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March 30, 2011

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Mr. Jim Hardin, President
CCA of North Carolina
4809 Hargrove Rd
Raleigh, NC 27616

Dear Mr. Hardin:

Thank you for your inquiry regarding the status of saltwater sport fishing in Texas and the results of our previous management actions. Texas has taken a series of dramatic steps since the mid-1970s in an effort to regain control over its severely overfished populations of sport fish, primarily red drum and spotted seatrout. These steps were prompted by the realization that biologically the stocks could not be sustained with heavy fishing pressure from both commercial and sport fishers. Monofilament gill nets were banned and the commercial sale of wild-caught red drum and spotted seatrout was prohibited in 1981. All other types of commercial netting in saltwater were prohibited in 1988. In addition, increasingly restrictive size and bag limits were imposed on sport anglers throughout this time period.

The overall impact of these fishery management measures has been the recovery of red drum and spotted seatrout populations as well as the reestablishment of premier sport fisheries for these species throughout the Texas coast. The biological, social, and economic benefits to the State accrued by these recoveries have been undeniable.

Texas fishery managers are blessed with on-going standardized monitoring programs which began in the mid-1970s and which can be used to measure real changes in marine resources and the anglers who pursue them. These survey programs have shown increases in population abundance, spawning success, angler participation, angler catch rates, and mean size of fish landed despite several severe freeze-related kills. Not only has the quantity of sport fish gone up but so has the quality. One of the secrets to this turnaround is the ability to control fishing mortality much more easily in a sport rod and reel fishery than in a commercial net fishery.

To help document this fishery success story in Texas, I would like to provide you with a few statistics from our survey programs. Program biologists collect

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thousands of samples each year to measure the relative abundance of juvenile and adult finfish. In addition, tens of thousands of anglers annually are interviewed and their catch measured. With these data we have verified that, despite three major freeze kills and more restrictive size and bag limits, red drum catch rates by sport anglers are the second highest on record. Catch rates have increased 60% since the 1988 net ban (attachment-Figure 5). The relative abundance of red drum in the bays is at record levels. This abundance has increased 20% since the 1988 net ban.

Because commercial nets targeted larger red drum, the removal of nets in Texas resulted in a dramatic upsurge in the number of large fish available (greater than 28 inches total length). Since 1981, the relative abundance of large red drum has increased over 700%! Since red drum are now surviving to a larger size on average, the sport angler has a better chance of catching larger fish. Our surveys have documented an increase in the average weight of sport-caught red drum from just two pounds prior to 1981 to a current average of over five pounds. In addition, Texas liberalized the red drum size and bag limit in 1994 thanks to the greater abundance of fish in the bays and the greater escapement of spawners to the Gulf.

The success with red drum is not unique. Spotted seatrout populations have also risen to nearly the highest levels since the '70s (attachment-Figure 6). This is particularly phenomenal considering the tremendous number of spotted seatrout killed in three freezes since 1983. Without nets in the water, managers were able to delay harvest and maximize the fish's reproductive success. The number of juvenile spotted seatrout in our bays has shown strong improvement since the nets were banned in 1988. And, once again, because the fish have a better chance of reaching a larger size, the sport angler now harvests on average a nearly two pound spotted seatrout which is almost twice the size prior to 1981.

Not just sport anglers reaped the benefits of making Texas waters net-free. Black drum relative abundance has increased 250% following the net ban which has enhanced the commercial trotline fishery for the species.

Anglers are now experiencing some of the best coastal fishing in recent memory. This has led to an economic boost in tourism and sport fishery expenditures with a total estimated impact to the State of over \$1.7 billion (2006 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation, USFWS) accounted for by saltwater fishing in the state of Texas. In addition, the number of saltwater fishing guides has more than doubled since the early 1980s. The availability of seafood in Texas has also not suffered with the loss of commercial netting.

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Hard resource allocation decisions and long-term sacrifices by Texas anglers have brought us to the point where we now have confidence about the future of our resource. The anglers, themselves, have now seen first-hand that conservation works and, in doing so, they have developed a strong conservation ethic. Never again will they lose control of these valuable fisheries. Anglers who once complained about fishing regulations now brag about the results!

