One of our nation’s greatest treasures is our coastal waters, which have been enjoyed by generations of Americans for recreation and sport. Today, 11 million Americans turn to those waters each year for recreational saltwater fishing. Marine recreational fishing is increasingly becoming a major driver of the nation’s outdoor economy through everything from retail sales to licensing fees. In fact, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) now estimates that the growing recreational saltwater fishing industry contributes more than $70 billion annually in economic activity. Yet, antiquated federal policies threaten to stem this positive economic trend. At the heart of our recommendations is a shift away from a continued approach to federal fisheries management that uses commercial fishing tools to manage recreational fishing.

There are profound differences in the nature of these activities and their respective impacts on our fishery resources and marine habitats. Restrictions on public access to our public marine resources continue to flow from a system that no longer reflects the reality of demand for recreational access to our marine fisheries resources, the current economic activity associated with that access, or the scientific reality of the light footprint recreational access has on our fishery resources.

We have been heartened in recent years to see important first steps acknowledging marine recreational fishing. It is our hope that the incoming administration will follow through on these first steps to fundamentally change how recreational fishing is addressed in federal fisheries management.

The approaches laid out in the following pages are science-based and call for a reexamination of old policies that no longer work. You will see an emphasis on steps that can be taken to more effectively manage the recreational and commercial fishing sectors in a manner that adequately distinguishes between the fundamentally different industries.
Recreational saltwater fishing generates 455,000 jobs and has a greater impact on our economy than commercial fishing with fishery resource impacts that are minute in comparison to commercial harvesting impacts. And, it cannot be overemphasized in our view: through license sales, excise taxes paid on fishing equipment and boat motor fuel purchases, recreational anglers foot the bill for conservation and resource management in this country.

Finally, the policy prescriptions in the following pages ensure that marine conservation efforts will be a top priority. Recreational saltwater anglers know it is in their best interests to:

- Promote healthy, robust fish stocks
- Protect our nation’s coasts for future generations to enjoy

We look forward to collaborating with federal policymakers to find 21st Century solutions that ensure the right balance between recreational fishing access, economic growth and conservation of America’s coastal waters.
Recreational Anglers Provide Significant Support to the American Economy

Saltwater recreational anglers are a powerful force in the U.S. economy and in the efforts to conserve and sustain the nation's marine resources.

⇒ More than 11 million Americans participate in saltwater angling annually.

⇒ This leads to more than $70 billion in economic activity and creates almost half a million jobs, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

⇒ Include freshwater anglers in the calculation, and these totals surge to more than 40 million licensed anglers, generating over $48 billion in retail sales with a $115 billion impact on the nation’s economy and creating employment for more than 828,000 people.
Recreational anglers and boaters generate the vast majority of funding for conservation of our nation’s marine habitats and fish. Since the passage of the 1950 Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act, anglers have paid a federal excise tax on fishing tackle. Congress later imposed the federal excise tax on motor-boat fuel. In 2010 alone, anglers and boaters contributed $650 million in excise taxes for sportfish conservation and management, boating safety and infrastructure, and habitat restoration. An additional $657 million was contributed by anglers through fishing license fees. Also, anglers donate over $400 million more each year to various conservation and fishing organizations. In turn, these funds become the lifeblood of conservation efforts aimed at maintaining the vitality of our nation’s inland and coastal waterways.

Angling is also at the core of culture and quality of life for countless coastal communities and families with annual events, family gatherings and vacations all centered on fishing in our nation’s coastal waters.

These Socio-Economic Realities and Conservation Contributions Can be Better Acknowledged in Federal Policy
While the Magnuson-Stevens Act has improved fish stocks, we now need to manage that success in a way that fully develops saltwater recreational fishing’s economic, social and conservation benefits to our nation. Because it is a fundamentally different activity than commercial fishing, recreational fishing requires different management approaches.

From a management perspective, the Magnuson-Stevens Act relies on fixed quotas that can be managed in real-time. This works for the commercial sector where relatively few vessels are focused on maximum sustainable yield. However, recreational fisheries are enjoyed by millions of individuals with diverse goals. Some try to catch fish for food while others simply want to have fun catching and releasing fish and enjoying their time outdoors. **Recreational anglers need wide-ranging, dependable access to healthy and abundant fisheries.**
Federal laws and policies governing saltwater recreational fishing have not kept pace with dramatic changes in the fishing industry

Recreational saltwater fishing is now immensely popular, and the economic impact of recreational fishing is greater than the commercial industry in terms of number of jobs provided and total economic impact. Yet, recreational anglers are allowed only a fraction of overall landings. In some cases, draconian measures have been put in place limiting recreational fishing seasons for some species to just a few days a year. These actions run counter to data that these fish stocks are vibrant and healthy. This has an economic ripple effect, from less fishing license revenue to reduced tax receipts from sales of everything ranging from boats to gear and bait.

