LOUISIANA FISHERIES FORWARD

# STATUS AND TRENDS OF THE RECREATIONAL FOR HIRE SECTOR IN LOUISIANA

LOUISIANA FISHERIES FORWARD
Advancing Our Seafood Industry

QUALITY + EDUCATION + SUSTAINABILITY

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

2019

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# INTRODUCTION...

**ON A SUNNY OCTOBER AFTERNOON IN 2017,** a retired recreational for-hire (RFH) captain gives an all-knowing smile when asked how the industry has changed over the decades. He remembers the first wave of change coming in the late 80's with the implementation of bag and size limits.

***"Before then, it was easy to fill your boxes with bottom fish,"*** says Myron Fischer, who was a federally permitted charter vessel operator before returning to work for La. Wildlife and Fisheries where he became Research Lab Director (now retired). Then, in the early 90's, popular larger charter boats 40 feet and longer were giving way to smaller, faster, more economical outboards. At that time, the state's traditional fleet had dwindled to roughly ***"five big boats out of Grand Isle, three in Venice, and about four each in Empire and Fourchon."***

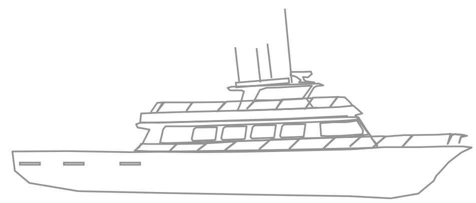
"The catches were plentiful," Fischer, says, "with a larger variety of fish not seen as much today - white trout, different species of snapper, and golden croaker." Like other captains and anglers, Fischer enjoyed the luxury of a 365-day fishing year until 1997, when seasonal closures were first imposed on red snapper fisheries to maintain healthy populations. Decades later, the economic and policy environment of the RFH industry has changed substantially – for both the stewardship of the fisheries and to support a fleet that has grown to a recorded 868 Louisiana-licensed captains in 2017.[1]



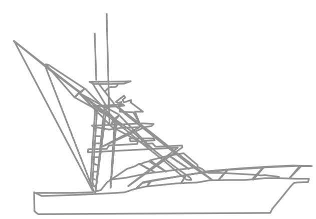
The Louisiana Fisheries Forward (LFF) program - a joint partnership of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) and Louisiana Sea Grant – recently initiated the development of a RFH outreach curriculum to assess the status and challenges of this rapidly changing industry. Meetings were held in 2017 with the state's inshore and offshore captains in an effort to better understand the current challenges facing RFH operations, including coastal changes and increasing federal regulations, and to gauge opinions on various management options. This report draws from those meetings; and from state and federal reports, licenses sales, academic studies, and field observation; to develop a general overview of the status and trends of the saltwater industry. The intent is to provide readers with a better understanding of the RFH sector in Louisiana in terms of its structure and management, economic and social contributions, and regulatory challenges.

# STRUCTURE & MANAGEMENT...

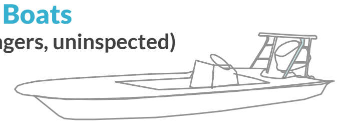
## Operational Classes //



**Head Boats**
**(>6 passengers, USCG inspected)**



**Charter Boats**
**(≤6 passengers, uninspected)**



While the term "charter fishing" is commonly used in the broadest terms, many outside of the industry are unaware that the RFH fleet is categorized under two federal classifications: charter boats and head boats. These names have historically derived from the two ways in which clients paid for fishing trips. Pricing on smaller vessels was typically set as a single payment or "charter" for the entire vessel. Pricing on larger "head boats" allowed for booking on an individual basis, or 'by the head' as the name implies. Client payment methods; however, have evolved considerably over time – and these two categories now refer primarily to a vessel's authorized passenger capacity. At the federal level, "head boats" are defined as those RFH businesses licensed to carry more than six passengers per trip. For these operations, the vessel's hull construction and equipment must be certified and inspected by the United States Coast Guard (USCG). Because of their larger size, these operations normally fish in offshore, federal waters (beyond three nautical miles for Louisiana). Meanwhile, "charter boats" are not required to undergo USCG certification, however, their operators are allowed to carry no more than six passengers per trip. Depending on a charter vessel's size, these operations can offer a range of fishing options - from inshore territorial waters to offshore, federal waters. Each of these operational classes is governed by licenses and permits that must be obtained at the federal and state level.

