



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

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(Week # 8 of 52 weeks) "If NOAA doesn't measure the red snapper stock, NOAA cannot manage it."

An accurate stock assessment for the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery could have stopped the one vote defeat (6-7) for a 9.95 million pound Allowable Biological Catch ABC for 2013 by the Gulf of Mexico Special Scientific and Statistical Committee. After discussing "uncertainty" and "layers upon layers of assumptions", a motion setting an 8.46 million pound ABC was approved 10-3 on November 8, 2012. The committee decided not to address the level of red snapper harvest again until after the NOAA science center's benchmark assessment is released possibly in late 2013.

The "layers of assumptions" would be eliminated with honest stock assessments. Several scientists asked if there were overage adjustments because of overfishing by the anglers? *"Steven Atran (GOMFMC staff) responded that the red snapper rebuilding plan did not currently have that accountability measure."* Why? If commercial fishermen over-harvested even 10,000 pounds of red snapper the entire power of NOAA law enforcement would be brought to bear on fishermen who fish in the accountable sector. Yet NOAA looks the other way when anglers over-harvest. Where is the equity?

As long as there are no honest, peer-reviewed stock assessments available, all aspects of fishery management are thwarted. This is a prime example of drastic unnecessary regulations being forced on the men and women who provide fresh seafood to the non-boating consumers. Scientists cannot manage precisely and fairly without empirical data. They must stop "layers and layers" of assumptions.

NOAA and the Council determined anglers can over-harvest nearly 2 million pounds of red snapper in state waters without any impact on rebuilding the federal stock of fish. That's convoluted.

If you research "convoluted" in a special dictionary it says, "convoluted means how the Gulf Council manages fish." A vigilant reading of the Minutes of SSC meetings like the one described above, indicates frustration on the part of some of the scientists leading to convoluted management.

SFA believes the majority of scientists who serve on the SSC understand the importance of getting the data right. They recognize that bad data translates into punitive regulations on fishermen whose economic lives are controlled by one political vote by the full council or its SSC committees.

For example, a 7 to 6 vote by the South Atlantic Council banned red snapper harvest from North Carolina to Key West, Florida over two years ago. The fishing industry believes several votes were based on politics, especially by a Past President of Coastal Conversation Association who was a leader on the South Atlantic Council at the time.

NOAA must conduct fisheries dependent and spawning aggregation measurement projects with the commercial fishermen who could help scientists figure out spawning patterns. As one scientific fisherman recently told SFA, *"The actual location and timing of fish spawning depends on the salubrious oceanographic conditions which foster larval & early juvenile survival and the relative age (maturity & fecundity) of the assembled fish. It can vary from year-to-year and accounts for poor, average, or very successful spawns. Increased survival and eventual entry into the stock being fished is usually referred as cohort analysis of year-class strength -- the relative abundance of individuals resulting from those very successful spawning events."*

If NOAA can't measure a fish stock, they can't manage it.

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