



THE FUTURE OF SPORTFISHING:

Policy Recommendations from the Recreational Fishing Community

Sportfishing Industry and Community Partners
ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESSIONAL TRANSITION MEMORANDUM

2024–2028

The American Sportfishing Association and recreational fishing partners present the following recommendations for the next Presidential Administration and the next two Congresses. These recommendations promote conservation efforts for our nation’s waterways, support local economies, and enhance access for the 57.7 million Americans who participate in recreational fishing.

This document was a collaborative effort by a group of recreational fishing industry, conservation, and community stakeholders. This group’s mission is to support science-based conservation, growth in trade and commerce, increase education and access, and advocate for and protect the rights of American anglers.

We urge the next Administration and next two Congresses to consider and adopt the following recommendations. We look forward to working with you to deliver on these priorities.

This memorandum is endorsed by the following organizations:

- *American Catfishing Association*
- *American Sportfishing Association*
- *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*
- *Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.)*
- *Boat U.S.*
- *Bonefish and Tarpon Trust*
- *Center for Sportfishing Policy*
- *Coastal Conservation Association*
- *Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation*
- *Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation*
- *International Game Fish Association*
- *Major League Fishing*
- *Marine Retailers Association of the Americas*
- *National Marine Manufacturer’s Association*
- *National Professional Anglers Association*
- *Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership*
- *Trout Unlimited*



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Introduction

Recreational fishing is one of the most popular and accessible ways to connect the public, especially diverse audiences, to the outdoors. Our community is working hard to ensure that the sport continues for generations to come. The number of recreational anglers in the U.S. has steadily grown, today 57.7 million Americans participate in recreational fishing.¹ The sportfishing industry currently contributes over \$148 billion dollars in economic output and supports over 900,000 jobs.²

Our fisheries resources are held in the public trust and conserved through sound state and federal laws and policies, supported by funding from anglers and the sportfishing industry. Fishing activity across the nation supports the economy, connects people to the outdoors, and provides substantial funding for conservation. Through fishing license purchases, excise taxes, and direct donations, the recreational fishing community contributes approximately \$1.8 billion dollars toward aquatic resource conservation each year.²

¹ RBFF Special Report on Fishing 2024

² 2023 Economic Contributions of Recreational Fishing: U.S. Congressional Districts Report. Southwick Associates



A Partnership Proposal

The recreational fishing community has developed the following policy positions focused on both freshwater and marine fisheries, ranging from sportfish equipment excise taxes to increased hatchery production, habitat conservation, angler access, and aquatic invasive species management. With the support of the Administration, the sportfishing community can grow our economic contributions, while providing a wholesome, traditional recreational activity that supports a sustainable outdoors.



National Conservation Funding

Adequate and Dedicated Funding for Federal Land Management Agencies

Federal land management agencies perform critical conservation work despite lagging funding authorization levels. Outdoor recreation contributes 2.2% to U.S. GDP, yet only receives 0.16% of federal funding – a nearly 14x difference in scale.³ Agencies including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Forest Service, US Army Corp of Engineers, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, National Marine Fisheries Service and NOAA Sanctuaries rely on adequate funding for public land management and access, fisheries stock assessments, accurate data, fish hatcheries, fish habitat restoration and more. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act were important steps in providing crucial funding to federal land management agencies for projects including fish passage restoration and coastal resiliency infrastructure. However, with increased climate threats and development threatening marine and freshwater ecosystems, more support and funding is required.

³ BEA. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2022

Recommendations:

- **Support robust funding for federal land management and natural resource agencies.**

Examples of programs that provide high levels of support for the recreational fishing community include:

- **The National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP)**, a prime example of a voluntary federal program that delivers a strong return on investment to the nation. NFHP is a network of state and local partners dedicated to conserving and restoring aquatic resources across the country.
- **Fish hatcheries**, which are necessary for providing recreational opportunities at stocked lakes and streams, food security, conserving threatened and endangered species and mitigating impacts of federal water development projects
- **Everglades restoration funding**. The Florida Everglades are vital to healthy fisheries, habitat, and water quality. Restoration efforts have been ongoing and are successful, however more support is needed to ensure this ecosystem is conserved. In FY24, \$425 million was approved for Everglades restoration with the FY25 presidential budget requesting \$444 million.⁴

