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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Gulf's Resources Must Belong To All of Us

By CAROL B. DOVER



Carol B. Dover

Florida's seafood industry and sportfishing are each important to the state's heritage and economy. They contribute billions of dollars in economic activity and sustain tens of thousands of jobs. We should not have to choose one at the expense of the other.

Next month, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council may do just that. "Amendment 28" proposes to change how the total red snapper catch, an important regional fish, is allocated between commercial and recreational fishermen. Florida's small commercial fishing businesses — with their suppliers, and restaurants and grocers that sell their fish — may get the short end of the fishing pole.

Taking fish from the commercial fishery hurts more than fishermen. Local seafood is critically important to local diners and visitors alike. The National Restaurant Association lists locally sourced seafood as the top menu trend for the past four years. That's why we've joined a coalition of fishermen, chefs, restaurant owners and conservationists to urge that the Gulf Council reject these unfair proposals.

Most of Florida's commercial fishing businesses meeting the growing demand for Gulf seafood to restaurants, retail stores and their patrons are small, family-owned operators with a handful of employees. They share allocation of Gulf fish with the recreational sector — individual fishermen, and the charter captains and guides they hire. For red snapper, the split is about 50/50.

The last decade saw dramatic improvement in the commercial fishery — a change sorely needed. The snapper fishery was crashing, and management techniques were harmful to businesses and not particularly helpful to the snapper stock. The most common tactic was to shorten the fishing season — frustrating commercial and recreational fishermen equally. Ever-shortening seasons force fishermen onto

the water in bad weather and unsafe conditions.

Fortunately, the commercial fishery has changed. We have more flexibility, and "derby-style" seasons are gone. The Gulf red snapper population is healthy and recovering.

Recreational fishermen, on the other hand, continue suffering the same old approaches. Folks planning a family fishing vacation for Gulf snapper must target a small window in the summer — at the height of tourism season. While seasons decrease, frustration with outdated regulation increases.

Unfortunately, Amendment 28 offers little to alleviate shorter seasons. Even folks pushing the change admit that.

We want the council to focus on real solutions, not shortsighted schemes that hurt seafood providers and consumers. It is senseless to punish progress and stifle increased local seafood demand, yet the proposals before the council create that result. Recent were the days when we lacked enough local grouper and snapper for our menus, and we can't go back there.

Amendment 28 creates no long-term positive impact. It will damage Florida's critical seafood industry in the near term. Serious stakeholders offering real solutions could help the council improve recreational fishing access without penalizing small employers and seafood consumers. We urge the council to reject Amendment 28 and to identify reforms that keep our coastal economy strong and seafood accessible to everyone.

Carol B. Dover

— CAROL B. DOVER, FMP
President and CEO of the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association