

Good morning, Chair Huffman. I'm Spud Woodward from the Brunswick-Golden Isles area of coastal Georgia. I am vice-chair of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and a member of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, However, I am not here representing either of those organizations. Instead, I'm here as a saltwater angler, fisheries biologist and former director of Georgia's marine fisheries management agency.

There have been marked improvements in the Marine Recreational Information Program or MRIP as it's known. However, for many federally managed species, MRIP still does not produce catch estimates adequate for MSA management and for determining compliance with annual catch limits. MRIP estimates can vary greatly from year to year for species rarely encountered in angler intercept surveys. Also, MRIP catch estimates for many federally managed species have high percent standard error measurements. This creates both scientific and management uncertainty. This uncertainty leads to precautionary decisions that can unnecessarily limit fishing opportunities. Managers need flexibility to consider fishery performance based on multiple years of MRIP catch estimates. This is being done with Atlantic cobia through the interstate fishery management process. Ideally, NOAA Fisheries should partner with state agencies along the Atlantic Coast to create and implement surveys to supplement MRIP. This has been done successfully with red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico using a combination of electronic reporting and conventional creel survey methods.

The South Atlantic Council manages a snapper-grouper complex of 55 species. Many occur in the same areas at the same time making it difficult to avoid incidental catches of those that cannot be legally harvested. Over the past decade the recreational sector could harvest red snapper for a total of 38 days. For the other 3,678 days, red snapper was bycatch to be released. Studies show that at least 28% of these fish do not survive due to the combined effects of hooking, handling and barotrauma. Descending devices significantly reduce discard mortality caused by barotrauma and are a better option than venting the fish. The South Atlantic Council has asked NOAA Fisheries to establish a rule requiring a descending device be onboard any vessel fishing for or possessing snapper-grouper species. The Gulf of Mexico Council has been hesitant to take a similar step causing Congress to intervene in the form of the DESCEND act. It is imperative that the fishing community take greater responsibility for the fate of the fish they release. It is also imperative that managers be willing to give the fishing community a reward for their good behavior by allowing the harvest of at least a portion of the fish that would otherwise have been lost to discard mortality.

MSA National Standard 1 guidelines speak to managing important prey species for their food value in the marine ecosystem. Recently, the South Atlantic Council tried to do just that with bullet and frigate mackerel, species important in the diets of wahoo and dolphin. However, there is uncertainty about how this can be done under the MSA causing unforeseen delays. The Forage Fish Conservation Act has been proposed to improve ecosystem management under the MSA. While I strongly agree with the purpose and intent of this legislation, I also know that the requirements, if implemented as written, will significantly increase the workload of state marine fisheries agencies, NOAA Fisheries and the regional fishery management councils. Thus, due consideration must be given to enhancing the capacity of each, in both human and fiscal resources, to ensure success.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak this morning. I appreciate your willingness to travel throughout the United States to hear the many and varied perspectives on the Magnuson Stevens Act.