

Commentary: Update the archaic, overreaching fisheries law



Recreational anglers. (South Florida Sun Sentinel)

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This hurricane season has been one of the worst in recent memory, and Floridians, who are no strangers to tropical storms, have been particularly impacted. As the Sunshine State rebuilds, it's important to consider the impacts of these storms on Florida's economy and the policies that impact its recovery and growth.

Each year, millions of Americans flock to our nation's coasts to participate in saltwater recreational fishing — a type of fishing that heavily depends on the recreational boating industry.

The recreational boating industry supports more than 650,000 American jobs and has an economic footprint in excess of \$121 billion, annually. More than 55,000 Floridians work in jobs supported by the industry — more than three times the population of Lake Wales — contributing \$10.3 billion in economic impact.

However, the industry's significant contribution, both to the work force and our nation's economy, has been hampered by well-intentioned, poorly designed federal fishing regulations that rely on bad data and

management.

Marine fisheries, which anglers rely on for consistent access to quality fishing, have been governed by the Magnuson-Stevens Act since its passage in 1976. This outdated legislation was created to regulate commercial fishing, and neglects the fact that recreational fishing, whether on Florida's tarpon flats or offshore, is a fundamentally different activity. As a result, recreational anglers are forced into a system that makes no sense.

The existing regulatory framework — under the management of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration — puts archaic restrictions on fisheries access for recreational anglers and implements inconsistent season dates that limit recreational fishing. In turn, this limited access hamstring Florida businesses that rely on sportsmen.

Logically, if American anglers can participate in their sport only a few weeks per year, their impact on the businesses that support their ability to fish and boat is directly undercut.

Possibly the worst example of federal fisheries mismanagement is Gulf of Mexico red snapper.

The red snapper has long been one of the most popular fish among saltwater anglers. However, the fishing season has been dramatically reduced over the past six years — from six months to a measly three days. That is, until the Department of Commerce encouraged the Gulf states to increase those three days to 42 days. That's right, from half a year to barely more than a month. Hope you don't have other plans that month or you're out of luck.

This regulatory change begs the question: How is such overregulation possible?

Unfortunately, NOAA relies on antiquated data-collection methods designed for commercial fishing, due in part to the strict interpretation of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. By using commercial regulation data-collection methods, NOAA fails to accurately measure the impact of recreational anglers.

But recreational anglers and adjacent businesses aren't the only ones impacted by this inefficient regulation — the system also undermines conservation efforts.

Sportsmen and -women know how important healthy, robust stocks of fish and game are — they rely on conservation to protect their pastimes, and in many ways, they are our country's original conservationists. A sizable portion of funding for conservation efforts in the U.S. is generated by recreational fishing and boating. Individual states rely on license sales and excise taxes on applicable goods — from sport fishing equipment to boat motor fuel — to generate revenue that is critical to conservation. In Florida, during fiscal year 2015, the state generated \$37,555,602 in revenue from licensing alone — far from insignificant.

This makes anglers' lack of access particularly problematic. Without these anglers — who contribute \$1.5 billion annually to fisheries and conservation through excise taxes, donations and fees — our natural resources would be decimated.

Luckily, there is good news. Earlier this year, U.S. Rep. Daniel Webster, R-Clermont, joined fellow Reps. Garret Graves, R-La.; Gene Green, D-Texas; and Rob Wittman, R-Va.; to introduce the “Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act of 2017,” otherwise known as the Modern Fish Act.

This critical legislation would provide a much-needed update to the current regulatory system, which, after more than 40 years, is long overdue. Specifically, the Modern Fish Act would modernize fisheries management and data-collection techniques — addressing the problem at the crux of the existing regulatory framework.

The passage of the Modern Fish Act would relieve frustrated recreational anglers by replacing harmful overregulation and unnecessary restrictions with practical management approaches. In turn, it would boost thousands of businesses that are supported by saltwater recreational fishing, all while ensuring effective conservation efforts and funding.

Increased access, an economic boon for local business, and more support for conservation — who can’t support that?

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