



**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE**  
**National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**  
 NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

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MEMORANDUM FOR: Robin Riechers  
 Chairman, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

FROM: *for* Roy E. Crabtree, Ph.D.  
 Regional Administrator

*James E. Weaver*

SUBJECT: March 2007 Regional Administrator's Report

Permits Status

As of March 8, 2007:

- 1,912 active open access Gulf shrimp permits
- 717 active moratorium Gulf shrimp permits
- 1,390 active for-hire coastal pelagic moratorium permits
- 1,353 active for-hire reef fish moratorium permits
- 1,001 active commercial reef fish moratorium permits

Amendment Status

Grouper Forum - On February 27-28, 2007, the Gulf of Mexico Grouper Forum was held in St. Petersburg, Florida. The forum was co-hosted by NOAA Fisheries Service, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. It was intended to enhance communication between agencies and regulated parties. Over 140 constituents, as well as many state and federal government employees attended the two-day forum. The forum served as a first step in developing a continuing dialogue with stakeholders. During the forum, attendees were provided information on state and federal regulatory processes, ongoing regulatory actions, considerations for management, and updates on recent grouper assessments. Additionally, an open forum discussion was held to identify ways regulatory agencies could better communicate with constituents. A stakeholder panel, involving commercial, recreational, and non-governmental organizations, was also asked to identify ways to maximize the value of stakeholder opportunities for public input in the regulatory and scientific process. Throughout the forum, stakeholders were given many opportunities to ask questions and provide input. Recommendations resulting from the forum will be summarized in March 2007 for further consideration by all three agencies.



Reef Fish Amendment 18A - This amendment resolves several issues related to monitoring and enforcement of existing regulations, update the framework procedure for setting total allowable catch, and reduce bycatch mortality of incidentally caught endangered sea turtles and smalltooth sawfish. The amendment was approved on July 24, 2006. The final rule published August 9, 2006 (71 FR 45428), with an effective date for most actions of September 8, 2006. The effective date for the vessel monitoring system (VMS) requirement was originally December 7, 2006, but was extended on December 6, 2006, for an additional 90-days to allow fishermen and approved vendors time to purchase, install, and activate approved units (71 FR 70680). The effective date has been delayed for an additional 60 days to resolve an unanticipated technological problem with one of the approved VMS units and allow vendors additional time to meet the demand for purchase and installation of VMS units that are currently backlogged. The new effective date for VMS is May 6, 2007 (72 FR 10088).

A VMS unit built by Faria has been type approved for use in the reef fish fishery (72 FR 8695) giving fishermen a choice of three manufacturers to select from. The Faria unit is intermediate in cost and installation to the Boatracs and Thrane and Thrane units. A reimbursement program is still available for vessel owners and/or operators who have purchased a VMS unit for the purpose of complying with fishery regulations for the commercial Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery (71 FR 63753). As of March 6, 2007, 429 units have been installed and approximately 150 units have been purchased and are waiting to be installed. Approximately \$3 million is left for reimbursement of VMS units from the 2006 budget, and additional \$4 million in funds is anticipated from the 2007 budget. However, this money is available to other fisheries throughout the United States on a first come, first serve basis.

Red Snapper/Shrimp Interim Rule - This temporary rule proposes interim measures for 2007 to address overfishing of red snapper while the Council evaluates more permanent management measures to end overfishing and reduce red snapper bycatch in Amendment 14/27. Proposed measures include reducing total allowable catch to 6.5 million pounds, reducing the red snapper recreational bag limit from four to two fish, maintaining the April 21 to October 31 recreational season and 16-inch minimum size limit, setting the for-hire captain and crew red snapper bag limit to zero, setting a 13-inch minimum size limit for the commercial fishery to reduce bycatch, and establishing a target reduction of shrimp trawl bycatch mortality on red snapper 50 percent less than the benchmark years of 2001-2003. A draft environmental impact statement (EIS) evaluating alternatives for the amendment was filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and published on October 13, 2006 (71 FR 60509). The comment period ended November 27, 2006. A final EIS was published with the EPA on December 29, 2006 (71 FR 78427); the 30-day wait period ended on January 29, 2007. A proposed interim rule was published on December 14, 2006 and the comment period ended on January 26, 2007. A final rule is expected to publish in March 2007.

Vermilion Snapper Regulatory Amendment - The intended effect of this regulatory amendment is to relieve management measures for vermilion snapper after a recent stock assessment resulted in a change of stock status to not overfished or undergoing overfishing. The management measures proposed in the regulatory amendment include reducing the recreational and commercial minimum size limit from 11 to 10 inches total length; ending the April 22-May 31 commercial seasonal closure; and eliminating the 10 vermilion snapper bag limit restriction

within the current 20-fish aggregate bag limit for those reef fish species without a species-specific bag limit. This amendment was submitted for Council for Secretarial review on February 27, 2007.

Shrimp Amendment 13 - This amendment establishes a separate vessel permit for the royal red shrimp fishery, status determination criteria for penaeid shrimp, standardized bycatch reporting methodology, a permit moratorium, and a requirement for completion of a Gulf shrimp vessel and gear characterization form. The amendment was approved on February 21, 2006. The final rule published September 26, 2006 (71 FR 56039), and became effective October 26, 2006. Moratorium permits will be required in the Gulf shrimp fishery beginning March 26, 2007, and fishermen may apply for a moratorium permit until October 26, 2007.

Regulatory Amendment to Adjust Bycatch Reduction Criterion - This regulatory amendment would modify the bycatch reduction certification criterion for the western Gulf to match the criterion of the eastern Gulf: a 30-percent reduction in finfish biomass. This change would result in a consistent certification criterion throughout the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic region. NOAA Fisheries Service is proposing to consolidate and make technical revisions to the testing Manuals for the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic region. In addition, the change would allow additional bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) to be certified for use in the southeastern shrimp fishery. The rule implementing this amendment is under development.

Framework Action to Revise the List of Allowable BRDs - In accordance with the framework procedures established in the Shrimp Fishery Management Plan for the Gulf of Mexico, NOAA Fisheries Service has developed a proposed rule to revise the list of allowable BRDs for the Gulf of Mexico shrimp fishery. In summary, the allowable configuration of the Fisheye BRD would be modified for the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic region, and the Expanded Mesh BRD would be decertified. With the proposed revisions to the allowable configurations of the Fisheye BRD in both the Gulf and South Atlantic shrimp fisheries, the Gulf Fisheye BRD would be removed from the allowable list of gears. The rule is currently under development.