



Federal Data Gathering Fails Again, Undermines Conservation

NOAA study finds its own estimates inflated 30 - 40%; marine recreational catch data program in need of overhaul

Background

The Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) is a NOAA program that provides estimates of recreational fishing catches and trips that occur from Maine to Mississippi and Hawaii. These data are used to assess and manage state and federal fisheries in the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico and Hawaii. MRIP is the product of two different components:

1. Dockside interviews administered by state partners that gather information on angler catch rates (i.e., number, types and sizes of fish caught); and
2. A mail survey administered by NOAA known as the Fishing Effort Survey (FES), which is used to estimate fishing effort (i.e., the number of fishing trips that occur). The FES is driven by angler recall.

Problem Statement

For years, MRIP catch estimates have been a source of contention for anglers, state agencies, and other fishery managers that depend on accurate and precise data for decision-making.

- MRIP was designed to provide broad (imprecise) information about recreational fishing catch and effort trends. However, MRIP has been used to manage fisheries to precise, poundage-based quotas as best scientific information available (BSIA). In most cases, it's the only information available, and despite its clear shortcomings, it is called "best."
- Many anglers and state agencies have expressed concerns that MRIP effort estimates have been greatly inflated since FES was introduced in 2018. Despite those closest to the resource recognizing these effort numbers are likely overestimates, these data have been incorporated into a wide range of management decisions to the detriment of conservation and fishing access.
- In response to longstanding concerns with MRIP, several states designed their own recreational data collection programs to supplement or replace MRIP to better align data collection with their management needs.

A recent [pilot study](#) conducted by NOAA found that FES may be overestimating recreational catch and effort data by 30 - 40%. This is the third time in 13 years serious issues have been uncovered in NOAA's recreational fishery data program.

- While certainly not the only source of bias, the recently identified source of the bias is in the ordering of the survey questions. NOAA plans to conduct a follow-up study in 2024 to investigate the effects of question order while also administering the survey monthly rather than every two months.
- Until follow-up study results are available, NOAA contends that MRIP FES data remain BSIA for decision-making.
- It's likely to take several years for both follow-up study results and revised FES estimates to be incorporated into stock assessments and management decisions.
- In the meantime, using incorrect recreational estimates to inform the status of fisheries and make management decisions could have severe implications for fish stocks, anglers, businesses, communities and the economy.

Continuing with status quo MRIP data collection (even with minor tweaks) will certainly erode public trust and will fail to meet the needs of anglers and fisheries managers. Instead, this discovery presents an opportunity to take a step back, re-evaluate data needs and identify the best path forward.

Solution Statement

The MRIP recreational catch and effort data collection system needs to be fundamentally reshaped to meet the needs of stock assessments, the precise management requirements of federal law (Magnuson Stevens Act) and the stakeholders. We offer the following recommendations.

MRIP State Model Solution

- Some states, e.g., California, Oregon, Washington, left the MRIP precursor, the Marine Recreational Statistical Survey (MRFSS) decades ago and have never used MRIP. The trail they blazed was never more inviting for those states now looking to find a better path forward.
- Many states have demonstrated the capability of developing survey programs to estimate recreational catch and effort data with more precision (e.g., Alabama's Snapper Check; Florida's State Reef Fish Survey; Louisiana's LA Creel; Mississippi's Tails n' Scales; Texas' Marine Sport-Harvest Monitoring Program).
- NOAA needs to work with all states to identify the best steps forward including the opportunity to transition some or all recreational data collection to the states and how to best provide support (i.e., funding) to states that lead data collection improvements.
- Working with the states, NOAA needs to develop consistent data standards while maintaining flexibility to collect data that are tailored to the needs of their stakeholders.

- Some states may not be ready to transition to their own data collection program for estimates of effort. For those states, NOAA must collaborate with states and stakeholders on needed reforms to recreational data collection, many of which were identified in a recent National Academy of Sciences report.
- This model only works if an open, transparent discussion is facilitated without defensiveness.

Alternative Management Solution

- While NOAA transitions through needed changes to the recreational catch data collection program, it must also continue to invest in the development and implementation of management alternatives that better account for known limitations of recreational catch estimates.
- In the face of increasing public demand to access their fishery resources and changing ocean conditions, it is painfully apparent that the current federal model of fisheries management is antiquated, lethargic and depends too heavily on fishery-dependent data. NOAA should pursue new management models based more on fishery-independent data, and what is happening in the water today.
- Alternative management should strive to achieve the following goals: (1) provide stability in the recreational bag, size, and season limits; (2) develop strategies to increase management flexibility, and (3) achieve accessibility aligned with availability/stock status.
- NOAA needs to commit staff within the regions to actively work on developing and implementing these alternative management strategies in FMPs.
- The [Recreational Harvest Control Rule](#) (HCR), developed in the Mid-Atlantic, exemplifies the type of effort NOAA needs to foster.
 - The HCR considers two factors when determining whether recreational management measures (e.g., bag, size, season limits) should be restricted, liberalized or remain unchanged for the next two years:
 - Factor 1: A statistical analysis of recreational harvest data compared to the harvest limit to better account for the imprecision and variability of MRIP harvest estimates.
 - Factor 2: An analysis of stock size relative to the target stock size from the most recent stock assessment to better account for the status of the resource.
 - These two factors, in combination, determine the magnitude and direction of a management change. Analyzing these factors results in management stability and a better alignment of fishing access with stock health.