⁴ Presidential Budget FY25

NATIONAL CONSERVATION FUNDING

Reauthorization of the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund

Every year, excise taxes collected from sportfishing equipment and motorboat fuel contribute hundreds of millions of dollars in conservation funds to state fish and wildlife agencies, boating safety and other vital programs that benefit our community through the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund. This program must be reauthorized before the end of fiscal year 2026 to continue its high level of “user pay, public benefit” support for state aquatic resources conservation and boating access, angling and boating participation by the public, boating safety programs, marine and Great Lakes fisheries commissions, and coastal restoration efforts. A collection of organizations that pay into and/or benefit from the fund, known as the Angling and Boating Alliance, is developing recommendations for the upcoming reauthorization, including addressing the lost revenue from third-party marketplace facilitators allowing for the sale of products direct from overseas to U.S. consumers without any excise tax collection, which places U.S. manufacturers and importers at a competitive disadvantage and results in lost conservation funding.

Recommendation:

- **Support the Angling and Boating Alliance's recommendations for a timely reauthorization of the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund**



Enhanced Funding for State-Led Collaborative Conservation

State Wildlife Action Plans are the blueprints for conserving the nation's fish, wildlife, and their habitats. Development and implementation of these plans is led by state and territorial fish and wildlife agencies in collaboration with local, state, and federal agencies, tribes, universities, private landowners, and fish and wildlife enthusiasts. With adequate funding, these plans can

address the needs of at-risk species and habitats before they become listed as threatened or endangered, which is more cost-effective and ecologically beneficial. Proactive conservation is good for wildlife, good for habitat, good for taxpayers, good for business, and good for our communities. By supporting biodiversity, habitat restoration, and fish and wildlife health, SWAPs play a crucial role in maintaining wildlife populations and the ecological balance needed for resilient landscapes. While strongly bipartisan legislative efforts to fully fund SWAP's, such as the proposed Recovering America's Wildlife Act, have failed to be realized, the Administration and Congress should continue to pursue increased funding for SWAP's.

Recommendation:

- **Support fully funding State Wildlife Action Plans**

Marine Fisheries Policy Proposals

Federal marine fisheries in the United States are regulated by NOAA Fisheries and eight Regional Fisheries Management Councils. Historically, preference has been given to the commercial fishing industry. The sportfishing industry is an afterthought and saddled with antiquated, commercial-focused, management plans and inaccurate data. Recreational fishing has a considerable financial stake in the success and stability of marine fisheries and deserves due credit for our role in conservation and sustainability.

A culture shift at the highest level of fisheries management is required to recognize the inherent value of recreational fishing. Saltwater angling is one of the most popular recreational activities in the country with 13.8 million Americans participating, contributing over 40 billion dollars to the economy,⁵ despite being responsible for only 2 percent of all marine fish harvest (with commercial fishing responsible for the remaining 98 percent).⁶ Saltwater recreational fishing is especially important in coastal, rural, and tribal communities. Many of these communities are dependent on recreational fishing, not just for tourism revenue, but also for the cultural and traditional ties that recreational fishing represents.



Access to marine fisheries is an important variable in ensuring communities have a thriving recreational fishing economy. A lack of quality data is limiting fishing opportunities because managers build precaution into regulations to account for data uncertainty. Examples where poor data are limiting access include South Atlantic Red Snapper, which has been limited to a one-day recreational season even though stock assessments show the population at record levels of biomass, and on the West Coast quillback rockfish, which due to a highly questionable stock assessment has resulted in largescale closures for all rockfish. It is important to re-envision the fisheries management process to ensure sufficient and accurate data is collected on recreationally important fisheries and to avoid highly precautionary management approaches that unnecessarily stifle fishing opportunities.

In the following pages we outline several marine fisheries policy positions that we hope the incoming Administration implements, making the successful partnership between the industry and federal government a priority. This partnership can lead to successful years of sustainable fisheries management and conservation.

⁵ 2023 Economic Contributions of Recreational Fishing: U.S. Congressional Districts Report. Southwick Associates
⁶ Comparing NOAA's Recreational and Commercial Fishing Economic Data, Southwick Associates

MARINE PROPOSALS

Improve Data and Access



YOUTH COASTAL FISHING PROGRAM ACT

Children's exposure to recreational fishing is the first step in developing a lifelong appreciation for conservation and marine stewardship. 86% of anglers go fishing before the age of 12.⁷ Yet, NOAA is the only federal land or water management agency that does not have a program to introduce young people to recreational fishing. This Act creates a \$2 million dollar grant program within NOAA to take children, especially those in underserved communities, fishing in the ocean or Great Lakes.