In closing, I must stress that Texas fisheries are different from North Carolina fisheries and that North Carolina should manage its aquatic resources based on what's best for its unique situation. Banning nets in marine waters was the right thing to do in Texas. Without the ability to establish a limited entry program before the overfishing occurred, fishery managers had to find other means to achieve optimum yield from this public-owned resource. We are proud of what we have accomplished, even as we turn our attention to preventing the same mistakes from occurring in other fisheries.

I hope this information will be of help. If I can be of further assistance, please feel free to contact me at (512) 389-4636.

Sincerely,



Robin Riechers
Division Director of Coastal Fisheries

RR:dh

Attachments

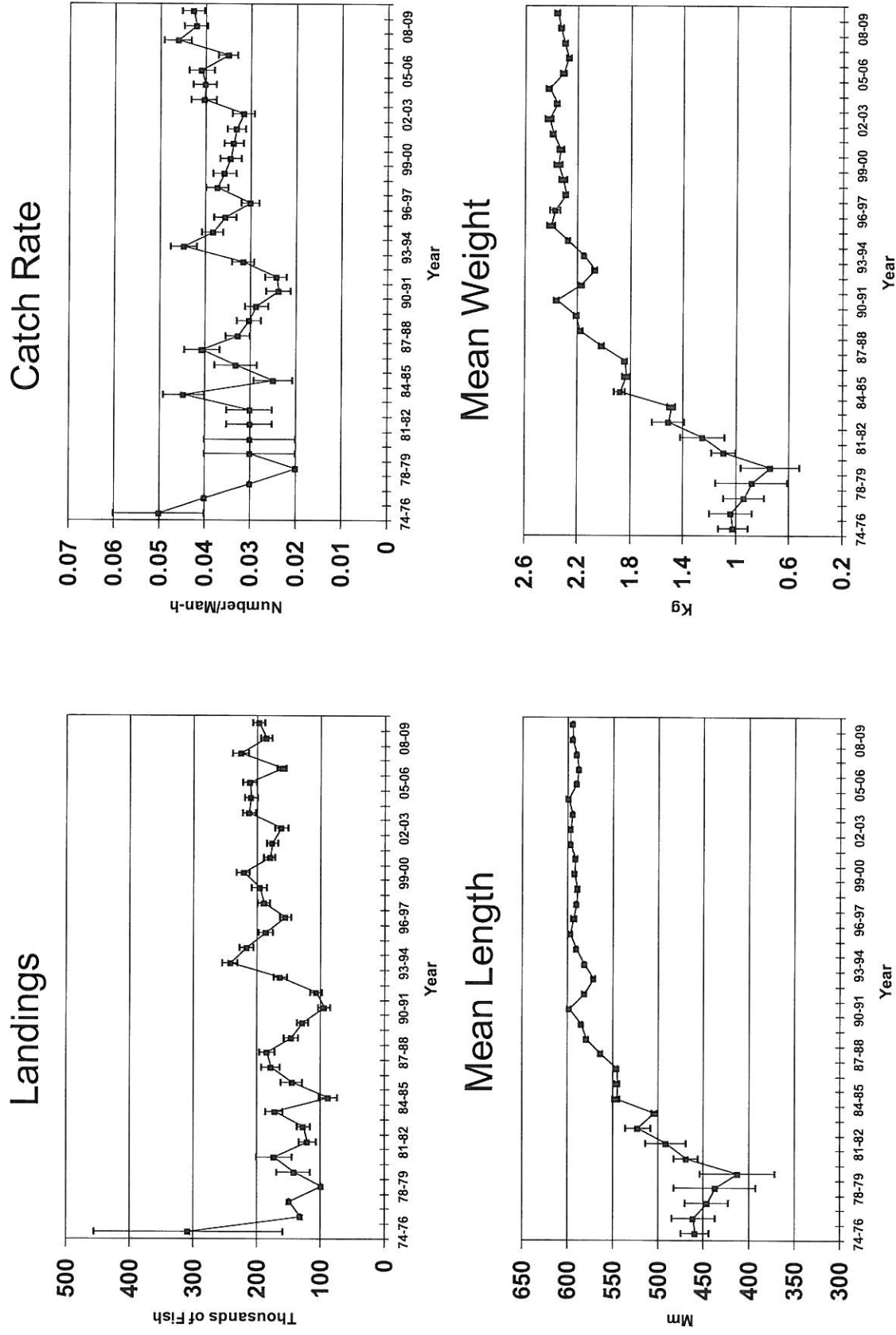


Figure 5. Annual coastwide statistics (± 1 SE) for red drum landed from Texas bays and passes by private-boat fishermen, May 1974-May 2010.

