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Congress of the United States
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May 2, 2013

Mr. Bob Mahood
Executive Director
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place Drive
Suite 201
North Charleston, SC 29405

Dear Director Mahood:

On behalf of the Eastern North Carolina fishermen that I am proud to represent, I am writing to express my strong opposition to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's proposed Amendment 30 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan. As you know, through Amendment 30 the council is proposing to require all commercial fishermen with a snapper grouper permit to install a vessel monitoring system (VMS) on their boat.

Every snapper grouper fisherman I've talked to opposes this proposal for a variety of reasons. First, the amendment would require fishermen to purchase a roughly $3,100 VMS unit, pay $300 to have it installed, pay at least $45 a month in service fees for as long as they have a snapper grouper permit, and then pay to repair the unit when it breaks down. These costs would come on top of those that fishermen are already being forced to swallow as a result of the new safety requirements implemented by the Coast Guard last fall. This is absurd! During these difficult economic times, the federal government should not be forcing yet another unfunded mandate on an industry that is already struggling financially.

The proposal also fails to account for the disproportionately large financial impact it would have on owners of smaller vessels, which constitute a large share of the fleet, particularly in Eastern North Carolina. These vessels often don't have the physical space to house a unit or to keep it out of the elements, nor do they have the battery power to assure reliable operation of both the unit and the vessel. Mitigating these circumstances would cost money, which vessel owners simply cannot afford.

VMS units are also notoriously unreliable. I have heard many horror stories from fishermen about the units breaking down or randomly turning off at sea. When that happens, the vessel is required to stop fishing, come back to port immediately and get the unit repaired. This can be a particularly devastating economic circumstance for fishermen to deal with.

Not only are the costs of Amendment 30 unacceptable, the benefits appear to be non-existent. In fact, North Carolina fisheries managers have made it clear to me that they see little scientific utility in the proposal.

What I find even more troubling is that the council is justifying this action by stating that information reported by the VMS units could be helpful in instituting new Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) which would be off-limits to commercial and recreational fishermen. That is absolutely unacceptable. The Magnuson-Stevens Act already requires U.S. fisheries to be managed sustainably. We don't need more MPAs to do so. The last thing fishermen need during these hard times is their government unnecessarily closing off more territory to fishing.

For these reasons, I strongly oppose the Amendment 30 proposal and I urge the council to reject it. I would be grateful if you would forward this letter to each member of the council for their consideration before the vote. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Walter B. Jones

Walter B. Jones
Member of Congress