To address the historic lack of focus on recreational fishing within the federal marine fisheries management system, Bass Pro Shops Founder and CEO Johnny Morris and Maverick Boats President Scott Deal chaired the Commission on Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Management, which produced its landmark 2014 report, “A Vision for Managing America's Saltwater Recreational Fisheries.”

The report makes a strong case for NOAA, or Congress in a new Magnuson-Stevens Act, to finally review allocations of fish stocks between commercial interests and recreational anglers. In doing so, NOAA needs to maximize benefits to the nation by developing a cooperative management system with state fishery managers. NOAA also needs to implement long-proven ways of managing fish stocks used by states for recreational fishing sectors.

RED SNAPPER CASE STUDY

Even though the Gulf red snapper population is healthier than it has been in decades, federal fisheries managers continue to reduce recreational fishing seasons, with an average 10 day season in federal waters from 2014-2016, down from 180 days only 10 years ago. There are many contributing factors that have resulted in the current state of unrest regarding red snapper management, including overly rigid statutory requirements, inadequate stock assessments, inaccurate angler harvest estimates, a refusal by managers to legitimately reexamine allocations and the heavy influence of commercial fishing and environmental organizations within the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. All of these factors underscore a federal fisheries management system that fails to recognize distinctions between recreational and commercial fishing.
Support Public Access to Public Resources

The Federal government needs to do more to ensure access to public waters:

- Federal funding and maintenance of waterway infrastructure should focus on poorly maintained boat ramps and fishing piers, insufficiently dredged recreational ports and marinas, and neglected aids to navigation.

- Unwarranted federal closures of public waters need to be avoided.
The recent expansion of two Pacific marine monuments and the new marine monument in the Atlantic explicitly make a distinction between public recreational access to a Federal public marine resource and access for private commercial activities.

While we have been pleased to see important decisions made in recent years to maintain access in various Federal waters, the sportfishing community has also unfortunately seen federal management policies in some National Parks, National Marine Sanctuaries, and National Marine Monuments prevent anglers from accessing these public resources. Visitation to these waterways helps boost tourism to local economies, increases funding for federal and state governments, and ensures public access to areas maintained for the use, enjoyment and recreation of all Americans.

In the past, such as with the recent Biscayne National Park closure, the managers of Federal ocean spaces ignored key attributes of recreational fishing and boating when they restricted access to public waterways: **recreational fishing is a sustainable activity that helps boost tourism and local economies**; and recreational anglers and boaters pay excise taxes and license fees to fund healthy and abundant fisheries.

Total access closures, such as marine reserves, should be a measure of last resort and only be considered after well-enforced traditional fisheries management tools have been exhausted. Too often, access closures have been unnecessarily implemented before less impactful—and historically successful—tactics have been attempted. Bag limits, size limits, quotas and seasonal closures must have all been unsuccessfully tried before a total closure merits consideration.
States are the experts at managing—very successfully—numerous fish species such as red drum, spotted sea trout, and striped bass.

One of the root problems with the current federal fisheries management system is NOAA’s fundamental assumption that fish are a commodity and not a natural resource property owned by all Americans. Most anglers come from a background where the states manage fish and game for the benefit of all users, not only those users who were gifted some portion of it for their personal profit. Anglers expect that federal fishery resources will be managed the same way, but they are not.

Change is needed. NOAA must modify their management system to fit the data system for recreational catch. The federal government should adopt similar management approaches for fisheries that recreational anglers pursue.

Few Americans realize that NOAA divides up the total fish catch between for-profit commercial companies and recreational anglers. NOAA makes this allocation based on historical catch numbers from decades ago—when millions fewer of us were enjoying America’s coastal waters for recreational fishing. The doors to reallocation have long been rusted shut. Currently, NOAA has the data and the technology to recognize allocations are out of balance and are denying access to the American people. However, they claim to lack the data to determine exactly where allocation should be set to maximize fisheries value for the nation.

NOAA needs to collect more data on how anglers choose trips as costs and fishing quality change. Today’s technology makes it possible for NOAA to inexpensively and accurately track data related to trends in recreational fishing. This data can better inform the policies NOAA implements impacting millions of anglers. With data on angler behavior, NOAA can combine that information with a model of the fish stock allowing greater predictive power in allocation models that should result in changes in allocation that will increase the value generated through fishery management.
Programs to Help Fish and Fishing

The Sport Fish Restoration Program must be reauthorized and modernized

Boaters and anglers provide the financial foundation for aquatic resource conservation and access every time they go boating or fishing. Without recreational boaters and anglers there would be insufficient funds to support boat ramps, habitat restoration, fisheries research, and the creation of artificial reefs—all of which directly increase opportunities for the public to enjoy our shared aquatic resources.

The funds raised from these excise taxes are distributed back to state fish and wildlife agencies to fund projects including fisheries management, data collection, boating safety, boating access, wetland conservation, and aquatic education programs. Congress should update the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund in order to secure annual funding for fish habitat and conservation and ensure new anglers are being brought into the sport.

