

Statement of William “Bubba” Cochrane II
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Testimony on the Reauthorization of the
Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act

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Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
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Chairman Sullivan, Ranking Member Peters, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee - thank you for the opportunity to address you today regarding the reauthorization of the *Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act*.

My name is Bubba Cochrane and I’m a commercial red snapper fisherman from Galveston, Texas. I also run a federally permitted charterboat and fish recreationally when I have the time. I have the honor to serve as the President of the Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Shareholders’ Alliance – the largest organization of commercial reef fish fishermen in the Gulf, and I’m the Vice President of Gulf Wild – the only brand of seafood in the country that’s fishermen-built, conservation-based, and fully-traceable.

I’ve fished my entire life. I started out recreational fishing with my father and then began working on a local charterboat. From there, I worked my way onto a commercial fishing boat in 1990 and eventually saved enough money to start my own business. I now own and run my own commercial fishing boat – the Chelsea Ann (named after my daughter) using hook and line to catch red snapper and other reef fish in the western Gulf. I spend over 100 days a year on the water and another 15 to 20 days attending meetings of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and traveling to Washington to speak with you, your staff, and other decision makers.

My fourteen year old son Connor (who’s probably watching this hearing right now when he *should* be doing his homework) loves to fish and will someday take over my business when I retire... but not until he graduates. I’m here today not just to represent my business, my organizations, the Gulf’s commercial fishermen, or the 97 percent of Americans that get their access to fresh fish by purchasing it in restaurants, grocery stores, and fish markets that we supply. I’m here for Connor – he is the next generation of commercial fisherman because I feel an obligation to pass on something truly sustainable to him and others like him.

America has set the gold standard for sustainable fisheries because of our commitment to science-based management. The Magnuson-Stevens Act is the system’s bi-partisan backbone and it is something we should all be proud of. I am truly honored to call myself an American fisherman and to have the opportunity to have a voice in this process.

Magnuson-Stevens is working. Fishing is profitable, fish stocks are rebuilding, more anglers than ever before are able to go catch plenty of fish with their kids and grandkids, fishing communities are resilient, and American seafood consumers have year-round access to wild, sustainably-harvested fish and shellfish. Under Magnuson-Stevens, forty one stocks have been rebuilt since 2001 and the number of stocks on the overfishing and overfished lists remains near all-time lows. Combined, U.S. commercial and recreational saltwater fishing generated \$208 billion in sales and supported 1.6 million jobs in 2015.

A number of the people who spoke before me told you that Magnuson-Stevens is failing, and some even claimed that it has had “devastating impacts.” But nobody else here today – maybe with the exception of Bob Zales – makes their living on the water. My livelihood depends on healthy fish stocks. My ability to feed my family and send my kids to college hinges on there being fish to catch. I’ve taken time off the water to be here today to impress upon you that we must work together to support Magnuson-Stevens and safeguard the gains made since the last reauthorization. And I am here to tell you that Magnuson-Stevens is a success story – *your* success story.

You’ve heard from some that Magnuson-Stevens needs to be changed to allow “more flexibility.” But when it comes to science-based fishery management, flexibility is a slippery word, especially when it means making an end-run around conservation. Make no mistake about it: extending rebuilding timelines in the name of flexibility would be a step away from science. Remember, the 10 year rebuilding requirement people complain about already has built-in flexibility. Take Gulf red snapper for example – we’re currently 12 years into a *twenty seven year* rebuilding plan. Atlantic halibut have a 50 year rebuilding plan, and some rockfish species on the west coast have a 70 year rebuilding plan. These plans are stretched to the limit – stretch any more and they might just snap.

You’ve also heard that quotas don’t work for recreational fishermen. This is simply not true. Between 2010 and 2016, recreational fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico successfully caught up to 96% of their gag grouper quota without exceeding the recreational annual catch limit. The Gulf of Mexico Headboat Collaborative Pilot Program successfully took more than 200,000 anglers fishing in 2014 and 2015 and through a combination of real-time reporting and quota management, succeeded in staying within its quotas. And starting in 2016, Louisiana’s LA Creel program has successfully used weekly landings estimates to monitor and enforce a self-imposed red snapper quota for state waters recreational fishermen. Quotas are working for the recreational sector all across the Gulf.

It wouldn’t be a fisheries-related hearing without the individual fishing quota – or IFQ -programs coming up. As someone whose business depends on IFQs, I’d like to take a moment to provide some facts. IFQs are one type of catch share program. Two of the 16 catch share programs in the United States are in the Gulf of Mexico – the red snapper and grouper/tilefish IFQs. Together they generate over \$50 million in direct fishing revenue. Alaska leads the way with six catch share programs (the most in any region) that generate over \$980 million in direct revenue.

IFQs saved the red snapper fishery in the Gulf. Before the IFQ was implemented, we fished a derby – we went as hard as we could for the first ten days of every month and dumped a lot of

fish on the dock for very low prices. The stock was crashing and we all knew it, but we had to make a living. We were fishing on 2-3 pound fish and many times discarded more than we landed. We fished in weather we shouldn't have, and some guys never came home.