## Licenses and Permits //

### Federal Requirements

Anyone wanting to become a RFH captain in the United States must first apply for USCG certification. The USCG regulates the operation of RFH vessels and operators in both inshore and federal waters. The qualifications for these federal licenses are generally based on three factors: total days of service; waters served upon; and, vessel tonnage. Two main types of RFH licenses are available: operator of uninspected passenger vessel (OUPV) or "6-pack" license, and Master of Self-Propelled Vessels (25-200) upon near coastal waters. According to federal requirements, vessels that are uninspected may hold no more than six passengers, while vessels that carry more than six passengers must be inspected by the USCG.[2]

For RFH operations in federal waters, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration‘s National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA) requires additional permits.

***Coastal Migratory Pelagic (CMP) Permit***
Implemented in 1989, this permit is needed by any RFH vessel fishing in federal waters to catch and keep mackerels and cobia.

***Reef Fish Permit***
Established in 1996, this permit is required by any RFH vessel fishing in federal waters to catch and keep snappers, groupers, amberjack, tilefish, hogfish, or gray triggerfish.

***Atlantic Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Permit***
A NOAA Fisheries-issued permit required for any RFH vessel fishing in state and federal waters retaining tunas, sharks, swordfish, and billfish.

It is important to note that both the CMP and Reef Fish permits are under a moratorium, or limited access, which means no NEW permits are available, only transfers. The initial goal of this restriction, enacted in 2002 by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, was to moderate short-term increases in fishing capacity while the Council determined what is necessary to stabilize fishing mortality for stocks subject to overfishing or that are overfished. Between 2005 and 2017, the number of valid or renewable federal reef fish RFH vessel permits decreased from 1,677 to 1,311 (as of May 26, 2017). During that same time period, the number of valid or renewable federal CMP for-hire permits decreased from 1,765 to 1,323.[3]

Current rationale in the most recent review (August 2017) of reef and CMP permits indicates that distributions of permits geographically have been relatively stable, suggesting the moratorium has contributed to economic stability and provided enough room for change while accommodating permit transferability. The review also cites improvements in the biological status of certain stocks; though not exclusively attributed to the moratorium, the relatively stable allowable catch suggests a positive impact on the status of the stocks.

## State Requirements

The state of Louisiana requires an additional license for operators of the RFH vessels operating from Louisiana's coastal ports. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) refers collectively to all RFH vessels as "charter boats" and only differentiates based on passenger capacity and residency. The department offers a Resident Charter Boat Fishing Guide License and Non-Resident Charter Boat Fishing Guide License. These two licenses are available for operators of those vessels carrying 6 or less passengers and those carrying more than 6 passengers. To qualify for these state licenses, coastal-based RFH businesses must have the following:

- A valid USCG Captain's License
- A valid driver's license
- A LA Recreational Fishing License
- Proof of liability insurance

These state-based licenses are authorized under Louisiana Revised Statutes (Title 56, Section 302.9) and are limited specifically to RFH operations within the state's saltwater areas. While Louisiana's inland for-hire operations (e.g. freshwater fishing guides and tour boat operations) are currently not required to obtain a state-level license, they are subject to federal requirements. According to the USCG (46 CFR 11.201), any commercial-based RFH operation on inland navigable waters must obtain the appropriate class of license for their passenger capacity (OUPV or Master Class permits).

It should be noted that the state charter boat license is for the captain, while USCG regulations apply to both the vessel (e.g. inspected vessel) and captain (e.g. master's license).

For operators targeting certain offshore species, in addition to the required federal permits the state also requires a Recreational Offshore Landing Permit (ROLP). The LDWF developed the ROLP Program in 2013 to better quantify and characterize recreational fishing efforts beyond Louisiana's territorial waters. The ROLP is required for any charter captains targeting tunas, billfish, swordfish, amberjacks, groupers, snappers, cobia, wahoo, and dolphin.

