

Fishermen deserve relief from excessive regulation
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In the Gulf of Mexico, federal authorities have allowed a short season for fishermen to catch red snapper, a popular game fish. On our side of the state, the regulators haven't budged: The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, which regulates federal waters from the North Carolina-Virginia line down to the Florida Keys, is still forbidding both commercial and recreational fishermen from taking red snapper.

We believe the moratorium, instituted in 2010, is overly restrictive and should be revisited. The council should seek more input from the fishing industry, and it also should take into account views from a wider range of scientists. There is good reason to believe the red snapper population in the South Atlantic is healthier than regulators' estimates indicate.

Last year, the fishing industry in the South Atlantic came close to receiving a devastating blow. In December, regional fishery managers voted to drop a plan that would have banned bottom fishing of some 70 species in a 4,800-square-mile area of the Atlantic Ocean stretching from Brunswick, Ga., to south of Cape Canaveral. Last week, the National Marine Fisheries Service ratified the South Atlantic council's recommendation to eliminate the proposed closure.

The plan was aimed at saving the red snapper, but it was dropped after new studies showed that red snapper populations were not as low as previously estimated. That fact has fishing advocates impatient for an easing of restrictions. They believe the science on red snapper stock assessments has been consistently inaccurate.

The red snapper ban means the recreational fishing industry on our side of the Sunshine State will continue to suffer. We agree with U.S. Rep. John Mica, R-Winter Park, that the ban on such fishing has very much harmed Florida's recreational fishing industry.

The ban and restrictions in the Gulf came about because of surveys showing that red snapper had been overfished in the South Atlantic and the Gulf. But in the Gulf, the stocks are getting better, and the fish are getting older. And that's in the Gulf -- where the BP oil spill happened in 2010.

While it's important for regulators to monitor red snapper stocks in federal waters -- which generally begin three miles offshore and reach out 200 miles -- there is legitimate concern that the ban is too severe.

It's time for the regulators to reconsider the red snapper ban.

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