

June 7, 2017

To: Secretary Ross  
Fr: Earl Comstock  
Re: Update on Private Recreational Fishing for Gulf Red Snapper

At the appropriations hearing this morning Senator Shelby may ask about the situation with recreational fishing for red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. The Federal fishing season this year for private recreational anglers (those fishing from their own boats as opposed to charter boats) was only three days, from June 1 to June 3, so it has already closed.

At the request of the White House (Dearborn/McGinley) and a dozen Congressmen from all five States bordering the Gulf of Mexico for a three day a week Federal season throughout the summer, you authorized me to explore an extension of the Federal fishing season.

**There are three reasons an extension is warranted –**

- (1) the Federal season for recreational anglers has been reduced to only three days despite a significant increase in the stock, causing immense frustration to anglers and grave economic harm to businesses that depend on recreational anglers;
- (2) the States disagree with NMFS stock assessments and estimates of recreational catch, with the result that each State has been setting its own fishing season in State waters for red snapper, with seasons ranging from 68 days to all year; and
- (3) an extension provides an opportunity to reset the relationship between the Department, the States and Congress over management of red snapper and could lead to a long term solution by spurring Congressional action that is needed to fix this issue.

I have had two very productive conference calls with the directors of all five State fishery managers. They have all indicated that their States are willing and able to quickly change their rules to allow for an alignment of the open and closed days throughout the summer. They are presently getting angler feedback on two possible options:

- (A) a two day a week (Saturday-Sunday) summer season starting on June 17 and ending on Labor Day (with Monday and Tuesday, July 3 and 4, included), for a total of 27 days, with States that have a fall season (Florida and Texas) allowed to keep them; and
- (B) a three day a week (Friday-Sunday) summer season starting on June 16 and ending on Labor Day (with Monday and Tuesday, July 3 and 4, included) for a total of 39 days.  
Under this three day option, States must give up their fall seasons.

As discussed, under either option the increased angler catch will result in the overall catch limit for this year being exceeded by 30% and 50%. NMFS has assessed the impact of such an overage and agrees it does not threaten the health of the stock. It may slow rebuilding of the stock, but so far the stock is ahead of schedule. Either option would mean that, absent Congressional action to modify the Magnuson-Stevens Act requirements for the Gulf, the recreational season next year would be significantly reduced. All the State fishery managers know this, but agree that coordinated action has the greater long term benefit.