⁷ RBF Special Report on Fishing. 2023

Recommendation:

- Support the passage of the Youth Coastal Fishing Program Act

OVERHAUL MRIP

The Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) is the federal data collection system for recreational fishing. However, this program has routinely been shown to be highly inaccurate, including a recent study that found the program overestimates recreational catch by 30-40%.⁸ This has led to inaccurate stock assessments, lower quotas, and shortened seasons, a notable one being the 2024 one-day red snapper season in the South Atlantic. We recommend a fundamental shift in the program that relies more heavily on state-led data collection systems where supported by state agencies and interstate commissions, such as those that are currently being used in the Gulf of Mexico and the West Coast.

⁸ Evaluating Measurement Error in the MRIP Fishing Effort Survey. NOAA Fisheries Service, Office of Science and Technology. May 2023

Recommendation:

- Reform MRIP and collaborate with states to generate more accurate and precise recreational fisheries data



MARINE PROPOSALS

Investment in Marine Technologies

WITHDRAW NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALE VESSEL SPEED RULE AND PARTNER WITH INDUSTRY ON TECHNOLOGY SAFETY SOLUTIONS

The recreational fishing community advocates for common sense solutions to conserving the North Atlantic right whale. The 2022 Amendments to the North Atlantic Right Whale Vessel Strike Reduction Rule ineffectively applies a broad-brush management approach that will be costly to implement, practically impossible to enforce, and damaging to recreational boating, fishing, and coastal economies along the Atlantic coast. Several marine electronic companies have technology that can detect NARW in real time and are hard at work at integrating how that information can be instantaneously communicated to boaters.

Recommendation:

- Withdraw 2022 vessel speed rule and invest in marine technologies that reduce the risk of vessel strikes.

CREATE A TASK FORCE TO DEVELOP MITIGATION PROTOCOLS FOR SHARK DEPREDAATION

Shark depredation, when a shark bites or consumes the hooked catch as it is being retrieved, is increasing in prevalence and leading to poor quality fishing experience and concerns about fisheries sustainability. Legislation introduced in the 118th Congress, called the Supporting the Health of Aquatic Systems through Research, Knowledge, and Enhanced Dialogue (SHARKED) Act, would create a task force to research technologies and other methods that can reduce the prevalence of shark depredation. We ask that this administration support the SHARKED Act or follow suit and develop a similar task force that is in effect until viable solutions are found.

Recommendation:

- Create a task force to research and identify solutions to mitigate shark depredation



MARINE PROPOSALS

Effective Fisheries Management

IMPLEMENTATION OF ALTERNATIVE MANAGEMENT APPROACHES AUTHORIZED BY THE MODERN FISH ACT

The Modern Fish Act established and encouraged alternatives to federal fisheries management approaches, including harvest control rules that account for variability and uncertainty in NOAA's recreational harvest data and allow flexible management. This shift in management is progressing slowly because it goes against decades of traditional fisheries management where a theoretical catch limit, typically in pounds, is projected before the season based on past catch histories that often do not represent the current status of the stock. Harvest control rules include real-time information on stock status and need support from policy makers to continue flexible management and promote sustainable fisheries.

Recommendation:

- **Support the implementation of alternative management approaches like harvest control rules tailored to the characteristics of recreational fisheries.**

SPORTFISHING REPRESENTATION ON REGIONAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT COUNCILS

The eight Regional Fishery Management Councils oversee all marine fisheries in the United States. However, the councils generally heavily favor commercial fishing and lack sufficient recreational fishing representation. Recreational anglers care deeply about fisheries issues and are heavily invested in the success of fisheries management, and in many parts of the country, have a greater economic impact on the region than commercial fisheries. To establish healthy marine fisheries and garner public support for federal management, it is crucial to ensure strong recreational fishing representation at the council tables.