**Figure 1. Louisiana Charter Boat Licenses (≤6 Passengers 1995 - 2017)**

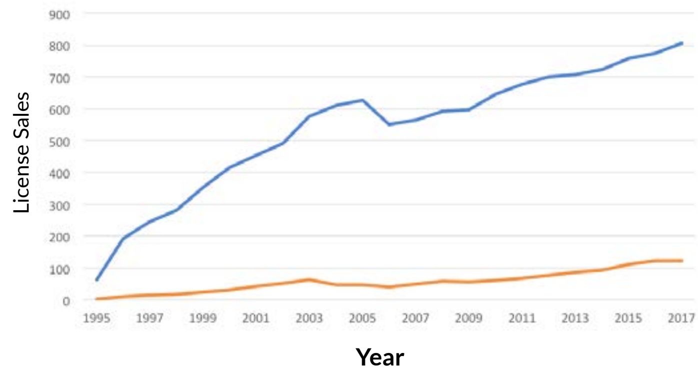
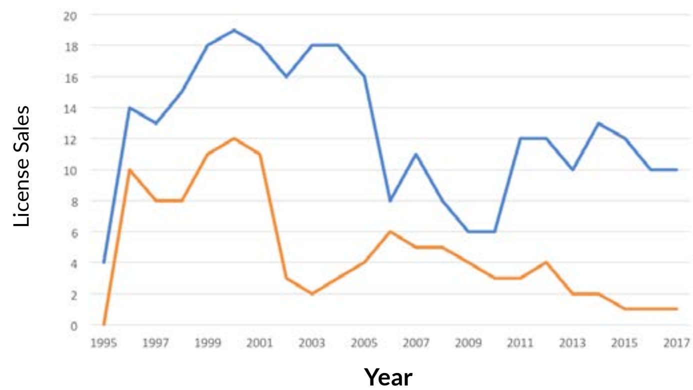



**Figure 2. Louisiana Charter Boat Licenses (>6 Passengers 1995 - 2017)**




## State Trends

Since its inception in 1994, the charter boat licensing program has provided significant economic benefits to the state. Revenue from these license sales fund a variety of activities including research and conservation, fish management work on the state's waters, education and outreach via the Louisiana Charter Boat Association, and more. So, just as RFH businesses contribute to the economy, license and permit fees from these operations also contribute to the management and health of Louisiana's recreational fisheries. The number of active charter fishing boats changes each year as new operators are added and others leave the fishing industry. Changes in demand and technology can also affect structure and participation within the state's RFH fleet – as well as a state's coastal topography. These factors are somewhat evidenced by the sale of state licenses over time.

Without a doubt, the RFH fleet in Louisiana has evolved over time to one dominated by inshore operators with six or fewer passengers. In the 23-year period since LDWF first instituted charter boat license requirements for saltwater areas of the state, the number of charter boat operators licensed for less than 6 passengers has sky-rocketed from less than 300 in the mid-1990's to more than 800 in 2017 (Figure 1). This includes a rise in more non-traditional charter operations, like bow-fishing and fly-fishing. By comparison, there are no head boat operators, and the number of 6-plus operators in Louisiana has been in a long run decline. After reaching a peak of 31 operations in 2000, the number of larger charter vessel operator licenses sold has dwindled to 10 in 2017 (Figure 2).

Head boats remain relatively prevalent in neighboring states with high levels of coastal tourism. In those areas, a "deep-sea" fishing excursion is but one of several activities available to beach-based vacationers. In contrast, the Louisiana fleet tends to serve a clientele base for which charter fishing is a primary reason for coastal tourism. Much of this difference is due to the topography and fishery productivity of coastal Louisiana. Most of Louisiana's RFH businesses are situated at the terminal end of narrow peninsulas of coastal land.

These seaward ridges are most often found on the "high-land" bordering coastal bayous and rivers that support a level of estuarine productivity unparalleled in the continental United States. While these remote destinations often lack the amenities found in neighboring states, they afford relatively quick access to Louisiana's highly productive inland marshes and abundant offshore fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico.

Indeed, the state's twenty coastal parishes support a thriving RFH sector that account for a substantial amount of revenue, employment, and taxes.

***Louisiana's reputation as a mecca for coastal and offshore fishing is well-known. Nationwide, anglers speak in hushed tones about the legendary catches reported in remote destinations with exotic names like Delacroix, Venice, Fourchon, and Cocodrie.***

# ECONOMIC & SOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS...

## Economic Impact //

Once thought to be the sport of choice for businessmen and the wealthy, charter fishing lures millions of anglers every year, many of them families and groups of friends, aboard charter vessels in the Gulf of Mexico region. The economic contribution of the for-hire fleet to the overall economy in the Louisiana Gulf coast extends well beyond measuring the direct employment, income, and gross revenues of the RFH businesses. For-hire captains purchase products and services, such as ice, food, drinks, bait, and gas to maintain and operate their vessels, which has a positive effect on the businesses supplying those products. These secondary suppliers, in turn, purchase products and services from their own suppliers, and the cascading effect from industry to industry continues the cycle of consumption spending.