I put every dollar I had into my fishing business when we were developing the red snapper IFQ program in the Gulf. I was "all in." Failure was not an option for me or my family.

Since the IFQ, things have gotten better – quotas have increased, the price has come up, discards are way down, and the red snapper we're catching are twice as large as the ones we caught before the IFQ. I now have the opportunity to stay home when it's blowing 35 knots because I can spread out my quota throughout the year. I have more control over my business.

I've figured out that sustainability and profitability can – and do - go hand in hand. The stock assessments prove this. The 2009 stock assessment update, the 2013 assessment, and the 2015 assessment update all confirm that overfishing has finally ended and there are more red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico today than there have been in decades.

Thanks to the science-based conservation requirements of Magnuson-Stevens and a fully accountable commercial IFQ program, the red snapper quota for *all* fishermen in the Gulf has *nearly tripled* in the last 10 years. Commercial, charter, and recreational fishermen had a 5 million pound quota in 2008 and today we're all fishing under a quota that's nearly 14 million pounds. Clearly, the commercial IFQ program has not harmed recreational fishermen. And let me stress that accountability, fishing within the rules, not exceeding harvest limits, timely reporting of catches and proper monitoring, has been key to our success. This is *your* success as well.

Yes, it's true that the federal recreational red snapper fishing season has shrunk in the Gulf, and I'm sensitive to that. The recreational red snapper catch limit increased by 120 percent from 2008-2014, compared to a 623 percent increase in recreational landings per day during that same time period. As a result, the recreational season continues to shorten so that recreational fishermen stop overharvesting this species. I appreciate the recreational point of view of wanting more access, but rolling back conservation measures and ignoring science-based management is only going to slow down, stop or even reverse the rebuilding process altogether. As it is, the U.S. Commerce Department admits that this year's recreational season extension will, and I quote, "necessarily mean that the private recreational sector will substantially exceed its annual catch limit" and that, quote, "this approach may delay the ultimate rebuilding of the stock by as many as 6 years."

Commercial fishermen and the federally permitted charter boat community in the Gulf support improving management for private anglers, but it must be done in a sustainable and accountable manner. We can achieve this by doubling down on data collection and accountability, and by using the existing flexibility in the Magnuson-Stevens Act to come up with creative solutions. We continue to support the Gulf States and federal government working together to develop a viable, long-term, science-based solution to the red snapper challenges in the Gulf of Mexico for private angler fishermen. But let's be clear, as our population grows the number of private anglers and seafood consumers will continue to increase every year. Fishery managers must be

mindful of this fact when developing a solution but must also understand that taking away quota from the commercial and charter boat sectors won't solve the problem.

Red snapper is a critical species for Gulf commercial fishermen, since recreational fishermen already take home 80 percent of the most popular fish species in the Gulf, including overwhelming majorities of amberjack, red drum, speckled trout, king mackerel, and triggerfish. Even if the federal red snapper fishing season could not be extended, private anglers can fish in federal waters for these species or for red snapper in state waters during longer state seasons, including in my home state of Texas where recreational fishermen fish for red snapper year round. Commercial fishing for red snapper started in the Gulf in the 1880s. Red snapper is part of our heritage and our history and, as a commercial, federally-permitted charter, and recreational fisherman myself, I want to be sure it is available for generations to come.

On a final note, I want to reiterate that commercial fishermen like me provide American seafood consumers with access to domestic sustainably-harvested snapper and grouper 365 days a year. Red snapper are a *public* resource, and commercial fishermen provide *public* access to millions of consumers who cannot afford to go catch it themselves. From the businessman in Detroit to the teacher in Denver to the nurse in Indianapolis – commercial fishermen give them the access they deserve and the opportunity to enjoy some of the best seafood the world has to offer.

Magnuson-Stevens is about more than just red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico – it's about halibut in Alaska, it's about codfish in New England, and it's about grouper in Georgia. Magnuson-Stevens is about the charter fishing businessman in Florida who wants more accountability and the recreational fisherman in California who values conservation. And Magnuson-Stevens is also about the family in South Dakota that has just as much right to order a red snapper fillet off the menu as I do.

The Gulf's fight is everyone's fight. It's a fight to put the long-term supply of fish first, to commit to science-based management, to insist on accountability across all sectors, to invest in the future generation, and to ultimately defend the pillar of our nation's fisheries – the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

We – the nation's fishermen, seafood suppliers, seafood-consuming public and Congressional leaders – have an obligation to protect the gains we've made and the recoveries we've experienced under the last forty years of Magnuson-Stevens. We owe it to ourselves, our fishing communities, and the next generation like Connor to pass on a natural resource legacy that ensures sustainable seafood and sustainable public access for all Americans for today and future generations.

Thank you; and I'm happy to answer any questions you have.