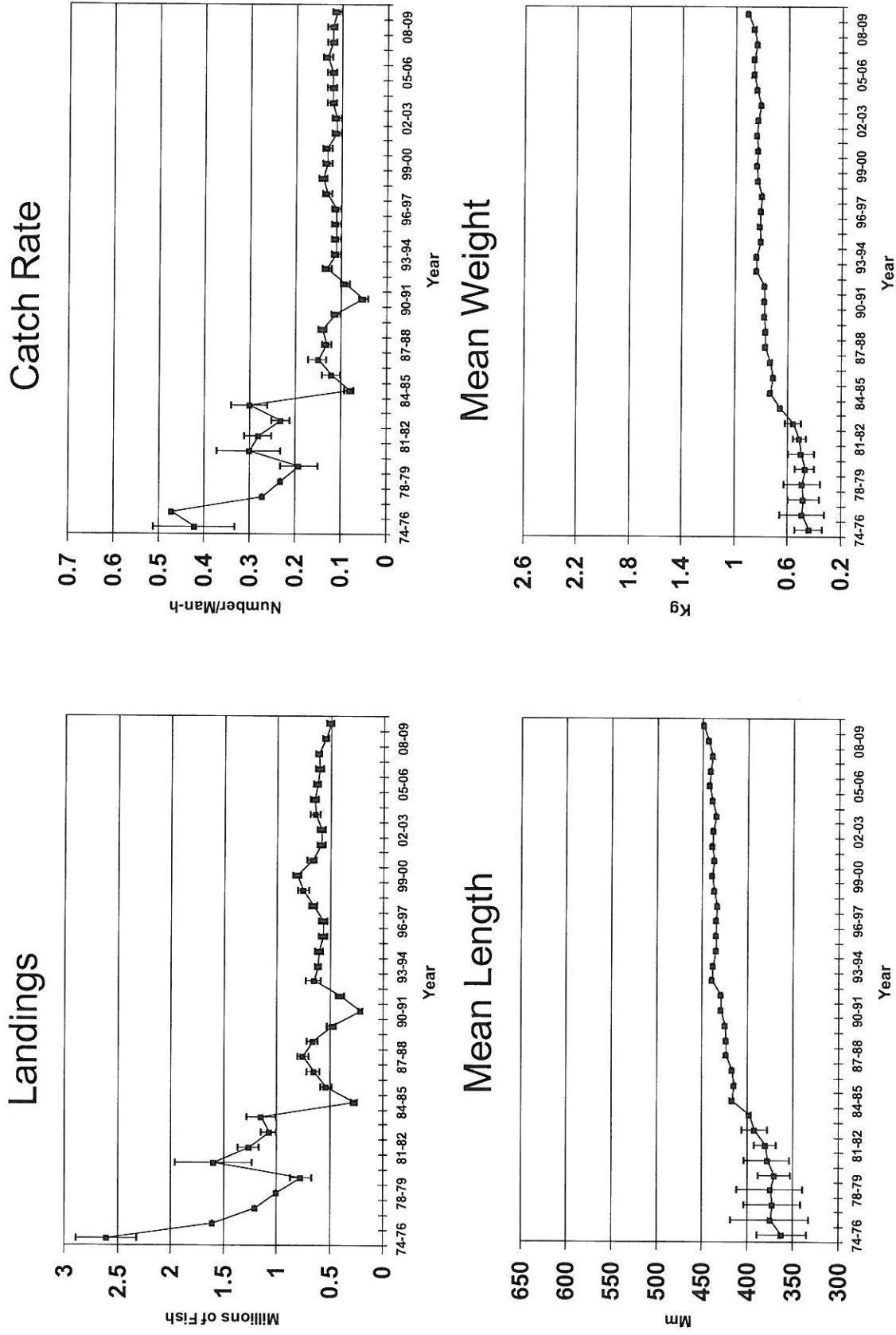


Figure 6. Annual coastwide statistics (± 1 SE) for spotted seatrout landed from Texas bays and passes by private-boat fishermen, May 1974-May 2010.