

Environmentalists pan recreational red snapper season deal

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WASHINGTON – In a sharp reversal from Obama- era rules, the Trump administration is extending by more than five weeks the amount of time recreational anglers have to harvest red snapper in federal waters off the Gulf of Mexico. Earlier this year, NOAA Fisheries approved a recreational season of three days – June 1-3. Starting Friday, they'll get an additional 39 spread over the summer in both state and federal waters following negotiations between the Department of Commerce (which oversees federal fisheries) and the fishery managers from the five Gulf states. The deal to reopen the season represents a major victory for private fishing advocates who argue the federal restrictions on red snapper have not only hurt the economies of Gulf Coast communities but also are unnecessary because the once-depleted fish stock has bounced back to robust levels.

Mike Leonard, conservation director for the American Sportfishing Association called the announcement “a welcome relief for the thousands of tackle shops, marinas, equipment manufacturers and other businesses who have suffered from decreasing public access to Gulf red snapper in recent years.”

It's also another defeat for environmentalists who have watched President Trump pull out of the Paris accord to limit greenhouse gas emissions, propose deep cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency, and move to open more offshore waters to oil and gas drilling.

“The anticipated decision to lengthen the private recreational red snapper fishing season in the Gulf of Mexico by the Department of Commerce will almost certainly lead to overfishing of red snapper, plain and simple,” said Meredith Moore, director of Fish Conservation at the Ocean Conservancy. “While we welcome this decision, there is still a need for long-term solutions,” Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La. said in a statement. “NOAA says the number of red snapper is increasing, yet shortened the season. We need to make sure that we use accurate data when dictating our policy.” NOAA Fisheries acknowledges the stock is still overfished and that the change could delay the ultimate rebuilding of the stock by as many as six years, according to an agency document justifying the expanded season.

“Nevertheless, (the agency) calculates that the stock will continue to

grow, although at a substantially more modest pace if this approach is adopted for one year," the document said. The agency also said finding a common solution with states was key because federal efforts to rebuild the stock by compressing recreational seasons in past years have been undermined by states' decisions to allow much longer red snapper season in their waters.

"The current situation has undermined the federal- state partnership on management of (red snapper) and threatens to undermine the very fabric of Federal fisheries management in the Gulf and elsewhere," the agency wrote.

The new rule will reopen the 2017 Federal recreational season for red snapper by private anglers on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from June 16, 2017, through Labor Day, September 4, 2017. No fishing will be permitted Monday through Thursday with the exception of July 3, July 4, and September 4.

Correspondingly, the five Gulf States will align the red snapper season in their waters with the federal water season for the rest of the summer. The department's rule does not change the quota or season length for the federally permitted forhire component of the recreational fishery or the commercial individual fishing quota program and the 2017 commercial quota.

Florida state waters in the Gulf of Mexico are from shore to nine nautical miles out and are managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Federal waters extend from where state waters end, out to about two hundred nautical miles and are managed by NOAA Fisheries who is overseen by the Department of Commerce.

To get the additional 39 days to fish in federal waters, Florida had to give up the its red snapper season in the fall that was set to be open on weekends in September and October and Monday through Thursdays starting June 19.

The deal was criticized by a group representing charter boat captains who concede recreational anglers deserve better than they've gotten but worry the expanded season for them will inflict long-term damage in the Gulf. "The best information we have on this (39-day) reopening shows it could lead to more than 7 million pounds of overfishing, which will almost certainly shut down our fishing businesses next year, lead to less fishing access for our customers and damage the work we have done to rebuild this population of fish," said Mike Jennings, president of the Charter Fisherman's Association.