Recommendation:

- **Endorse equitable recreational fishing representation on the Regional Fishery Management Councils.**



MARINE PROPOSALS

Species and Habitat Recovery

ESTABLISH PROCESS FOR CONVERTING DECOMMISSIONED OIL PLATFORMS INTO ARTIFICIAL REEFS/ENCOURAGE NOAA TO EMBRACE THE ADDITION OF ARTIFICIAL REEFS NATIONALLY/REEF ACT

Artificial reefs are an important conservation tool for boosting climate resiliency by providing thermal refuge in deeper waters to offset the effects of coral bleaching, increasing habitat connectivity and metapopulation ecological benefits for species with high reef affinity. Artificial reefs enhance access for anglers, commercial fishermen, and recreational divers while relieving pressure on natural reefs. The intrinsic environmental benefits of hard substrates provided by offshore oil and gas infrastructure for species of both corals and fish have been well documented. The Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement and NOAA should not only embrace, but also help facilitate the conversion of oil and gas infrastructure to a state's 'Rigs-to-Reefs' program. In addition, legislation like the REEF Act, that identifies additional obsolete Naval vessels for use in strategic artificial reef building, should be supported as well.

Recommendation:

- **Support the REEF Act and expedite the conversion of oil and gas infrastructure to the 'Rigs-to-Reef' Program.**

WEST COAST SALMON RECOVERY

West Coast salmon are heavily threatened by a wide range of factors including climate change, habitat degradation, water quality and quantity declines and fish passage barriers. Effective conservation strategies include hatchery supplementation of endangered stocks, fish passage infrastructure – including dam removal – and sound management plans. Pacific salmon species are a keystone species of the Pacific Northwest and have extensive cultural connections within communities and tribes. Support of west coast salmon is critical to healthy aquatic ecosystems, thriving economies, and cultural traditions.

Recommendation:

- **Support and fund efforts to recover West Coastal salmon.**

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MARINE PROPOSALS

MARINE MAMMAL MANAGEMENT

Pinniped predation in the Columbia River is a leading cause of salmon mortality. Sea lions target dams where they can easily feed on returning salmon, causing a decline in spawning success and survivability. Funding is requested to mitigate this effect by reducing pinniped populations in the river system. \$5 million has been requested by Pacific Northwest states for state natural resource departments and tribes to fund this necessary program.

Recommendation:

- **Support annual funding and expanded state authority for the reduction in pinniped populations to conserve salmon populations.**



Freshwater Fisheries Policy Proposals

Freshwater recreational fishing is one of the most popular recreational activities in the United States, however there are many threats to freshwater ecosystems, including invasive species, pollution, and lack of access. Many of these threats can be addressed in bipartisan legislation such as the Farm Bill, however they require continued support and investment from policy makers and governing bodies.



FRESHWATER PROPOSALS

Freshwater Legislation



STRONG CONSERVATION TITLE IN THE FARM BILL

The Farm Bill's Conservation Title represents the federal government's largest investment in private land and water conservation. Conservation programs in the Farm Bill have long supported farmers, ranchers, and landowners hoping to restore fisheries – working to stem hypoxia in the Gulf, prevent harmful algal blooms in the Midwest and conserve stream flow in western states. Given the scale of the Conservation Title of the Farm Bill and the real and potential benefits for fisheries and fishing access, more focus should be placed on maintaining or improving Farm Bill programs for aquatic resources. We ask for support in developing a strong conservation title that develops and strengthens programs targeting aquatic ecosystems and fisheries conservation.

Recommendation:

- › **Support the development of a strong conservation title in the Farm Bill**

ESTABLISH THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN FISHERY COMMISSION

The Mississippi River Basin is one of the most valuable and celebrated freshwater fisheries in the United States, with an estimated \$26 billion economic impact from recreational fishing.⁹ However, threats from invasive species to habitat fragmentation to pollution continue to impact states' management of these fisheries. With resource management and funding spread across dozens of state jurisdictions, the states of the Mississippi River Basin are seeking a formal Commission to fund and coordinate interjurisdictional management, like the successful cooperative management afforded other regions of the country through similar commissions

⁹ 2023 Economic Contributions of Recreational Fishing: U.S. Congressional Districts Report. Southwick Associates

Recommendation:

- › **Create a Mississippi River Basin Fishery Commission.**



FRESHWATER PROPOSALS

Conserving and Accessing Waterways

SUPPORT THE CONTINUED USE OF TRADITIONAL FISHING TACKLE UNLESS SCIENCE DICTATES OTHERWISE

Traditional lead fishing tackle is an affordable, widely available fishing product that has been used by America's anglers for over a century. However, our community often faces efforts to ban or restrict lead fishing tackle despite a lack of scientific evidence. If there is no proof of a negative impact on wildlife populations or the environment, anglers should be able to choose what type of tackle works best for their needs. Alternatives to lead are not as widely available, are generally more expensive and/or do not perform as well. The restriction of lead tackle would reduce access and put an unreasonable burden on the sportfishing industry and anglers, particularly those of low-income.

