

Snapper debate lingers after season

BY JOE MACALUSO

The lines are still wet just days after the three-day recreational red snapper season ended Saturday in federal waters, but the issues surrounding this species remain on the front burner on state and federal management levels.

Spurred on by a proposal announced by Gov. John Bel Edwards to select 150 fishermen to take 25,000 pounds of red snapper in an open season - a move labeled as a "pilot program" and a "scientific study" by state Wildlife and Fisheries assistant secretary Patrick Banks - red snapper continue to be a red-hot topic.

Edwards' proposal drew praise, and urged support for, from radio spots aired by Share the Gulf. Among the members listed on its website are restaurant associations from the five Gulf States, the National Restaurant Association, a handful of commercial and for-hire fishing associations and the Environmental Defense Fund.

In the same week, Edwards' "150" has met measured resistance from the Coastal Conservation Association, the Louisiana Charter Boat Association, the American Sportfishing Association and even the Louisiana House and Senate.

Just about the time recreational fishermen were hauling in their two-per-day red snapper from federal waters during last Thursday's opening day, the State House voted 86-5 to pass a House Concurrent Resolution calling for the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries "... to not move forward with implementation of their announced red snapper management pilot program."

The state Senate voted 29-0 on a similar resolution later that day.

All the while, recreational fishermen faced roughening Gulf of Mexico waters to take from the abundant red snapper stocks off the Louisiana coast. Thursday's opener, with 1- to 2-foot seas, was the best day, and most crews reported taking limits in less than an hour.

Friday's conditions were much worse, and the 3- to 6-foot seas lingered into Saturday when Rep. Garret Graves, R-La., spent the morning with fellow Catholic High alums at the school's 10th annual fishing rodeo.

Graves finished second in red snapper with a 17-pound-plus fish, then took time to decry a federally imposed season that forced recreational fishermen to brave weather and sea conditions because there are only three days when anglers can take snapper from federal waters.

Graves said Saturday's nine-man party took two hours to reach their destination, then took just 40 minutes to catch their 18 snapper.

Now, with the federal season closed, Banks was set to carry Edwards' proposal to this week's Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council meeting in Naples, Florida. While the move does not need Council approval - it needs the OK for a federal exempted fishing permit - Banks said an explanation will help further a three-year plan he proposed earlier this year that would allow Louisiana to manage red snapper out to 200 miles beginning in 2019.

Also Monday, Banks sent a survey to anglers holding a state-issued Recreational Offshore Landing Permit asking their consideration of one of three red snapper season options: Option 1: Separate seasons for state and federal waters Option 2: A joint 27-day Saturday-to-Sunday season in state and federal waters from June 17 through Labor Day with open days July 3-4 and Labor Day with the possibility of an open state season after Labor Day, "... of biological data permit" Option 3: A joint 39-day Friday- Saturday-Sunday season in state and federal waters from June 16 through Labor Day with open days July 3-4 and Labor Day but no state season after Labor Day From all indications, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission will discuss these same recreational red snapper season changes at a special 1 p.m. conference-call meeting Friday.

The FWC announcement read, "Recent discussion between the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Gulf states indicate that there may be a way to add a substantial number of additional red snapper fishing days in federal waters this summer of 2017, but Florida would have to give days to get days."

Florida's 78-day recreational red snapper season would be shelved upon approval of Option 2 or 3.

Louisiana recreational anglers would be in the same position. The state's state-waters-only red snapper season went more than 200 days in 2016.

The issues of the LDWF's plea for an exempted fishing permit and Edwards' proposal, along with a discussion of "possible federal action to address historically short federal waters red snapper

season," are on the agenda for Thursday's 9:30 a.m. Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission meeting in Baton Rouge.