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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-3303

November 25, 2013

Chairman Ben C. Hartig
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 20
North Charleston, SC 29405

Dear Chairman Hartig and Fellow Council Members:

I am writing to respectfully request that you immediately cease work on Amendment 17 to establish new, permanent marine protected areas (MPAs) for speckled hinds and warsaw groupers in the South Atlantic region, and off North Carolina in particular. This amendment is simply not justified by the science. It would also unnecessarily hurt commercial and recreational fishermen when they are already struggling financially.

The reality is that the council knows very little about the status of these two species. The last stock assessment on speckled hinds was done 13 years ago. The last stock assessment on warsaw groupers was done 22 years ago. I understand that a new stock assessment on these species is not expected to be completed until 2016.

Despite the scarcity of data on these fish, the council has implemented significant management measures to protect them. A commercial and recreational limit of one fish per vessel of each species, along with a commercial sale prohibition on both species, has been in place since 1994. A prohibition on harvest of both species was put in place in 2011.

In addition, in 2009 the council established a network of eight deepwater marine protected areas (MPAs) off North Carolina and throughout the South Atlantic. However, there are no monitoring or evaluation plans in place to provide the council with the data necessary to determine if these MPAs are serving their stated purpose.

Because of the fishing restrictions that are already in place, the fishermen that I represent find it difficult to accept the National Marine Fisheries Service's finding that these two species are undergoing overfishing. Their skepticism is supported by the council's own Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) which has stated that "it is possible that speckled hind and warsaw grouper are not undergoing overfishing given all the regulations for associated species and the current analysis from the Regional Office."

The SSC has also stated that "based on the current info, the SSC cannot determine what benefits an additional closure will provide to the stocks of speckled hind and warsaw grouper, what amount of area closure is necessary to reduce bycatch mortality, or if additional closed areas are even necessary. Additional monitoring and data needs to be collected in order to be able to conduct and assessment of these species."

Given these facts, it seems clear that implementing additional fishing restrictions at this time would be totally unjustified. Therefore, on behalf of the Eastern North Carolina commercial and recreational fishermen that I am privileged to represent, **I urge the council to stop all action to create new MPAs for these two species.** Instead, I would suggest that the council focus its efforts on updating the stock assessments and implementing monitoring and evaluation plans for the existing MPAs.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Walter B. Jones

Walter B. Jones
Member of Congress

Cc: Dr. Roy E. Crabtree, Southeast Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries Service