*In 2015, the RFH fleet in Louisiana accounted for 162,000 trips valued at more than $86 million in dockside revenue and an additional $100 million in trip-related expenditures and value-added impact.*

The top industries supported by Louisiana's for-hire fleet are:

- marinas
- marine supply stores
- boat repair shops
- fishing gear manufacturers
- grocery and sporting goods stores
- commercial fisheries (providing bait)
- banks (providing loans)
- gas stations

This does not include auxiliary expenses by anglers traveling to and from the for-hire fishing site (e.g. auto fuel, lodging, food, and any bait, tackle, and equipment not included in fishing fees.) Over 594 service sector jobs were supported by the for-hire fleet in Louisiana in 2015.

NOAA Fisheries conducts nationwide expenditure surveys of marine anglers every three to five years to better determine the economic and social impacts associated with any fisheries regulation that may influence business operations. Of the 19.7 million recreational fishing trips in the Gulf of Mexico in 2015, Louisiana had the second highest recorded trips with 2.4 million.[4] Total angler expenditures on durable goods used for marine recreational fishing in Louisiana were $1.6 billion. Angler expenditures on durable goods, supported 13,470 jobs to the state's economy, generated $1.4 billion in sales, and $587 million in income to recreational fishing dependent sectors.[5]

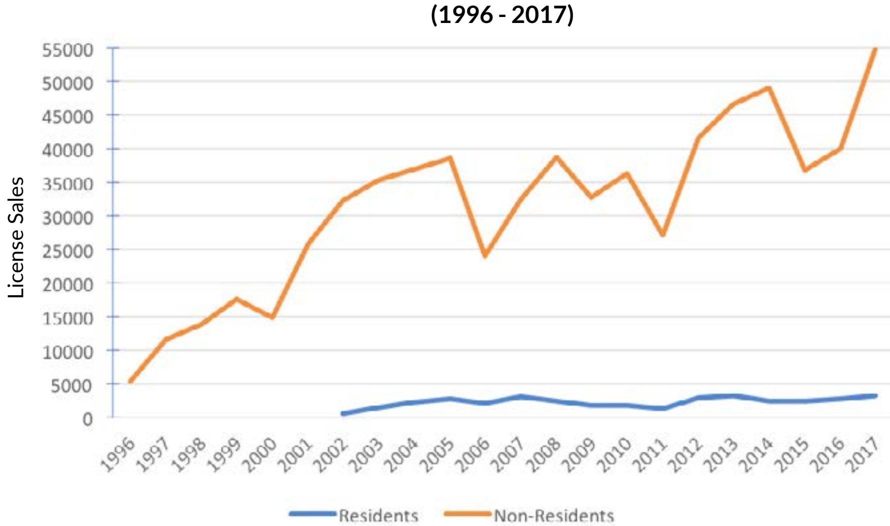
Data from NOAA reveals that in 2015, the RFH fleet in Louisiana accounted for 162,000 trips valued at more than $86 million. Those fishing activities generated $50.6 million in trip-related expenditures and an additional $49.7 million in value added impact. These data are consistent with an independent survey conducted by LDWF in cooperation with LSU just five years earlier. That study estimated approximately $42.6 million in economic impact came from Louisiana RFH operations in 2010 for all vessel classes.[6]

## Changes in Demand //

A considerable portion of recreational fishing income is derived from tourism when anglers cross state lines to go fishing, which is why fishery managers and charter captains statewide are developing greater partnerships with tourism promotion organizations like convention and visitor bureaus (CVB's). The CVB's are a sector in the unique position to support the RFH industry and see, firsthand, its impact on the state's economy. Anne Klenke, Tourism Director for the Lake Charles/Southwest LA Convention & Visitors Bureau, speaks routinely with tourists who call interested in Louisiana's RFH services in her area. ***"The waterways of Southwest Louisiana are one of our great natural assets. For visitors to be able to access these and the great variety of fish they can catch on them, our professional charter fishing captains are critical as they provide the boat, the gear, and the expertise to their guests to not just fish but catch fish. Media and travel writers consistently write about the great charter fishing experiences to be had in Southwest Louisiana, thereby telling our story to millions of readers looking for an outdoor adventure."***