Recommendation:

- › **Support science-based natural resource management and allow lead fishing tackle unless clear, site-specific research showing population-level impacts to wildlife justifies restrictions.**

AQUATIC INVASIVE SPECIES CONTROL

Aquatic invasive species (AIS) have wreaked havoc on our marine and freshwater ecosystems. Due to growing concerns, many organizations and companies within the sportfishing community partnered to launch the AIS Commission. The Commission published a report in 2023 that highlighted multiple priorities, including modernizing existing legislation such as the Lacey Act and the Nonindigenous Aquatic Nuisance Species Prevention and Control Act; the engagement, education, and recruitment of recreational user groups in preventing the introduction and spread of AIS, and incentives for harvest of AIS.¹⁰ Further discussion is underway to implement these recommendations, including provide re-authorization for the Aquatic Nuisance Species Task Force and increased funding and grants for AIS control and prevention (e.g., Asian carp control in the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River Basin), among other priorities.

¹⁰ Improving the Prevention, Eradication, Control, and Mitigation of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) 2023

Recommendation:

- › **Support the recommendations of the AIS Commission, including related legislation.**

Moving Forward

The recreational fishing industry and the angling community stands ready to work with the incoming administration as well as the 119th and 120th Congresses to further conservation efforts for marine and freshwater fisheries and grow the sportfishing industry and economy. This partnership can be strengthened to give recreational anglers and the industry a stronger voice and ensure success in our conservation and management endeavors.

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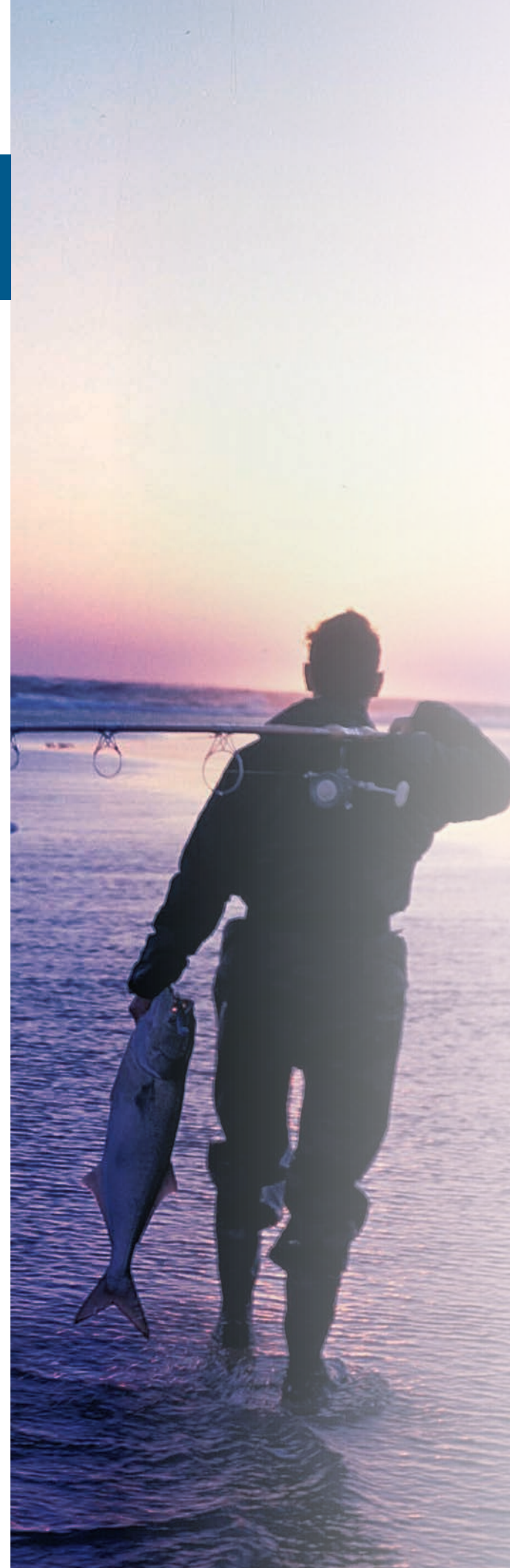
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