New funding strategies are needed to address top priority fish habitat

The National Fish Habitat Partnership (NFHP) was founded for this purpose and is an exemplary, grassroots program of 19 regional Fish Habitat Partnerships (FHP’s) that encompass much of the nation’s waters. Consisting of local communities, anglers, conservation organizations and state and federal agencies, the network of FHP’s under the NFHP are working to identify and restore areas of highest priority using both private and public matching funds. The NFHP’s coordinated national effort to index aquatic habitat conditions and areas most in need of protection or restoration combined with the FHP’s grassroots, bottom-up approach, well positions the NFHP to serve as the coordinating entity for most aquatic restoration funding programs. Congress should authorize this program.

NOAA should equally fund projects between the commercial and recreational sectors

NOAA’s Saltonstall-Kennedy program provides important funding for marine fisheries research through tariffs collected on imported seafood. This program has historically funded projects related to commercial fisheries management and research. Recently, NOAA opened a small portion of this program to recreational fisheries-related projects, but the program still heavily favors the commercial fishing sector. Given that the program is funded by tariffs that are paid by the American public, the NOAA’s projects should be equally funded in the commercial and recreational fishing sectors.
Partnerships Rule

For more than a century, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has worked cooperatively with state fish and wildlife agencies, conservation organizations, and anglers to enhance and conserve aquatic resources. One of the most important responsibilities of the Service is to run the National Fish Hatchery System (NFHS). Over 140 years ago, the NFHS was established to address seriously declining fish populations and to compensate for the loss of fish, habitat, and recreational opportunities due to the development of federal water resources projects. In addition, states depend upon the millions of dollars they receive in annual license fees from anglers who benefit from the hatchery program. However, the Service is not maintaining the hatcheries.

The Service should eliminate the deferred maintenance backlog of $167.3 million

Given the agency’s important work on the Central Everglades Restoration Plan and the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative, the recreational fishing community supports a strongly funded US Army Corps of Engineers ( Corps) with a robust recreational boating and fishing program. The Corps’ protection and restoration programs seek to re-establish the natural functions of America’s rivers, lakes, wetlands, and coasts. In addition, the Corps’ navigation and development projects mitigate important aquatic habitats and provide access for recreational boaters and anglers.

Congress should provide sufficient funding for the Army Corps’ recreational boating and fishing program
The recreational fishing community supports **the creation of a new Federal Advisory Committee to advise the Secretary of Commerce on all saltwater recreational fishing matters that are the responsibility of the Department of Commerce**. The Council will advise the Secretary on facilitating the expansion of recreational fishing opportunities, the management and conservation of marine fisheries and their habitat, and economic growth related to marine recreational fishing.

The current Marine Fisheries Advisory Committee (MAFAC) puts significant emphasis on commercial fishing interests while explicitly restricting input and participation from the average recreational fisherman. There are significant differences between commercial and recreational fishing, which necessitates separate advisory committees.

Similar to the Interior Secretary’s Federal Advisory Committee for freshwater fishing (Sport Fish and Boating Partnership Council), the proposed recreational fishing council will provide the Secretary of Commerce with a medium to solicit input directly from the saltwater recreational fishing industry.

The recreational fishing industry is eager to proactively work with federal policymakers to enhance access for anglers while continuing our enduring commitment to protecting our nation’s coastal waterways. Membership on this new advisory committee should include representatives of state marine fishery management agencies, recreational fishing organizations, marine recreational industries, and sportsmen’s organizations.

[Arrows] A new FAC should be created to advise the Secretary of Commerce on recreational fishing matters
Federal laws and policies governing saltwater recreational fishing need to be brought up to date to reflect the current socio-economic realities of public demand for recreational fishing access and the scale of the recreational saltwater fishing sector of our outdoor economy. NOAA has taken helpful first steps toward recognizing the economic impacts and multipliers associated with saltwater recreational angling and the profound differences regarding the impact of recreational fishing versus commercial fishing on resources. We appreciate these first steps. But much more remains to be done, and we pledge to continue extending a hand of collaboration and cooperation to the new administration.

America’s more than 11 million saltwater recreational anglers play a major role in supporting our economy, conserving our national resources, and maintaining our culture. They help support more than half a million jobs and generate more than $70 billion in economic activity. And today fishing has reached new heights of popularity, as parents continue to pass on proud traditions on to their sons and daughters.

Laws, policies, and regulations should take advantage of available technology and use new breakthroughs to inform enforcement in near real-time. Expanded access to public waterways should join more effective regulation. Investing in waterway infrastructure will expand the public’s access to public waters, rather than exacerbating disrepair.

Funding for infrastructure and other projects impacting fish habitats, in addition to key regulations like allocation of catch shares, should balance the priorities of the recreational and commercial sectors.

A new administration has a rare opportunity to haul in a remarkable trophy: sustainable, vibrant fisheries, thriving communities of recreational anglers passing on a cherished way of life, and millions of Americans in coastal towns and inland jobs alike benefitting economically from their passion. We cannot miss the opportunity.