



THE FISHIN' INSIDER

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When I started writing this column back in 1993, the world of fisheries management was undergoing radical changes. The cod fishery on the Grand Banks had just collapsed, ditto the Georges Bank. The economic fallout was brutal on parts of the east coast and eastern Canada and the politicians were screaming bloody murder. About all the serious marine biologists of the day could say was "We told you so". The pols and bureaucrats yelled back, "no ya'll didn't" and that was met with, "yea we did; ya'll just weren't listening", followed by a flood of retirements of some very talented people. The Clintonistas decided to fill most of these positions with bean counters better known as economists and things went south from there. So here we are in 2006 and it appears that possibly a little sanity may be seeping back into the system. The pendulum of fishery management may be swinging toward a more pragmatic approach.

I don't mean to flog this horse some more since it ain't got hardly any hide left on its carcass but this Monday the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council will hold a scoping session at the Four Points Sheraton in Brownsville beginning at seven in the evening on Monday the 23rd. The subjects of this glorified rap session will be proposed Amendment 27

of the red snapper fishery management plan and Amendment 14 of the shrimp fishery management plan. The following concerns the snapper FMP since the shrimp plan is probably moot. Storms have wrecked the fleet east of Beaumont and economics have wrecked the fleet around these parts.

Amendment 1 to the FMP covers Total Allowable Catch and the proposed alternatives are leaving the TAC set at 9.21 million pounds or in alternatives 2-7 reducing the TAC to 7 million pounds in alternative 2 all the way down to 2 MP in number seven. The folks have'um a new computer model to statistically extrapolate the real condition of the red snapper fishery or so they believe. They're using this model to try to stay legal with the myriad of congressional mandates that've come down the pike. The intent is to rebuild the stock in the U.S. EEZ of the Gulf of Mexico back to historical levels. If your wondering what the historical levels actually were then get in line cuz ain't nobody knows for sure; they're using historical reports from fish houses for commercially caught snapper and extrapolations from miniscule samplings of recreationally caught snapper.

Amendment 2 covers minimum size of commercially and recreationally caught snapper. Here's where some pragmatism re-enters the picture. They're responding

to the outrage created by some of their previous brain farts, like the infamous decision back in the late 90's to up the minimum size to 18 inches to extend the season. This resulted in the trail of tears effect, that is dead fish surrounding fishing boats. This was quickly rescinded after a few national rags ran cover shots of the pogrom that embarrassed the bean counters. The alternatives range from no action to progressively reducing the size limit an inch at a time to eliminating the size limit all together in both the commercial and recreational sector. This almost came as a shock cuz they'll also be talking about possible gear restrictions specifically circle hook sizes in the commercial fishery. The larger the hook the larger the fish as they say cuz babies can't get their lips around big hooks.

Amendment 3 covers the recreational fishing season which as all of ya'll know is really screwed up around these parts. The interesting news here is that while they don't address a regional management plan they seem to open the door. They have on the table the alternative of running the recreational season as part derby, fish 10 to 15 days a month, and part open season for 2 to 3 months out of the year.

Confusing, you bet cuz it was created by bureaucrats. Improvement, could well be with the right balance. \