Bay-Delta anglers are up in arms. They have launched a no holds barred misinformation campaign to attack a simple, common sense and overdue solution to the impacts of predation by non-native striped bass on endangered native salmon and smelt. Their efforts are short-sighted and could cost the state an opportunity to adopt a sensible, scientific and balanced solution to helping protect salmon and smelt without eliminating the prized striped bass fishery.

Fishing enthusiasts are upset that biologists from the state and nation’s leading fishery management agencies have proposed a plan to reduce the legal size (from 18 to 12 inches) and increase the catch limit (from 2 to 6) on striped bass in most areas of the Delta. The proposal is a joint effort of the California Department of Fish and Game, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It is designed to reduce known predation on salmon and delta smelt.

There is no question that striped bass eat salmon smolts and delta smelt. Every scientific study that has looked at the issue has concluded as much. The only disagreement is over the extent of the impact. According to the state and federal biologists, the impacts range from 5 to 50 percent of salmon smolt populations.

The massacre that occurs each spring when striped bass migrating up the Delta meet young salmon smolts heading downstream is a well-documented event that is witnessed by fishermen every year and often described as a “blood bath.”

Fishing advocates like to argue that striped bass are not the only problem and are being used as a scapegoat. They are partially right. There are a number of stressors that impact the Delta and contribute to the demise of salmon and smelt alike, including the state and federal water pumps, partially treated sewage, pesticides and other contaminants from stormwater discharges, and other invasive species just to name a few. But striped bass are not a distraction or scapegoat as suggested. Striped bass are one of the many stressors, ALL of which must be addressed if we are to achieve a truly sustainable and healthy Delta.

The bottom-line is that striped bass are PART of the problem and need to be PART of a comprehensive solution. The proposal before the California Fish and Game Commission represents a balanced and thoughtful solution that was achieved through settlement of litigation brought by the Coalition for a Sustainable Delta. Had the court case proceeded, the result could likely have been a blanket elimination of size and bag limits on striped bass, without an adaptive management program component, which is included in the proposal to provide important flexibility for fishery biologists to monitor and adjust the regulations over time as we learn from the impacts of the proposed changes.

The settlement must be recognized for what it is: an opportunity to achieve a balanced and scientific solution to a difficult issue. The proposed changes provide the Fish and Game Commission with an important opportunity to reduce predation without eliminating the Delta’s striped bass fishery.

Contrary to the hopes of fishermen, rejection of the proposed changes won’t solve anything. This issue will not go away. Another group will simply pick-up the lawsuit, with a strong case already in place, and proceed toward a ruling that would likely have a far greater impact on striped bass.

Let’s hope that common sense prevails in the spirit of achieving a long-overdue and sustainable solution for the Delta.