

Gulf Coast anglers plan protest against fishing limits

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Recreational anglers along the Gulf Coast are planning a floating protest against strict federal limits on red snapper fishing that they say are hurting businesses throughout the region.

Demonstrations are being organized in fishing ports in Alabama, Florida and Mississippi for June 4, with boat owners and captains planning to gather in marinas and passes to show their opposition to the rule.

The demonstration will be held a day after the federal three-day fishing season ends for red snapper, one of the region's most popular catches.

An organizer of the Alabama protest at Orange Beach, Justin Fadalla, said the demonstrations are the start of a movement, yet they won't provide an answer to a long-simmering problem.

"Gathering in Perdido Pass is not going to change anything," he said. "But I hope it gets the word out there that we're mad."

The short season is hurting marinas, tackle shops, and marine services companies all over the Gulf Coast, Fadalla said.

Federal regulators say the tight limit is needed to protect the fish, but opponents accuse scientists of using flawed science to set the rule.

Mayor Tony Kennon of Orange Beach, Alabama, said he supports the protest and will have city marine officers on hand since hundreds of

boats could participate.

"This has a chance to be absolutely huge because the rec fishermen outnumber the charter guys 20-to-1," said Kennon, himself a recreational angler.

Red snapper season opens June 1 in federal waters, which are most popular for anglers because of their depth. While recreational boats will only get to fish for three days, charter boat captains will have a 49-day season.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration establishes rules each year on how many fish of different varieties can be caught in Gulf waters.

Federal regulators have said they set the strict limit this year because private anglers are expected to take 81 percent of their 3-million-pound (1.3-million-kilogram) quota out of state waters, where seasons range from 66 days off Alabama to year-round off Texas. That leaves relatively few fish to be caught farther offshore in federal waters.

Critics of the rule say federal scientists who claim that red snapper need protections fail to take into account fish that live on artificial reefs constructed by Alabama and other states.

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