

H.R. 1979 “The Driftnet Modernization and Bycatch Reduction Act”

Bill Shedd Testimony

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My name is Bill Shedd – President of the American Fishing Tackle Mfg. Company and avid recreational fisherman. Conservation is woven into my business model and is the foundation of my life’s work. I am here today to discuss HR 1979 the Driftnet Modernization and Bycatch Reduction Act.

There have been decades of effort trying to clean up the California swordfish fishery, yet it remains one of the most indiscriminate fisheries in the country. Passage of H.R. 1979 will greatly reduce unnecessary bycatch, help produce a higher quality seafood product and even increase the number of commercial fishing jobs in the California swordfish fishery.

California is the last remaining state allowing the use of this indiscriminate fishing gear, but just last year the California State Legislature passed a bill to phase out drift gillnets by a combined vote of 119 to 1. The California swordfish fishery is jointly managed at both the State and Federal level, so it is critical that Congress act to close the loop on this fishery. H.R. 1979’s most immediate value is to bring federal law and California state law into alignment.

As I previously mentioned, the most important reason to eliminate the use of this gear is to prevent its long-known problem of unwanted bycatch. Despite years of attempts to regulate the indiscriminate nature of California drift gillnets, the decadal estimate of finfish bycatch from 2004-2014 is 64 percent.¹ Bycatch includes marine mammals, turtles, whales and important sportfish such as striped marlin, bluefin tuna, and sharks, at least 20 percent of which are already dead upon release.

¹ NMFS Observer Data for CA DGN Fishery 2003-2014.

https://www.westcoast.fisheries.noaa.gov/fisheries/wc_observer_programs/sw_observer_program_info/data_summ_report_sw_observer_fish.html

For decades, drift gillnet fishermen have asserted that the gear does not cause significant damage to the marine resource. However, the facts do not support that position as there is much data available regarding drift gillnet bycatch. I have personal knowledge on this subject from spending a lifetime on the ocean and around others with direct knowledge. I have personally been approached by drift gillnet fishermen who have developed a conscious about the marine resource damaged caused using this gear over a number of years. Several years ago, on the condition of maintaining this person's anonymity, a drift gillnet boat captain provided us with a video he took on his boat that showed dead bycatch of marlin, a whale, dolphin, turtles, sharks, and more. Similar images are widely available on the internet, and they continue to disturb me to this day. The time to end this destructive fishing practice is long overdue.

Just as sportfishing jobs are important, so too are commercial fishing jobs. However, the use of drift gillnets employs very few people. In 2017 there were less than 20 boats using drift gill nets in the commercial swordfish fishery². With the elimination of drift gillnets in California more commercial fishing jobs will be gained than will be lost.

Yes, you heard that right, more commercial fishing jobs will be gained than lost.

According to recent analysis done by the Pacific Fishery Management Council's Highly Migratory Species Management Team, deep-set buoy gear has the potential to land far more swordfish than has recently been landed by drift gill nets.³

Development of this new gear over the last six years has proven itself to be successful. In addition to creating more commercial jobs, and being far friendlier to the marine environment, deep-set buoy gear is also more profitable to the commercial fisherman. That is because it produces a far fresher product that can receive a market price nearly double of that from drift gillnet caught fish. According to NOAA Fisheries, in 2017, five vessels fishing deep-set buoy gear landed a fish value at \$408,874 (\$81,724 per vessel) while seventeen drift gillnet

²Pacific Fishery Management Council, Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation documents. Available at <https://www.pcouncil.org/highly-migratory-species/stock-assessment-and-fishery-evaluation-safe-documents/current-hms-safe-document/pacfin-data>

³Pacific Fishery Management Council, Highly Migratory Species Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation Report, Number of vessels and commercial landings (round mt) in the West Coast drift gillnet fishery, 1990-2017, available at <http://www.pcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/HMS-SAFE-Table-12.htm>

vessels landed fish valued at \$890,442 (\$52,379 per vessel)⁴. In addition, boats using deep-set buoy gear can also harpoon swordfish at the same time, making their operation even more profitable.

My father commercially fished swordfish by harpoon for over 20 years in California. I also fished commercially on his boat. As someone who has experienced this fishery, both commercially and recreationally, I feel strongly that there is room for both parties to sustain profitability if conservation and common-sense management measures are adopted.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have about the need to modernize the California drift gillnet fishery and how this goal will be accomplished by passing H.R. 1979.

⁴ "A Review of the California Drift Gillnet Fishery." Southwick Associates. July 2018. <https://asafishing.org/wp-content/uploads/California-Drift-Gillnet-Fishery-Economic-Considerations-July-2018.pdf>