Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

Dr. Kathryn D. Sullivan
Under Secretary of Commerce for
Oceans & Atmosphere and NOAA Administrator
1401 Constitution Avenue NW, Room 5128
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Dr. Sullivan:

We write to you concerning the status of the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council's (the Council) ban on the harvest of red snapper in the South Atlantic region. While we all share NOAA's goal of protecting our red snapper populations, the financial and cultural losses surrounding this six year-old fishing ban are severe. We request that prior to a vote on continuation of the harmful ban, the agency address the discrepancies between NOAA's and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute's (the Institute) statistical evidence regarding red snapper populations.

As you may know, a primary justification for maintaining the harvest ban is the need to address the truncation of the red snapper population purportedly shown by NOAA's statistical evidence. However, competing population statistics produced by the Institute, a subsidiary of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, do not corroborate NOAA's findings of truncation, but rather offer statistical evidence of population development that would be traditionally expected to result from a six year-old fishing ban. In addition, criticisms of NOAA's data collection methods have been raised, which casts further doubt upon the reliability of the data and the anomaly of truncation it purports to show.

Furthermore in concert with data collected by the State of Florida, we believe NOAA's angler discard estimates warrant substantiation by additional empirical support. Our concerns regarding the angler discard estimate and the inefficient sampling of the population compel us to request that all available data return to the Science and Statistical Committee for further review.

The population statistics from the Institute support allowing a commercial and recreational harvest of red snapper in the South Atlantic region. Unfortunately, reports indicate these data are not being considered as "best available science" and, therefore, are at risk of being excluded from the Council's deliberations. Permitting a limited amount of red snapper harvest this year, to the extent it would not jeopardize the fishery's overall sustainability, could serve to more accurately assess the size, sex, and relative abundance of the red snapper fishery and help resolve the discrepancies between the two data sets.

In future Council proceedings, we ask that all current scientific data be used to determine the management of fisheries in the South Atlantic region. To facilitate this inclusive approach, we believe competent non-NOAA scientists should be given a more active role on the Science and Statistical Committee. As you know, the scientific process is most effective when the methods and results used and produced can be scrutinized by all relevant experts. As we move forward with efforts to ensure the sustainability of the red snapper population, it is vital we remain loyal to this principle of quality science.

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Clearly, all parties represented on the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council are united in their desire to protect the red snapper population. In order to empower the Council to make fully informed decisions, we must ensure that all relevant scientific evidence is given due consideration. We look forward to working with you to protect the long-term viability of the red snapper population in our South Atlantic fishery, and ask that you inform us of your efforts to make South Atlantic red snapper management more science-based and transparent.

Thank you for your immediate attention to our concerns.

Sincerely,

BILL POSEY
Member of Congress

ANDER CRENSHAW
Member of Congress

DENNIS ROSS
Member of Congress

ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN
Member of Congress

RON DeSANTIS
Member of Congress

DANIEL WEBSTER
Member of Congress

GUS BILIRAKIS
Member of Congress

CARLOS CURBELO
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JOHN MICA
Member of Congress

MARIO DIAZ-BALART
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WALTER JONES
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BRADLEY BYRNE
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RICHARD NUGENT
Member of Congress

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