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## Legislators revive debate on 'gamefish' idea

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Seth Vernon refers to fish as his "business partners."

Without enough of them off the Carolina coast, Vernon's charter fishing business, Double Haul Guide Service, would be up the creek.

That is at least part of the reason the Wilmington captain – who spent 220 days on the water in 2011 – supports the proposal to designate red drum, spotted sea trout and striped bass as "gamefish," allowing them to be caught only by hook and line and prohibiting their sale or purchase in North Carolina.

Vernon and other recreational fishermen target those species most often. And Vernon said he believes the state's failure to protect them from commercial overfishing as other states have done is threatening the recreational industry, which brings tourists to the coast where they spend money on charter fees, bait and tackle, hotel taxes, vacation rentals, boat repairs, restaurant meals, gas and other goods and services.

These days, Vernon said, he only takes his customers to special spots that he declined to divulge.

"Right now I'm just fishing a few areas, when in fact we should have fish up and down the coast," Vernon said.

The General Assembly returns to Raleigh in May and may consider placing the "gamefish" status on those species. Meanwhile, lawmakers have revived talks about the issue through a study committee that plans to meet several times during the next few months. Along with the gamefish designation, the bill would compensate commercial fishermen for lost income from the sale of those fish for a set period of time.

The bill is supported by recreational fishermen but opposed by commercial fishermen and fish dealers who believe the ocean's fish should be shared, not essentially "owned" by one group.

### **JOBS AT STAKE**

Both sides say the legislation is a "jobs" bill. Recreational fisherman argue that their industry creates jobs in fishing- and tourism-related businesses. Commercial fishermen say their jobs and livelihoods are at stake if part of their income is taken away.

At Motts Channel Seafood on Wrightsville Beach, manager Tom Franz said those species are important "local" seafood options for consumers. Losing them would hurt his business, he said, but it would hurt the local fishermen who supply him more. It's difficult enough to make a living as a fisherman, he said.

"Guys 40 and 50 years old, they don't know how to do anything else," Franz said. "That's what they do."

If not allowed to stock local fish, Franz said he would import them, although not by choice.



"You very much want to support the local fishermen ... and try to keep the money around here," he said.

The commercial fishing industry also opposes the bill because consumers would no longer be able to buy the local fish or find them on restaurant menus.

Sean McKeon, president of the N.C. Fisheries Association, which represents commercial fishermen, said some fishermen rely on the three species more than others.

"For some people, this is half of their income," he said. "For some people, this is braces for their kid's teeth."

He also said recreational fishermen already catch about 70 percent to 80 percent of those types of fish.

After lawmakers tabled the legislation in 2011 to focus on other matters, a special panel called the Marine Fisheries Committee was formed to consider that bill and other fishing issues. The committee's next meeting – a public hearing – is scheduled at 1 p.m. Feb. 2 at the Legislative Building in Raleigh.

Early on in the discussion, lawmakers are divided, and it is unclear how the full Legislature would vote on the issue.

### **SEEKING COMPROMISE**

Three Wilmington-area Republicans – Rep. Danny McComas and Sen. Thom Goolsby of New Hanover County and Sen. Bill Rabon of Brunswick County – are on the committee.

McComas is chairman of the House Commerce and Job Development Committee, where the bill likely would make an early stop. McComas acknowledged recreational fishermen far outnumber commercial fisherman in his district, which includes New Hanover's three beach towns, but he said a compromise may be necessary on such an emotionally charged issue.

"I think we need to bring both sides to the table and find a way to agree ... and put something out there that everybody is happy with," he said.

Is that possible?

"We've done that with other issues. I don't see why we can't do it with this," McComas said.

McComas also said that the 2012 legislative session is expected to be short and that the gamefish issue will generate a lot of debate, making it unclear whether a bill will make it to the House and Senate floors for votes.

"Very little legislation is passed that is as emotionally charged as this, and we need to be careful," he said.

Goolsby said he supports the bill as a way to protect sport fishing in the eastern part of the state.

"It's a big boon to our economy, and I want to do what I can to help that industry," he said.

Goolsby added that he understands the concerns of the commercial sector and wants to ensure that the legislation isn't "needlessly restricting" for them. But he said the state must ensure that fish stocks remain plentiful enough to bring tourists to the coast.

"There's still other fish to sell commercially, but these are fish that are very much in demand for sport fishermen," he said.

Rabon couldn't be reached.

Vernon said the gamefish designation would help everyone who wants to "wet a line" in the coastal waters of North Carolina because there will be more fish out there to catch from the surf, piers, docks and boats. It will give the average fisherman a better chance at catching something.

"If you don't have the fish stocks, what's the point in going?" he said.

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