

WITEK: WHO SPEAKS FOR THE SALEWATR ANGLER? (from page 8)

Like commercial fishermen, for-hire operators typically see larger harvests as good for business, are primarily concerned with short-term economic impacts, and tend to favor high annual catch limits, long rebuilding times, and a light regulatory footprint.

Those differences between private anglers and the for-hire fleet make a big difference when it comes to the fishery management process.

In the case of most species, private anglers account for the vast majority of fishing trips, and thus generate most of the economic activity, in the recreational fishery.

During the years 2015-2019 (chosen because they represent the most recent data not affected by COVID-related issues), surf and private boat anglers combined for more than 99% of all directed recreational bluefish trips and more than 98% of all directed recreational trips targeting striped bass.

But while private anglers might be responsible for the great majority of recreational fishing trips, their dominance of the fishery is not reflected in the fishery management process, where representatives of the fishing industry control most of the recreational seats.

On the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, to provide one example, out of the 13 non-governmental Council members, there are five commercial fishermen, four industry members (three from the for-hire fleet, one from angling media), two academics/former fishery managers, 1 representative of a non-governmental organization, and *just one private angler*.

With a breakdown like that, it's hardly surprising that, when bluefish landings needed to be reduced in 2019, the Council cut the bag limit for private anglers to 3 fish, while allowing customers of the for-hire fleet to retain 5 fish per day, giving the for-hires the benefit of sector separation, without burdening them with any of the responsibilities, such as a separate catch limit and separate accountability measures should that catch limit be exceeded.

But the underrepresentation of private anglers extends far beyond the Council itself. In justifying the special 5-fish bag for customers of for-hire vessels, a Council press release noted that

“Although the Council’s **Bluefish Monitoring Committee** recommended a coastwide 3-fish bag limit, the majority of comments from the public and **Bluefish Advisory Panel (AP)** members expressed opposition to this option, noting that it would have **severe economic consequences for the for-hire sector...**



Additionally, AP members and the public emphasized that these proposed reductions come at a challenging time for for-

hire stakeholders as they are also facing new restrictions on striped bass, black sea bass, summer flounder, and scup.”

While its true that the Bluefish Advisory Panel did object to reducing the bag limit to just three fish, it's also true that for-hire representatives outnumber private anglers by at least 2 to 1 on the panel, and so dominate the discussions about management issues.

The bottom line is that anglers’ concerns are often not heard, and often not heeded, in a management process that is biased toward industry views, in which industry members are less concerned with the greater public interest than in their own.

Yet for anglers to be heard, they must first make the effort to get involved, volunteering to serve on advisory panels and becoming familiar with the management process.

It's tiring, aggravating, and completely thankless work, that not only pays nothing, but requires the volunteers to give up vacation days, or perhaps a day's pay, to attend panel meetings, although more and more, such meetings are held via conference calls or in an on-line environment, which substantially reduces the time commitment involved.

Once they familiarize themselves with the process, they need to seek appointment to state advisory panels, to ASMFC advisory panels and management boards, and to the regional fishery management councils, when openings become available.

It's not unusual for state officials to search for intelligent, informed people willing to fill such positions, because too few qualified people actively seek appointment, due to the time commitments and impacts on both family and job.

When I was on the Mid-Atlantic Council, I had to take an unpaid leave of absence for the 20 or so days that I'd be out of the office each year; while per diem payments for service made up part of that, it didn't make up for all of the wages that I lost.

It's a perplexing problem, that might need a legislative solution that compels state governors to nominate persons from the commercial, recreational, and charter fishing sectors for every open council seat. For a while, Magnuson-Stevens required such diverse nominations, but only for seats on the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; the requirement lapsed nearly a decade ago.

Until things change, and private anglers are provided with representation on fishery management councils that more closely corresponds to their participation in the recreational fishery, expect management actions to continue to favor the commercial and for-hire industries, to the disadvantage of not only surf and private boat anglers, but to the fish and to the nation as well.

Charles Witek, from Greenwich CT, has spent over 50 years on the water, and is a well-known author and blogger. Witek said, “I have realized that without strong fisheries laws and effective conservation measures, the future of salt water fishing, and America's living marine resources, is dim.”