The Gulf Fishermen's Association

The Honorable Madeleine Bordallo
Chairwoman
Insular Affairs, Oceans, & Wildlife Subcommittee
House Natural Resources Committee
1324 Longworth House Office Building Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Henry Brown
Ranking Member
Insular Affairs, Oceans, & Wildlife Subcommittee
House Natural Resources Committee
1329 Longworth House Office

Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairwoman Bordallo and Ranking Member Brown:

On behalf of the Gulf Fishermen's Association, thank you for the opportunity to provide information on Individual Fishing Quotas ("IFQs") for the subcommittee's hearing on fishery catch share programs. Commercial fishermen living in the Gulf region of the United States have greatly benefited from the implementation of IFQs, which have helped end overfishing, while preventing and even reversing the collapse of fisheries.

The Gulf Fishermen's Association is dedicated to ensuring the fishing future for all fishermen and is comprised primarily of commercial fishermen who are concerned about the fishing industry and its future. These organizations have been strong proponents of IFQs and support the development and implementation of similar programs, like catch shares, in other fisheries.

Until recently, red snapper fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico were faced with depleted stocks and an uncertain future. The Gulf's red snapper fishery has a long history in America, dating back to the 19th century. This fishery was rather stable until the 1970s and 1980s, when demand for fish began increasing as the technology to catch fish was improving. During that time, fishermen were able to catch fish easily and deplete abundant stocks; due to the decline, fishermen had to travel farther offshore to catch smaller fish. When regulators stepped in to establish catch limits, fishermen began racing against one another to catch as much fish as possible before the limit was hit and fishing shut down for the year. This "derby" style system resulted in large discards of dead red snapper, a decrease in fish prices, higher operating costs and dangerous fishing conditions, as fishermen risked their lives and boats in dangerous weather.

Fortunately, in 2007, the Gulf of Mexico red snapper fishermen began fishing under an IFQ program. Under IFQs, each fisherman is allotted a share of the total catch and is held individually accountable for adhering to that limit. Fishermen are able to fish throughout the year when it is good for business, as seasonal closures are not needed. Further, as commercial fishermen, we are able to deliver high-quality fish to market when consumer demand increases and the weather is suitable for fishing. Under an IFQ

program, fishermen can lease or sell shares if they are unable to fish for any reason. Best of all, with an IFQ program, fish are not wasted but retained and counted against the individual quotas. Under previous rules, fishermen were forced to throw fish overboard to comply with management directives.

The red snapper IFQ has engaged commercial fishermen in the Gulf, empowering them to be stewards of the resource, to run efficient operations and minimize the waste of fish. Further we have the ability to carefully target and market red snapper to earn more money with less fish. Catch share programs provide fishermen with an economic stake in the fishery, while holding them accountable to their allocation and health of the stock.

Recently, scientists said that the red snapper population is finally improving after decades of decline. The IFQ program has helped stop overfishing and will increase allotments of fish in the coming years. The commitment of commercial fishermen to the red snapper IFQ has helped the program succeed since its implementation.

An August 2009 report from the National Marine Fisheries Service's ("NMFS") Southeast Region stated that "two years after initial implementation of the red snapper IFQ program, progress has been made toward achieving [the] program's objectives … [which] include mitigating derby fishing conditions and reducing overcapacity."[1] The NMFS report also states that the IFQ's benefits are "numerous" and "include increasing flexibility for fishing operations; providing cost-effective and enforceable management of the fishery; reducing bycatch; eliminating quota overages; improving safety at sea; and optimizing net social, economic, and biological benefits from the fishery."

Many of these goals and objectives are already being achieved. For example, since 2006, the average ex-vessel value of red snapper has increased 10 percent when adjusted for inflation (17 percent when not adjusted). At the same time, the number of fishermen holding IFQ shares has decreased nearly 15 percent, demonstrating that fishing capacity is becoming aligned with the available catch.

The NMFS report also states that fishermen have benefited from the IFQ program through increased flexibility as to when and whether they fish, as well as how much they may catch. For example, in the 15 years prior to the implementation of the IFQ program, the commercial red snapper fishery was open for an average of 88 days. During this period, fishermen were limited to either 200-pound or 2,000-pound trip limits and 10-day fishery openings per month. Under the IFQ, fishermen are not constrained by fishery closures or trip limits; a fisherman is limited instead to his annual allocation or red snapper that he can catch throughout the year. Subsequently, the NMFS report states that "the IFQ program has lead to greater efficiency for many red snapper IFQ program participants."

NMFS also cites the biological benefits resulting from the IFQ program, saying that during the 17 years of management prior to implementation of the IFQ, the commercial quota was exceeded nine times. Conversely, in the first two years of the IFQ

[1] 2008 Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Individual Fishing Quota Annual Report, August 17, 2009. Southeast Region, National Marine Fisheries Service.

program, “reported [commercial] landings have been below quotas.” Similarly, NMFS found that the ratio of landed to discarded fish has increased three to four times since the implementation of the 13-inch minimum size limit. The report acknowledges that while “the IFQ program is not directly responsible for large reductions in red snapper bycatch, it has indirectly allowed managers to implement a lower minimum size limit to achieve reductions in bycatch.”

Commercial catch share programs such as IFQs also support good jobs in the seafood industry and throughout the broader economy. When catch share management is used, seasonal harvesting restrictions are often reduced or eliminated as unnecessary. The result is more stable employment for fishermen, as well as their suppliers and buyers, lasting for longer periods of time and helping to prevent economic harm to fishing communities that depend on the fishing industry to sustain their livelihoods.

The IFQ program currently in place for commercially-caught red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico has been extremely successful, as it allows fishermen to lower operating expenses, increases the price paid at the dock, and meets high conservation standards, which has improved both economic performance and safety at sea. A recovering fishery is good for commercial, recreation and other fishing interests.

We respectfully urge you to consider supporting the development and implementation of catch share programs in other fisheries throughout the nation. The future health of fishery stocks depends on the elimination of overfishing. Catch share programs can help meet this goal while providing fishermen with an economically sound and healthy resource to fish in the future.

Sincerely,

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