

CASTING COMMENTS

United We Stand



By Pat Murray, CCA President

WE ARE IN UNPRECEDENTED TIMES in federal fisheries management. Actually, that is probably an understatement. With the President's recently released National Ocean Policy, a pending release of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's catch share policy, a slew of active legislative measures to do everything from gut to slightly tweak the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, and the largest man-made environmental disaster in the history of the Gulf of Mexico and beyond floating along, it is hard to imagine more key issues culminating at one time. Any one of the issues is remarkable in its own right; the four together are... well...unprecedented.

But, to me, that is not the truly unprecedented feature during this unusual time. The remarkable thing is the unity within the recreational fishing, boating, tackle and conservation arenas. That is truly unprecedented.

There have been times when two or even several recreational fishing-based groups unite to address a given issue, but through this difficult period, the community has virtually moved as one. This is clearly a statement as to the gravity of the issues we all currently face, but more importantly marks a dawning resolution among our community that we are much stronger pulling together than apart.

This was recently evidenced during the creation and eventual release of the President's National Ocean Policy. This esoteric, and potentially sweeping policy, went through all the normal undulations that come in the creation of a major policy document of this scope. The unnerving part of this one was that it involved us and, in its original draft, did not even mention recreational angling or more importantly, even consider our role in ocean use. We were that insignificant in the Administration's vision for how to

manage our nation's oceans. Not a good start.

The early drafts and discussions were ominous, but also served to galvanize the recreational fishing, boating, tackle and conservation field into one. By pooling lobbying prowess, political access and a broader group of constituents, the collective began to move the ball. On February 12, this unity was strikingly apparent in a group comment to the White House Interagency

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Ocean Policy Task Force that was signed by the American Sportfishing Association (ASA), Bass Anglers Sportsmen Society, Berkeley Conservation Institute, Center for Coastal Conservation (CCC), Coastal Conservation Association (CCA), Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF), International Game Fish Association (IGFA), National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA), Shimo Sport Fisheries Initiative, and the Billfish Foundation (TBF). There are a number of grand slam titles in recreational fishing but getting that many acronyms on one letterhead has to be a grand slam in conservation.

Although the final results from this effort will not be clear for years, the final version of the document not only included recreational fishing but more importantly a real consideration of the role of recreational fishing. There is no doubt that this progress would not have been possible without a unified effort.

This is not a lone example, ASA, TBF, CCC, CCA, CSF, IGFA and NMMA jointly commented on a recent bill from Senator Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) that promises to address federal fisheries management deficiencies. More striking was a joint letter this past April

in which many of the leaders in recreational fishing conservation were joined by (dare I write it) some of the largest environmental groups in addressing deficiencies in recreational fishing data and imbalances in fisheries allocations. Now that is unprecedented.

The broadest example happened this spring at the Recreational Saltwater Fishing Summit in Alexandria, Virginia where NOAA gathered most of the leading groups in marine recreational fishing to discuss the key issues of concern for the community. The crowd represented all the expected recreational fishing-based advocacy groups plus scores of angler clubs, charter services, and about every possible concern regarding the recreational side of saltwater angling. After two days of presentations, break-out sessions and discussion, the thing that was different than any other iteration of this kind in the past was the unity of concern and unanimity of vision for solutions. From the fear of losing access to the resource to the desire for more access for recreational angling interests in the management system, the group was able to largely agree. And not unlike the previously mentioned Ocean Policy, there are already some signs of progress on a number of fronts.

"United we stand, divided we fall" is an often overused phrase, but one that has been uttered by some of our nation's greatest leaders at some of the most important moments in the development of sound government. I hesitate to aggrandize the realm of fisheries management with a timeless phrase that punctuated the speeches of George Washington and Patrick Henry, but the message holds true. As a community, we are much stronger and influential together than apart. The days of "just say no" are long behind us, and working together, we can mark a positive path for the future our shared marine resource and for the future of recreational anglers' role in it. ♣