While the RFH industry is heavily reliant on consumer spending, it is also at the mercy of fluctuations from natural disasters and changes in management policies. Though LA Creel now tracks the number of RFH trips taken, another good indicator of the health of the RFH industry is the number of temporary fishing licenses sold by LDWF. These 3-day licenses allow anglers to experience Louisiana fishing without having to purchase an annual fishing license. The non-resident form of this license was first instituted by LDWF in 1996 and a resident version followed in 2002. Looking at sales data of these licenses over time provides partial insight into the various economic, environmental and management factors that have led to expansion and contraction of this sector in Louisiana (Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Charter Fishing Trip 3 Day License Sales (1996 - 2017)**




As with any new license or permit, the initial growth in sales in the late 1990s was likely due to a period of awareness and compliance issues. But a clear surge in the number of non-resident 3-day trip licenses is evident by the early to mid-2000s. The apparent growth of fishing-related tourism during that period was likely a product of a strong national economy, rapid expansion of outdoor-related social media, and heavy promotion by the Louisiana Office of Tourism. The substantial decrease in non-resident trips in 2006 was no doubt related to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This reduction continued throughout 2006 and early 2007, due to damages in the RFH fleet and negative media perceptions regarding the availability of fishing opportunities and the status of the fisheries resource. After a brief recovery to pre-Katrina levels, non-resident trips began to decline once again in 2008-2009 as the country's recession took hold and two more hurricanes hit the coast. Though Louisiana residents were not nearly hit as hard, non-resident expenditures dropped significantly for nearly all the state's tourism sectors, including charter fishing. This decrease would be further compounded in 2010 following the Gulf oil spill and the associated federal moratoria that halted all fishing operations for nearly a year in most the state's coastal and offshore waters. Recent years have seen a strong rebound in demand, with non-resident fishing license sales increase from 40,666 in 2016 to 54,799 in 2017.

## Costs and Earnings //

Navigating the commercial end of RFH operations can be confounding to both newcomers and old-timers. Beyond the myriad of regulatory requirements and the vagaries of the market and Mother Nature, operators must also possess sound skills in business management. To assess the economic health of the industry, state and federal agencies periodically survey RFH operations to collect detailed information on business structure, costs, and earnings. The most comprehensive of these economic surveys occur roughly every decade in the Gulf of Mexico region and was first conducted by Texas A&M in 1987 and again in 1997 by the University of Florida.[8] The most recent Gulf-wide economic survey of RFH operations, conducted in 2010 by Louisiana State University (LSU), was sent to 2,205 captains with an effective response rate of 31% (n=689). The Louisiana portion of that survey was conducted in cooperation with LDWF and obtained detailed information from 212 licensed RFH captains. Table 1 provides a snapshot of those data by vessel class (Table 1).

**Table 1. Physical and Economic Characteristics of RFH Operations in Louisiana (Source: Savolainen et al. 2011, CPI 2018)**

| Louisiana RFH Averages (n=212) | Large Vessels | Medium Vessels | Small Vessels |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vessel Cost ($) | 367,404 | 76,818 | 31,840 |
| Vessel Cost (2018 dollars)[9] | 426,408 | 89,155 | 36,953 |
| Vessel length (ft) | 57 | 32 | 23 |
| Engines (#) | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Age of vessel (years) | 19 | 10 | 7 |
| Trips per year (#) | 89 | 75 | 71 |
| Anglers per trip (#) | 13 | 5 | 3 |
| Percent Offshore (%) | 91 | 92 | 5 |
| Deckhands (#) | 1.5 | 1 | 0 |
| Distance traveled (miles) | 78 | 105 | 44 |
| Trip duration (hours) | 10 | 11 | 8 |
| Fuel and oil (gallons) | 176 | 109 | 24 |
| Annual Revenue ($) | 240,052 | 107,581 | 42,268 |
| Annual Expenses ($) | 169,542 | 67,334 | 18,894 |
| Net Income ($) | 70,510 | 40,246 | 23,375 |
| Net income (2018 dollars) | 81,834 | 46,709 | 27,129 |

From a structural standpoint, all RFH operations share common business considerations. Each of these firms must generate enough revenue to cover a wide range of costs related to ownership and operation. Fixed expenses associated with loan payments, insurance, and overhead must be paid monthly regardless of the level of for-hire activity. Variable costs are incurred at the trip level and are typically highest for fuel and oil, followed by labor, and supplies (bait, ice, tackle). Generally speaking, the categories of large and medium vessels are largest in size (32' and 57', respectively), carry more passengers, stay out longer, require more fuel, and travel greater distances to access federal waters (Table 1).

