On the commercial sector, a lot of the permit holders have changed. When they started putting in these smaller trip limits, and smaller allocations, the older, slower snapper boats, the style boats like mine, kind of have gone by the wayside, and now you've got this high-end, half-a-million-dollar, or million-dollar, center console boats with three or four motors, and they're leasing these commercial permits, and so we're either catching our limit, or we're not catching our limit, but a lot of those fish are not even making it to a fish house.

They will put seven or eight guys on the boat, or six guys on a boat, and they go out there, and they catch a few muttons, and they catch a grouper, or whatever, catch a few jacks, but they take it home, and they're cutting it up, and they're taking it home and feeding their families, and so those fish -- There is no landings on the commercial side, and, really, because of the recreational sector not reporting, there's no landings on the recreational side, and so there's no fish house landings, and they don't even know where the trip limit is, and so there's no recreational landings at all.

Over the last fifteen years, that's definitely starting to make a play, along with the other gentleman was talking about lionfish, and, before I got sick, in 2019, and my partner, Jason, we mainly harvested -- Our main fishery was -- To make up for the loss for grouper, and it really wasn't a loss, but it was an easier fishery to harvest, was lionfish, and the price got up, and we didn't have to gut them, and so we just focused our -- We just turned our focus to that one fishery, and it had me harvested, or fishing, in areas that I would never even dream about. It would be in a scrubby bottom that I would call nursery bottom, and you would see these little,

tiny sea bass, or little, tiny snapper or whatever, and there wasn't even no structure, but lionfish loved it. We would stay in that area, and it just evolved.

Another thing is like, with the vermilion snapper fishery, and we're not even close to -- You're giving us more quota, and we can't thank you enough for it, but there's not enough of us to catch it, and so, you know, we need to look at that and bump up our quota for that fishery, and that would help make up for the loss of these other fisheries.

I also support where the recreational sector -- They need more fishing days, but they also need to be accountable for their landings, and there needs to be some type of system, and I agree with a permit, and I've been saying that for years. There should be a permit system for the recreational sector, just like there is for everything else, whether it's duck hunting or deer hunting or any other animal that we harvest, and most of the guys are wanting to contribute, and they're conservationists, and they're conservationist minded, and so, yes, that all needs to be, you know, considered.

Another thing is, and I will touch on this real quick, is I have a buddy of mine that -- As I've been coming out of treatment and getting my health back, I've got into king mackerel fishing, and so I'm around a bunch of my buddies that cast net the Spanish mackerel fishery, and they're on a 500-pound trip limit down here in Florida, because North Carolina went over their quota by 100 percent, and so, if we go over our 500-pound trip limit by one pound, we've got FWC officers running around here wanting to write a citation, but, yet, there is nothing -- What happened to whoever is counting the stock assessment, or whoever is counting the trip limit and allowing the fishery to go over by 100 percent? I mean, did they get fired, or did they get fined? You know, nothing.

Those people need to do a better job of counting and keeping up with the landings, and that's all I have to say, and I thank you for your time, and I thank you for letting me have the chance to present my comments, and you all have a good day.

MR. GARRETT: I've just got another quick comment, since I didn't have time before, and I'm glad that I'm able to throw this in, and I actually don't have snapper grouper permits, but I do some commercial fishing through the FWC's saltwater products license and restricted species type commercial, but, anyway, I have some friends though that have these snapper grouper permits, and they have smaller boats, or not necessarily smaller, but they're slower boats, and so, when you talk about reducing that commercial trip limit from 1,000 pounds down to 200 pounds, or even to 500 pounds, that's going to limit the slower boats, because they go out for two to five days at a time, to make it worth their while, because of the gas prices and everything.

Anyway, is there any way you could change that from a trip limit to a daily trip limit, and, when they can actually prove they were out for three days, they would get a three-day trip limit, rather than the faster boats that can run out there one day and get their 200 pounds, and then they go out the next day and get 200 pounds, and, in five days, they've got a thousand, where this boat -- They might only be limited to their 200 pounds. Anyway, that's basically what I wanted to bring up for your consideration. Thank you.

MS. GUYAS: I want to say two more things, and so back on the permit. I mentioned that this is going to take a lot of players to get this done. Private anglers are going to be an integral one, and

that's going to take a lot of communication. You know, I think people have seen the success of some of these other programs, like in Florida, and so you can build on that, certainly, but you're going to need to include people, and it's going to be difficult.

I mean, you saw how many people were here from the private fishery today, and so it might take some creative thinking in getting wider buy-in from people. Depending on the road you go as you're developing this program, down the road, you might want to do another ad hoc AP that is just private anglers, to talk through some of the details and the logistics of how this might be set up, to kind of field-test it a little bit and just talk through, really, how is this going to work, kind of from top to bottom, from the user standpoint, and we're probably not there yet, but once you get a little bit further down the line.

Then the last point I will make is, as you talk about how to structure this, you're probably going to get the most bang for your buck if you build something that is at least compatible with what's already in place in Florida. What Florida has done really is a gift, and they have set up a program, and we already have all these people that are bought-in, and they accepted it, and they spent the political capital, and they're spending actual money to get this done, and you have a universe of anglers there that are being sampled.

Does it need to be exactly the same as Florida? Probably not, but that's where your AP is going to be helpful, in trying to figure those things out, but I think it would be good to build on that, rather than trying to reinvent the wheel. I guess, long story short, this is going to take a lot, but it's going to be worth it, if you guys really spend the time and are really thoughtful about it, and this could be a really, really good thing for everybody, and so I will stop. Thank you.

MR. COX: Good afternoon. This is Jack Cox, Morehead City, and I'm a commercial fisherman and AP member. Listen, the AP works hard, for a long time, and the council, even back in 2013, has been asking for some way to identify the private recreational anglers, and so please move forward on this. This has been going on for too long, and we don't know how many participants are coming in from the recreational side.

I think going down the road of a recreational, a private recreational, season is the right path, but we've got to identify the players. We don't have any idea how many people are taking from the resource, and, you know, we put a lot of time into this, and we don't get paid for it, and you guys really need to pay good attention to what we're doing, because we work hard at it, and that's something we've been asking for at the council for a long, long time, but, other than that, we're going to continue not to have very good assessments, and we're going to always be behind the eight-ball, because of things like this.

You know, we just -- If you don't have good data, you guys know what that does to the assessments. Anyway, thank you for your -- One other thing. I certainly don't have a problem with -- You know, you talked about VMS for the wreckfish fishery, and I certainly think it's something that should be across-the-board for all the snapper grouper permits. A lot of people are offloading on private docks, private sites, and law enforcement is not being able to do a good job, and a lot of trip limits are getting exceeded. Anyway, thank you.

(Whereupon, the public comment session was adjourned.)
