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JOINT RELEASE BY A.P. BELL FISH COMPANY, THE GULF OF MEXICO REEF FISH SHAREHOLDERS' ALLIANCE, AND THE SOUTHERN OFFSHORE FISHING ASSOCIATION

## **Red Grouper Reallocation by NOAA Fisheries Punishes Commercial Fishermen and Seafood Consumers, Rewards Recreational Anglers For Discarding Dead Fish, and Jeopardizes Red Grouper Sustainability**

Today, the U.S. Department of Commerce and National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries [formally published their decision](#) to take fish from commercial fishing families, the seafood supply chain, and the seafood consumers they serve. The publication of the Final Rule implementing [Amendment 53](#) to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan comes despite NOAA Fisheries admitting that doing so will increase recreational discards, put more strain on the recovery of this species, and reduce the amount of red grouper that all fishermen can enjoy in the Gulf of Mexico.

“Red grouper is the foundation of my family’s business that has existed in Florida for more than 80 years,” said **Karen Bell, third-generation owner and President of A.P. Bell Fish Company located in Cortez, Florida.** “We pride ourselves on catching and serving our customers fresh, wild, sustainably-caught red grouper from the Gulf of Mexico. Now NOAA Fisheries is making it difficult for us to serve our customers and stay in business.”

The ostensible purpose of Amendment 53 is to account for new data from NOAA Fisheries based on the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES), which indicated the recreational sector catches more red grouper than previously estimated. But instead of using these new data to spark a discussion about better management and more accountability to ensure all fishermen stay within their catch limits, NOAA Fisheries and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) chose to use these new data to

literally “rewrite history” to justify taking 32% of the commercial sector’s quota and giving it to the recreational sector.

“Somehow NOAA Fisheries took this new recreational FES survey, magically revised 35 years of data about what recreational anglers caught in the past, and told us that commercial fishermen need to give up some of our quota so these anglers get more fish to catch in the future,” said **Ed Maccini, president of the Southern Offshore Fishing Association (SOFA), based in Madeira Beach, Florida**. “But unlike commercial fishermen who report and weigh every pound of fish we land, recreational anglers don’t have to report what they catch or even be accurate in what they choose to report. It’s all basically guesswork by NOAA Fisheries. And now they’re taking our quota away based on these highly uncertain and wildly changing estimates.”

Commercial fishermen remain baffled as to why NOAA Fisheries would make such an anti-conservation decision when the red grouper stock recently reached some of the lowest levels on record. Furthermore, according to the Gulf Council’s own analysis, rewarding the recreational sector with more allocation “*is more likely to result in an overfishing or eventual overfished status of red grouper.*”

“This is a lose-lose-lose situation: our businesses are taking a hit, seafood consumers are taking a hit, and the health of the red grouper stock is taking a hit,” said **Jason DeLaCruz, owner of Wild Seafood Co. in John’s Pass, Florida**. “The commercial sector is stuck with getting a smaller slice of a smaller pie yet the recreational sector is allowed to throw back more than 3.7 million red grouper every year, and a few years back they threw back more than 6 million red grouper – that’s more fish than commercial fishermen are allowed to land. Amendment 53 reduces everyone’s quotas so that the recreational sector can discard more fish. It’s such a waste.”

The public opposition to Amendment 53 has been overwhelming – all told, more than 99.3% of all testimony recently submitted to NOAA Fisheries opposed Amendment 53. This opposition came from a wide range of industries and sectors including:

- Commercial fishermen
- Commercial fishing organizations (in the Gulf of Mexico and throughout the country)
- Federal commercial fishing coalitions (representing commercial fishermen from Alaska to California to Maine to the Gulf of Mexico)
- The restaurant industry
- The seafood supply chain
- Charter/for-hire fishermen and fishing organizations
- Scientists
- Economists
- Environmental organizations
- Lawyers/legal advisors, and

- Seafood consumers (literally thousands of them)

“Amendment 53 is illegal. Period,” said **Buddy Guindon, Executive Director of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders’ Alliance, based in Galveston, Texas.** “It maximizes discards, unfairly penalizes commercial fishermen by taking away their quota to cover dead discards by recreational anglers, and increases the risk of overfishing. This is opposite of what Congress intended when it adopted the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.”

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