Average net income was positive for all three vessel classes, ranging from $27,129 to $46,709, to $81,834 for small, medium, and large vessels, respectively.* While these numbers may seem appealing to prospective operators, purchasing an RFH vessel poses a substantial economic hurdle. Expressed in terms of 2018 dollars, the average guide operator would spend nearly $37,000 for the vessel alone. The larger categories are even more expensive, with a charter vessel costing prospective buyers nearly $90,000 and the average head boat costing more than $425,000. Perhaps due to the lower costs of entry, guide vessels tend to be the most numerous type of RFH business. These smaller operations accounted for nearly three-quarters (71%) of all RFH vessels in 2010 survey and generated more than half (51%) of the annual dockside revenue in the five states of the northern U.S. Gulf of Mexico.[10]

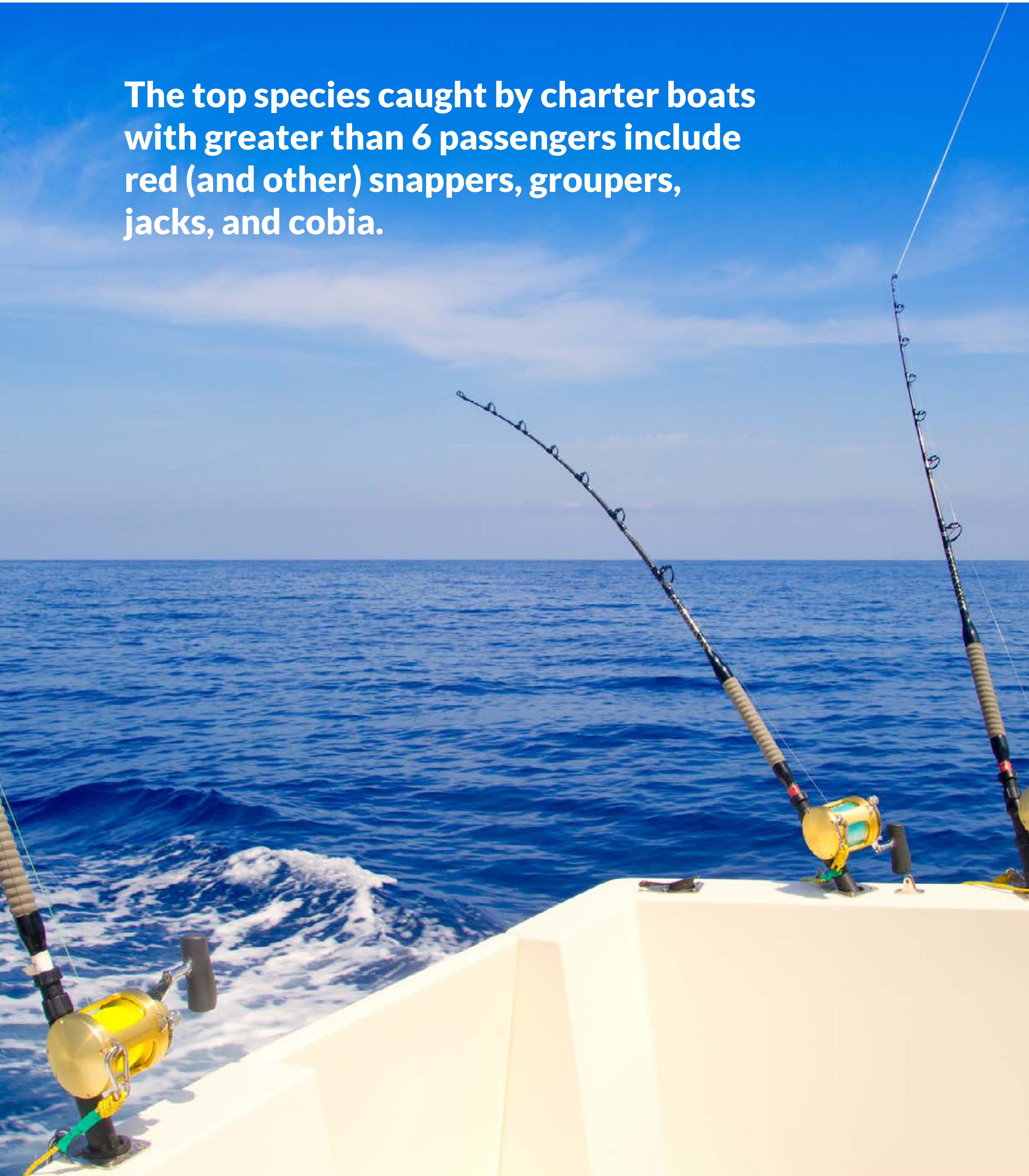
**RECENT INSHORE DATA //**

***In September 2017, the Louisiana Fisheries Forward program held a series of meetings with inshore RFH captains (n=33) to collect some basic information on operations. While the questionnaires were not as exhaustive as earlier surveys, the responses do provide an interesting comparison to earlier studies. The average guide boat operator had a vessel that was 6-10 years old, 22-25 feet in length, and on average used for 51-75 inshore trips. Most of these were full day trips ranging from 21-30 miles round trip.***

