



FIFTY TWO REASONS NOAA MUST CONDUCT FISHERIES STOCK ASSESSMENTS IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES ©

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“Science will set us free,” has been a rallying cry for Southeastern Fisheries Association (SFA) and other commercial and recreational organizations from Texas through North Carolina for several decades. It continues to be a passionate rallying cry in 2013. Science is non-partisan. Fish are non-partisan. The private sector group of men and women who fight for equal protection under the law and more transparency in how our tax dollars are spent by NOAA are non-partisan.

(Week # 5 of 52 weeks) “If you can’t measure a fish stock, you can’t manage it.”

I’m not sure why Texas refuses to comply with NOAA’s Gulf of Mexico red snapper plan, but I hazard a guess it’s partly because Texas does not believe and will not accept NOAA’s red snapper stock assessment science. Because of lower and lower NOAA allowable catches, Florida has a “derby” forty day red snapper fishing season for Florida’s licensed recreational fishing industry. The forty day “derby” could be reduced to a twenty–seven day “derby” red snapper fishing season in 2013 because two million pounds of red snapper were caught over the recreational quota.

Some anglers will take their boats offshore during the forty day Florida angler fishing “derby”, no matter what the weather is like, and run into trouble as has happened in the past.

Unlike Florida, Texas allows anglers to harvest red snapper every day of the year. Texas recreational fishermen can harvest four red snapper, per person, per day, greater than fifteen inches in length. There is great joy in Texas, but great angst in the four other Gulf States especially in Florida.

What does this have to do with stock assessments? It has everything to do with performing new and better red snapper stock assessments. SFA believes if NOAA’s regional office and science centers worked cooperatively with states, academia and the commercial and recreational fishing industry, they could stop ninety-five percent of the hate filled rhetoric that fills the Internet. An honest, open assessment could be done that would be believable to all the Gulf States and the fishing industry if they were more involved in the process.

If NOAA implements an open, peer-reviewed red snapper stock assessment and any state refuses to be compliant, the US Secretary of Commerce should issue regulations superseding state regulations until the states became compliant with the federal fishery management plan.

It is unlikely the US Department of Commerce will ever supersede the management of fish in Texas waters. NOAA has always been intimidated by Texas when it comes to fishery statistics. SFA understands NOAA Law Enforcement Agents will not make a case against a Texas recreational red snapper fisherman thought to have caught red snapper in federal waters, but lands the fish in Texas. If this was a commercial fisherman he would probably be charged under the Lacey Act because he caught a red snapper in closed federal waters, and crossed a state line to unload.

Much, if not all of this scenario, would be avoided with an honest, open, peer-reviewed red snapper stock assessment in the southeastern United States.

If federal management of red snapper can’t be consistent throughout the Gulf based on honest stock assessments, then Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana are justified in non-compliance to provide their citizens equal treatment under red snapper rules and regulations.

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Bob Jones, Executive Director
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