



American Sportfishing Association

Leading the Way for Fishing's Future

The Promise, and Peril, of Electronic Reporting for Anglers

by Mike Leonard, ASA Conservation Director

For the first time since 2014, over the next two weekends (November, 2017), anglers in the South Atlantic region will finally have the opportunity to harvest the iconic and infamous red snapper. To some, allowing a modest six days in late Fall to harvest a fish that is seemingly so abundant that it's often difficult not to catch may not seem like a significant victory.

However, this is an important first step to opening this fishery – and potentially others – in a way that ensures conservation while allowing reasonable access for the long-term. While not without risks, electronic reporting holds tremendous potential to supplement or replace existing surveys to provide more timely and accurate data. Currently, access to many fisheries is closed or reduced in large part because of data uncertainty and resulting precautionary management, as has been the case with South Atlantic red snapper.



red snapper

As part of this mini season, NOAA Fisheries and the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, in collaboration with the Snook & Gamefish Foundation, for the first time are testing out a new way of estimating recreational fishing catch using a voluntary, web-based reporting system.

Many in the recreational fishing community, my organization included, have been critical of the antiquated system that federal fisheries managers have been using to estimate angler catch, which relies largely on landline phone calls and snail mail surveys.

In 2017, it's hard to believe we can't do better than using the same survey techniques that probably intercepted Andy and Opie after their day fishing at the local pond.

Given the rapidly advancing and widely available technology at our disposal, figuring out how to incorporate angler catch data provided through smartphone apps and the internet holds tremendous potential to improve the timeliness and accuracy of data needed to sustainably manage fisheries. This is clearly where our marine fisheries management system needs to be headed.

If proven to be a viable way to estimate angler landings during this South Atlantic red snapper season, angler-provided electronic reporting has the potential to expand not only in this fishery but in others where lack of quality data is keeping anglers off the water.

However, it should be recognized that electronic reporting isn't a panacea to fix all the problems with federal marine fisheries management, where incomplete biological data and overly

stringent statutory requirements must also be addressed. We still need Congress to pass the Modern Fish Act to fix the broader challenges with federal recreational fisheries management law.

It's also important to note that electronic reporting needs to evolve carefully to ensure it's not overly burdensome or used as a tool to limit access.

Earlier this year, an ill-conceived proposal by the Louisiana



Mike Leonard, Conservation Director of ASA, shows he knows about redfish as well as red snapper with this jumbo.

Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, crafted without any input from the recreational fishing community, was clearly a camel's-nose-under-the-tent that was eventually to be used as a way to allocate individual fishing quotas (i.e., catch shares) to individual anglers. Thankfully this proposal was later withdrawn, but it showed the troubling ways in which electronic reporting could be abused as a means to limit access only to those fortunate enough to be gifted a public resource.

In addition, the potential bias in the data being generated by electronic reporting must be accounted for to ensure it is representative of total fishing effort. These issues exist within any fishing survey system, but are a bit unique in electronic reporting and therefore must be examined closely.

In the end, the positives of electronic reporting in improving fishing access and conservation far outweighs the negatives as long as anglers remain in the driver's seat as this concept continues to evolve. So if you're fortunate enough (and tough enough, based on early weather reports) to go offshore in the South Atlantic over the next two weekends, please do your part to help accurately assess the health of the South Atlantic red snapper stock and improve future access to the fishery by recording your catch at www.myfishcount.com.