While data on costs and revenue were not collected, these structural and effort related responses are consistent with the findings of RFH operations in Louisiana conducted in 2010.

* Detailed economic surveys with the RFH sector in the Gulf of Mexico are only conducted on a 10-year basis. Pertinent economic estimates are adjusted here in 2018 dollars to adjust for inflation, but do not account for any recent changes in the supply or demand of products or services.

**The top species caught by charter boats with greater than 6 passengers include red (and other) snappers, groupers, jacks, and cobia.**



# REGULATORY CHALLENGES...

Even in a Sportsman's Paradise like Louisiana, fisheries have their limits. While fish reproduce, their populations must be sustainably managed to ensure they are not depleted over time. A stock that is subject to *overfishing* has a fishing mortality (harvest) rate that is too high. One that is *overfished* has a population abundance that is lower than the threshold specified in its fishery management plan.

## State and Federal Management //

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) and NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) manage fisheries in federal waters. Under NOAA, the RFH sector is managed as a recreation fishery. LDWF, the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission, and the Louisiana Legislature manage fisheries in state waters; the RFH sector is licensed and permitted as a commercial fishery. Though LDWF manages state waters, it has a strong interest in how fish are managed in federal waters and how that management affects anglers in Louisiana.

Generally, Louisiana state waters extend 3 nautical miles from the nearest land; federal waters extend from 3 nautical miles to 200 nautical miles. However, for reef fish fishery management, Louisiana waters extend to 9 nautical miles. Fishermen should stay informed of the state/federal jurisdictional boundary as future congressional actions may affect the current boundary demarcation as it applies to reef fish species. If a future congressional action modifies the state/federal jurisdictional boundary, it will not impact the type of fishing gear reef fish fishermen may use.

State and federal harvest regulations change as agencies respond to what's happening in our fish populations. Over the years, there have been waves of significant regulatory changes for the RFH sector, impacting captains differently depending on their vessel types and the region where they primarily fish. In the early stages of fisheries management, the primary source for national recreational fishery statistics in the United States was the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS), which began in 1979 as a requirement of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976, to collect information about recreational fisheries on a regional scale to meet the management needs of the time. The MRFSS was originally developed to monitor all sectors of marine recreational fishing (shore, private boat, charter boat, and head boat), but a new For-Hire Survey (FHS) was later developed to provide more precise statistics on catch and efforts of charter and head boats.

The Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) survey came along in 2006 to provide better regional monitoring of recreational fishing participation, effort, catches, landings and releases of finfish species in marine waters and bays for all 50 states. It brings together federal, state, and interstate partners who are experts in fisheries management, survey design, statistics, and outreach to improve recreational fishing data collection.

## Evolution of LA Creel //

Throughout this time, LDWF found several issues with the MRIP survey, mainly that it is not able to obtain reliable landings of individual species in a timely manner, and cannot separate landings by regions/basins of the state. At the same time, several key regulations started officials down the road to state-based data collection tailored to Louisiana's unique recreational and RFH fisheries. In 2013, Louisiana established a Recreational Offshore Landing Permit (ROLP) to help better characterize offshore angling activities. This led to the development of an intensive red snapper landings survey in 2013. Concerns from LDWF over the MRIP survey resolution and available data led to Louisiana dropping its participation in MRIP in 2014 and beginning its own survey. Through LA Creel, LDWF is able to not only provide more precise and timely recreational landings data statewide, but also obtain critical, basin-level information to customize management of the species within smaller geographic areas. LA Creel was fully certified by NOAA in 2017 as the state's official data collection program.

# The main fish caught by offshore charter boat anglers include red snapper, mangrove snapper, grouper, mackerel, cobia, and tuna.

## Seasons and Species //

Because fish don't know the difference between state and federal waters. Because their populations fluctuate and require the right mix of age groups to stay healthy. And, because the number of recreational anglers in Louisiana's Gulf of Mexico increases each year, the state's fisheries are managed using seasons, possession or bag, and size limits.

