



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

FEBRUARY 24, 2013

(Week # 9 of 52 weeks)

“If NOAA doesn’t measure the red snapper stock, NOAA cannot manage it.”

Stock assessments must be undertaken cooperatively with state agencies and academia and the fishing industry, both commercial and recreational. NOAA discounts the scientific capabilities of the many scientists who work in venues apart from being directly employed by NOAA. Non-NOAA funded scientists have more leeway in following the scientific method from hypothesis to the research to the replication and finally to the conclusions. True or not, the perception of many within and without government, feel NOAA conclusions are predetermined and the research managed to verify the NOAA conclusions.

The FCMA was created in 1976. It established quasi-independent fishery management councils, whose membership is supposed to reflect all sectors of the fishing industry in each region. They were established by geographical regions to address the natural differences in the stocks of fish within the EEZ. There are significant differences in the eight regions.

There is however an important common thread applicable to all regions. That commonality is basic scientific stock assessment data developed through a process that utilizes more than landings and catch per unit of effort, that result in low allocations by Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC) in the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic Ocean.

Southeastern Fisheries Association and other fishing groups know if the SSC’s in the southeast had empirical and at-sea current data to work with they would be more comfortable to consider increasing the allowable catch. Under the present NOAA management controls, the SSC authorizes extremely low allowable catch quotas, putting too much emphasis on the United Nation’s concept of the precautionary principle.

Without current stock assessments the councils will continue to implement fishery management plans that require millions of pounds of regulatory discards such as the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishery. Many fishermen working on the water believe NOAA has created a discard rate of 5 to 10 million pounds of red snapper annually. A true red snapper stock assessment would end this wasteful situation.

Because of the NOAA “business plan” that seems to avoid stock assessment research, fishermen and fishing communities suffer. The local, state and national economies suffer. NOAA officials and the SSC members do not have to suffer or worry about losing their jobs or having their pay reduced.

At the current time, a group of NOAA selected scientists have TOTAL control of fishing quotas. This was never the intent of the original Magnuson Act. The SSC’s in the southeast have some honest, well qualified scientists serving, but is still a political entity beholden to NOAA and their regional officials. There are important political factors that must be discussed in the near future if the commercial and recreational industry hopes to survive. Stock assessment would relieve most of this angst toward NOAA.

For starters, Does NOAA have veto power over who is on the SSC? How are the members selected? Who makes the preliminary cuts of applicants? How many are paid by NOAA? How many receive grant money from NOAA? And what, if any, are the written and unwritten guidelines they must obey?

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

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