



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

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(Week # 15 of 52 weeks)

“If NOAA does not measure a fish stock, NOAA cannot manage it.”

The lack of rock-solid stock assessments in the Gulf of Mexico has resulted in a bill being filed in the U.S. House of Representatives to extend state jurisdiction over all reef fish in federal waters out to a depth of 120 feet from shore. The seafood industry recognizes and is chagrined with the red snapper state of affairs in the Gulf of Mexico. There has been a steady reduction of annual fishing days for individual anglers and the charter boat industry which is without merit when compared to the reality of the fishery.

There is unanimity among fishermen that the GOM red snapper stock is not overfished, but NOAA's harsh regulations linger on. Removing a NOAA fishery regulation is more difficult than solving the federal budget deficit and none of them will even be amended unless and until stock assessments are robust, transparent and current.

The proposed bill however goes far beyond solving the red snapper debacle. The seafood industry defines the bill as a Trojan horse slipped into play under the cover of darkness and without full disclosure to the Congressmen involved. There is no malice toward commercial fishing by the sponsors of this bill, but there are organizations that will do anything possible to remove commercial fishermen from Gulf waters in order to reserve all the fish for themselves. The proposed bill would accomplish that if the state wildlife commissions and agencies decided to give game fish status like billfish or red drum and prohibit harvesting for sale.

One of my folks recently sent me some thoughts on stock assessments. The opening paragraphs make a lot of sense. He wrote:

“It isn't about just counting fish; it is about assessing the impact of fishing mortality on stock sustainability. And, it isn't about disagreeing with past stock assessment conclusions; it is recognizing that inappropriate data was used to create them. Finally, it isn't that all sectors of many fisheries, and seafood consumers, question the validity of regulations imposed by Fishery Management Councils; it is a widespread lack of confidence in how the data for stock assessments is being acquired for use in the models because model results don't represent reality.

Various means exist for measuring removal of fish from a sustainable fish stock in order to compare that removal with the rate at which the desired fish get added to the exploited stock via annual growth and recruitment. Our objective in managing fish stocks should be to periodically determine the status of each stock upon which fishermen rely so that fishing practices can be correctly modified to prevent overfishing. Fishing mortality is, we can all agree, the specific impact of those varied fishing practices. Thus, it must be considered along with natural mortality to estimate the age and size of fish being removed from the exploited stock. Only then can an adequate balance be attained between what is removed and what is added via reproductive success and interim growth and survival. What results is a sustainable fishery.”

Quite often I am asked, “Bob, what do you mean by stock assessment?” I view that question the same as if I asked someone, “What do you mean by by-catch?” There is no easy or one sentence way to explain either stock assessments or by-catch. For some to understand either one of them would take a lifetime.

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