



## H.R. 2304 – A Bill that Would Weaken Fisheries Science and Undermine Efforts to Prevent Overfishing in the Gulf of Mexico

Congress should reject H.R. 2304 because it would undermine the progress we've made in preventing overfishing for some of America's most valuable and vulnerable ocean fish populations. The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the federal law that governs management of our nation's ocean fish, requires managers to set science-based annual catch limits (ACLs) to ensure sustainable fishing for all federally-managed ocean fish populations by the end of 2011. The misnamed "Fishery Science Improvement Act" would jeopardize this goal and put economically and environmentally important species such as cobia and vermilion snapper at risk by undermining the ACL requirement. Specifically, H.R. 2304 would:

**Exempt managers from setting science-based catch limits** for fish populations that have not been assessed in the past five years. This exemption could risk overfishing on at least 8 of the most commercially and recreationally-valuable fish in the Gulf (see page 2 for a complete list). It would also exempt managers from using scientifically valid methods for establishing ACLs based on existing and readily available information such as the biology of the species and recent commercial and recreational catch data.

**Create a new loophole** that could allow the Secretary of Commerce to exempt scores of fish species from the requirement to establish science-based catch limits, including those that are undergoing overfishing. H.R. 2304 would establish a new, ill-defined category of fish populations known as "ecosystem stocks" that are exempt from catch limits.

### Vermilion Snapper: A Snappy Catch at Risk

Vermilion snapper brings in good economic returns for commercial fishermen and enjoyment for anglers, and plays an important role in the Gulf of Mexico ecosystem. In 2009, Gulf fishermen landed 3.8 million pounds of vermilion snapper worth \$8.2 million, and anglers landed 325,000 pounds. Vermilion snapper is an increasingly popular target, and fishing pressure is on the rise primarily due to the restrictions on fishing for red snapper.

Though vermilion snapper is scheduled to have an update assessment later this year, because its formal assessment was completed in 2005 it could be exempt from catch limits under H.R. 2304. This could lead to overfishing of this popular species, resulting in reduced allowable catch and profits for commercial fishermen and declining recreational opportunities.

Source: NMFS Annual Commercial Landing Statistics and NMFS Recreational Fishery Statistics



**Extend the deadline to set catch limits that prevent overfishing** to 2014, putting vulnerable fish populations at risk. We know from experience that “kicking the can down the road” and risking overfishing can have disastrous consequences for our nation’s fish populations and fishing communities. For example, managers allowed overfishing of Gulf of Mexico red snapper for decades, reducing the breeding population to less than 5 percent of what scientists considered a healthy level by 1988.<sup>i</sup> Starting in 2007, managers finally put in place strict limits on the numbers of red snapper caught annually,<sup>ii</sup> and now for the first time in more than 20 years, overfishing for red snapper is no longer occurring in the Gulf of Mexico.

Thanks to the ACL requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, managers have steadily improved data collection and analysis for species that have historically lacked assessments because they are not commercially valuable or are small fisheries. H.R. 2304 would undermine this progress by taking away the incentive for managers to collect information and comprehensively assess these fish populations. Instead, they will likely allocate their scarce research funds to those species where they are legally required to set science-based catch limits.

Congress took decisive bipartisan action in 2006 to end decades of overfishing and restore our nation’s valuable fish populations by strengthening the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. H.R. 2304 undermines science-based management and puts vulnerable fish populations at risk just as we are nearing the finish line of ending and preventing overfishing for all federally-managed fish populations. **Congress should reject this short-sighted bill and instead help improve fisheries science by investing in fisheries data collection and monitoring programs.**

**8 Gulf of Mexico Ocean Fish Populations That Could be Exempted From Annual Catch Limits and Accountability Measures by H.R. 2304**

Red drum - Gulf of Mexico  
Nassau grouper - Gulf of Mexico  
Vermilion snapper - Gulf of Mexico  
Cobia – Gulf of Mexico (jointly managed with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council)  
Spanish mackerel – Gulf of Mexico (as above)  
Yellowtail snapper – Gulf of Mexico (as above)  
Little tunny – Gulf of Mexico (as above)  
Dolphinfish – Gulf of Mexico (as above)

Sources: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), “2011 Status of U.S. Fisheries: First Quarter Update,” Mar. 31, 2011, [www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/statusoffisheries/SOSmain.htm](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/statusoffisheries/SOSmain.htm); NMFS, Species Information System Public Portal. <https://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/sisPortal/sisPortalMain.jsp>, accessed June 25, 2011; and personal communication with NMFS personnel.

<sup>i</sup> Goodyear, C.P. 1988. “Recent trends in red snapper fishery of the Gulf of Mexico,” NMFS. SEFSC. Miami FL. CRD 87/88-16. Memo. Rpt. 98p, see pages 12 and 24.

<sup>ii</sup> Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC), 2007. “Final Amendment 27 to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan and Amendment 14 to the Shrimp Fishery Management Plan.” <<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/RedSnapper/pdfs/FinalRFAMend27-ShrimpAmend14.pdf>>.

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