It's a balancing act to maintain and improve the natural habitat of fish while increasing fishery yields for fishermen – one carried out by agents of LDWF, the U.S. Coast Guard and NOAA.

Possession, or bag, limits generally apply on a daily basis. Some species have size limits but no bag limits, some have bag limits but no size limits, and many have both.

Fishing seasons vary as well as bag limits, with some open year round while other seasons have a set open date and continue until a catch limit is reached or projected to be reached – as in the case of the iconic red snapper, one of the most monitored—and controversial—fisheries.

Before managers reduced red snapper catch limits in 2007 to allow for rebuilding, the combined commercial and recreational catch limit for red snapper was 9.12 million pounds, and the recreational red snapper season lasted for more than six months. NOAA Fisheries found these catch rates too high, raising flags about a possible depleted population.

As season and bag limits for red snapper were shortened, political battles grew over the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) allocations between the commercial sector, the recreational sector, and the federally-managed RFH fleet. In recent years the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council has supported a variety of state-level management options for Red snapper. In 2017, this flexibility has allowed recreational anglers (and Louisiana-licensed RFH operators) the longest red snapper season since 2013. Additional refinements are in process. Newly approved exempted fishing permits are allowing Louisiana and other Gulf states to examine the feasibility of novel methods for data collection and reporting within their federally-authorized TAC for a given species.

### WHAT ARE THEY FISHING FOR? //

*Anglers on RFH trips in Louisiana pursue a wide variety of fishes. The most common inshore species targeted by marsh and shoreline fishermen include spotted sea trout, red drum, black drum, sheepshead, and southern flounder. Further offshore anglers pursue a variety of coastal and reef species, such as snappers, groupers, cobia, jacks, and mackerels. Highly migratory, pelagic species of tuna and billfish are sought in the deepest waters of the Gulf of Mexico, sometimes more than 100 miles offshore.*


Some fish, with no season or size restrictions, like flounder, are presenting anglers with a different dilemma. Charter captain Dudley Vandenborre, who fishes primarily in Lake Pontchartrain, says he began to notice a drop in the area's flounder population about eight years ago, becoming more noticeable around 2014. "The population is way down," he says, "now, I catch only about 4% of the flounder I've caught in previous years.

***"In the case of the southern flounder, historically plentiful mid-November through February, fishermen could catch the 10-fish limit in one trip in November."*** From January through November of 2017, Vandenborre says he doesn't think he caught 20 flounders. He looks to other indicators of a dwindling flounder population.

***"Our shrimp fleet that bottom trawls would always have a big bycatch of flounder and they're not catching any as they drag Lake Pontchartrain. Even at fishing rodeos – I saw a winning flounder in 2017 weighing in at 1.8 pounds!"***

Fisheries biologists at LDWF and Louisiana State University have responded to this concern and embarked on an intensive reassessment of the state's flounder stock. Changes in the status and health of species such as red snapper and southern flounder illustrate the need for diligent monitoring and nimble management. The first priority of state and federal fisheries managers is to preserve our natural resources and fisheries. The future of the fishery depends on two factors: good habitat and good management. Working towards that end, regulations and management provide valuable information on who is fishing, where and when they are fishing, and that they have the proper gear for each species.

Photo credit: THE BIGFISH

**RFH licensing regulations fall under commercial fishing in Louisiana; find requirements at**
http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/fishing/commercial-finfish

**RFH harvest regulations fall under recreational fishing in Louisiana; find seasons and limits at**
http://www.wlf.louisiana.gov/fishing/recreational-fishing

**In federal waters, RFH regulations fall under recreational fishing; find requirements at**
http://gulfcouncil.org/fishing-regulations/federal/

NOAA's Text Message Alert Program allows fishermen to receive information on immediate fishery openings and closures through text message (SMS). Standard message & data rates may apply; you may opt-out at any time. **Text GULFRECFISH to 888777**

**To receive email alerts from LDWF, sign up at**
http://www.wlf.la.gov/signup.

## The most popular catches of guide boat anglers include spotted sea trout, red drum, black drum, flounder, and sheepshead.

### Endnotes //


1 Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, State RFH license database (2017)

2 USCG National Maritime Center (2018) http://www.dco.uscg.mil/Our-Organization/Assistant-Commandant-for-Prevention-Policy-CG-5P/National-Maritime-Center-NMC/Charter-Boat-Captain/#

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