



Recreational Fishing Alliance

To: House Subcommittee on Fisheries, Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans
From: Jim Donofrio, Executive Director, Recreational Fishing Alliance
Re: Testimony on the Reauthorization of the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act
Date: March 16, 2004

I. INTRODUCTION

Thank you Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding H.R. 3883, a bill to reauthorize the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act. My name is Jim Donofrio and I am the Executive Director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA).

The RFA is a national, grassroots political action organization representing individual recreational fishermen and the recreational fishing industry. The RFA Mission is to safeguard the rights of saltwater anglers, protect marine, boat and tackle industry jobs and ensure the long-term sustainability of our Nation's saltwater fisheries. RFA members include individual anglers, boat builders, fishing tackle manufacturers, party and charter boat businesses, bait and tackle retailers, marinas, and many other businesses in fishing communities. Therefore, the RFA has a tremendous stake in the health of the Atlantic striped bass stock.

II.

TESTIMONY

Thanks to this Act, the actions taken by this committee, and the management plans adopted by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, the ongoing recovery of the Atlantic Striped Bass is arguably the crowning achievement of US fisheries management. Since the original passage of the act in 1985, striped bass populations have increased significantly from about 5 million fish to approximately 50 million fish today.

The number of older, larger fish in the population continues to increase. It is expected that by the year 2016 the number of older larger fish will exceed the levels that were recorded in the 1930's.

We do, however, have concerns that should be addressed through this legislation to ensure that this recovery is not jeopardized. The first is the use of the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS) to estimate the commercial bycatch of Atlantic Striped Bass. In nearly 20 years of managing striped bass under the Act, one would think that fishery managers would have improved the ability to determine commercial bycatch through direct observation of the commercial fishery, but this is not the case. The method for assessing commercial bycatch must change to accurately estimate the true magnitude of the problem.

For the recreational sector, we would like to see a more wide-scale educational campaign for the use of circle hooks when anglers are fishing with bait. There is some

evidence that circle hooks may reduce release mortality under certain fishing conditions and should be further encouraged. I am proud to say that RFA partnered with NOAA Fisheries and ASMFC last year to distribute such educational materials to more than 7,500 anglers through the *Ethical Angler* program, but more of this must be done. However, decisions on when and where circle hooks should be *required* are best left to the states and the ASMFC. We request that this committee consider an authorization for appropriations to expand circle hook educational campaigns.

Our greatest concern, however, is the poorly accounted for commercial bycatch in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) that is caused by non-directed fisheries and a lack of management action to reduce this bycatch. Today, extensive coastal migrations of Atlantic striped bass occur annually in the New England and Mid-Atlantic EEZ. During these migrations, stripers aggregate on bottom features that hold forage fish such as herring, squid, mackerel, and menhaden and use these areas as winter feeding grounds prior to beginning the Spring migration to their home rivers and bays to spawn. These life history characteristics make large numbers of bass vulnerable as bycatch to commercial fishing gear such as gill nets, small and large mesh trawls, mid-water trawls and pair trawls in the EEZ.

On the water observations have shown that there is a significant amount of commercial bycatch in the EEZ when striped bass make their migrations. It is generally accepted that larger fish, the majority of which are sexually mature females, are more frequently found in the EEZ. Thus, this bycatch is potentially slowing the recovery of the size/age structure. We should always strive to reduce the loss of any fish, but particularly large female spawners, as bycatch.

Considering these facts, we ask that this committee amend the bill to include H.R. 2889, the Atlantic Striped Bass Protection Act of 2003. The bill directs the Secretary of Commerce to conduct a study of existing and new fishery observer data to effectively map migratory patterns, delineate wintering areas and feeding grounds of Atlantic Striped Bass in the Mid-Atlantic exclusive economic zone to minimize the commercial bycatch of striped bass.

No later than 3 years after enactment, the bill calls for the Secretary to submit a report to Congress detailing the findings from the study. The Secretary will then implement striped bass management measures in the EEZ to specifically address particularly high levels of commercial bycatch.

This committee in the past has taken a strong stance against wasteful fishing practices and H.R. 2889 is a practical and modest way to help further reduce bycatch and we respectfully request that this bill be incorporated into the Atlantic Striped Bass Protection Act. We request that this bill be further amended to include language directing the Secretary of Commerce to continue the moratorium on striped bass fishing in the EEZ for at least the next five years until the required bycatch studies have been completed and the appropriate management actions necessary to reduce bycatch have been taken. Thank you for your time and consideration. I will be glad to answer any questions you may have at this time.