

## Post Save Artificial Reef Building Report

The Emerald Coast Reef Association hosted an open forum meeting to discuss fishery issues Tuesday, April 22<sup>nd</sup> at the Destin Community Center. Retail Business Owners from Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, and Bay County, along with Representatives of the Private & Charter Recreational Fishermen and local politicians attended the meeting. Capt. Kris Tande, the Regional Director for U.S. Senator Mel Martinez came to listen to their concerns about how Government regulations and proposed regulations affect our economy in the panhandle.

Over 20 business owners and Presidents of various Non-profits and conservation type organizations provided testimony. Many more were in attendance and spoke personally to Kris Tande after the meeting.

Capt. Frankie Chambliss, a professional consultant and Captain, gave testimony on the steel thickness of barges and provided information about opportunities for our State to acquire retired vessels; however, if the ACOE's proposal to change the steel thickness for Artificial Reefs to ½ inch is adopted, these potential reefs will no longer be legal.

Rocky DeSimone, President of the Northwest Florida Marine Industries Association, reported that the Marine Industry pumps 18 Billion Dollars into Florida's Economy! The Marine industry is adversely affected when the Fishing Industry is hurt by government Regulations.

Tom Putnam, owner of Half Hitch Tackle stores in Navarre, Destin and Panama City Beach testified about the tremendous impact these regulations have on the Tackle Industry.

Bob Provost, Owner of Discovery Dive World in Valparaiso, spoke about the importance of Artificial Reefs to his business. He stated that while Spear fishermen only comprise 30% of his customers, they provide 60% of his sales, so the use of the fishery and the building of Artificial Reefs to sustain the fishery have a direct impact on his business.

Francis Montalvo gave testimony about the disturbing slowdown of booking of Charters at the Harbor Walk Marina since the Red Snapper Ruling was enacted. Already this year, they have suffered a loss of \$100,000.00 compared to the same time last year. This loss affects not only the Charter Boat owners but also their mates and all the retail businesses that support and rely on the Recreational Charter fishing industry.

Amber Hill, the President of the Destin Charter Boat Association Womens Auxiliary gave a presentation that included information about the reef building done by the Charter industries out of their own pockets. This Reef Building shows their dedication to improving the fishery off our coast and provides evidence that the Charter industry members are responsible stewards of the sea. She also pointed out that Alabama has a total of 180 recreational /head-boat vessels and 1,260 sq. miles of permitted area for private reef building compared to the Florida Panhandle that has almost 300 charter/head-boats and only 464.83 miles of permitted area for private reef building. She reminded us that our tourism industry is the reason we don't have a State Income tax.

Mike Eller, Co-President of the Destin Charter Boat Association, gave a history lesson on our local private artificial reef program and expressed his frustration with current and proposed regulations and the negative effect they are having on the Charter Industry.

An underwater video was provided by Capt. Paul Redman President of the Reef Fish Restoration Association and the Pensacola Charter Boat Association. It contained impressive evidence of the health of the Red Snapper Fishery in Escambia County.

Destin's Mayor, Craig Barker, gave a compelling statement about the devastating affect these rules are having on our local economy and our fishing fleet in Destin. He made note that "...Charter fishing in

Destin is responsible for the creation of over 7,000 jobs that pay wages in excess of \$150 million and generates over \$175 million of direct spending into the State of Florida's economy. In summary, Destin's charter industry contributes \$24.3 million of State tax revenue."

Some of the other Speakers were: Steve Gibichar, President of the Emerald Coast Chapter of the CCA – Jim Robertson, International Game Fish Assoc. – Capt. Kelly Windes, Destin City Council member.

The overwhelming consensus of the people in attendance was that they would like to see:

- The Steel Thickness requirement for Artificial Reefs remain at 1/8<sup>th</sup> inch
- Streamlined Permitting process for LAARS permits & permitted areas open to private reef building in State Waters to help save fuel
- The County and State and Federal Artificial Reef Offices receive more funding that is earmarked specifically for Artificial Reef Building.
- Future research that is based on verifiable data.
- The Gulf of Mexico broken up into zones to better reflect the true health of the fisheries in each zone.

Everyone that testified on the Red Snapper fishery issue in the Panhandle stated that our Red Snapper is healthier than it has ever been. There was a lot of frustration over the computer modeled data that is being used by NOAA/NMFS to justify the shorter seasons and smaller bag limits of fish that are so abundant in the North West Florida area.

At the end of the Meeting, Capt. Kris Tande spoke personally to the people in attendance assured us that he would look into these issues further and get back to us. Everyone was very appreciative of Senator Mel Martinez's office for sending Capt. Kris Tande to listen to the people.

By 11:00 am the morning following the meeting, Capt. Kris Tande had already spoken with the State Director for Senator Mel Martinez and reported back that they will have a meeting with the ACOE Jacksonville District office within the next 2 weeks. They scheduled a conference call to discuss the Red Snapper issue in Federal Waters. Capt. Tande told us it is much easier to stop legislation before it goes through Congress than it is to change it once it has passed. The Red Snapper issue will most certainly be an up-hill battle.