

**MR. TAYLOR'S POND
THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEMS IN THE GROUPEL FISHERY IN THE GULF OF
MEXICO**

You may remember the critique I wrote a year ago listing seven positive solutions in response to the original Amendment 30. Now I would like for you to consider one more. This will be, in my opinion, the best solution to the declining grouper stocks in the Gulf.

If this solution is included in Amendment 30B, I believe 30B will be the last amendment needed to meet all the requirements of the Reauthorization of the Magnusson Stevens Act (MSA). To me, the MSA boils down to three objectives: 1. to protect the economic viability of fishing communities and fishermen. 2. Ensure the optimum amount of fish be provided to the consumer, and most importantly 3. To prevent fish species from over fishing and to achieve and maintain optimal yield (OY).

An IFQ program will go a long way towards accomplishing these three objectives, but will not be enough! As you know, I am a strong proponent of IFQ's. I have been on the Advisory Panel to formulate the program for two years.

Now, we need to go one step further and include this solution in Amendment 30B. This solution is the creation and enforcement of Seasonal Area Closures. Seasonal Area Closures means that when grouper gather (aggregate) at known staging areas and known spawning areas, these areas should be closed to fishing for the entire time it takes to complete the spawning process, while allowing fishing in the remainder of the Gulf the entire year, and reopen these areas after spawning is complete.

We presently have closed areas and a one month closure during the spawning periods. This is a step in the right direction, but protects the reproduction of grouper for only one-fourth to one-third of the time needed. Gag grouper spawn over a three month time period and red grouper spawn over a four month time period.¹ The entire time the grouper stage and spawn in known areas should be established and protected.

The Gulf Council has done a good job over the past years, but the present laws of:

1. Size limits,
2. Trip limits,
3. Bag limits,
4. Area closures,
5. One month closure from February 15 to March 15 during spawning,
6. VMS,
7. Gear restrictions,
8. Elimination of fish traps,
9. Boundaries for longline fishing,
10. TACs,
11. Closures of the entire grouper fishery when the TAC of one species is met,
12. MRRFS,
13. Trip tickets,
14. Logbook reporting,
15. Vessel registration,
16. Onboard observers,
17. Safety regulations,
18. Licenses for recreational fisherman,
19. Reef permits,
20. Saltwater product licenses,
21. Retail dealers' licenses,
22. Dealer reporting systems,

23. Use of de-hookers
24. Use of circle hooks,
25. Use of venting tool,
26. Dip nets for turtles,
27. Use of spare tires to place turtles on to remove the hook,
28. Fines imposed by law enforcement officers,
29. License suspension by law enforcement officers,
30. Confiscated catch seized by law enforcement officers, (Whew!) and other laws I have surely failed to recall, are just not working. If they were, the Council would not be considering more amendments to the FMP.

These thirty laws address one element of the MSA, protecting fish species from overfishing, but fail to address the other two: 1. protecting fishing communities and fishermen, and 2. Provide food for consumers.

An example of how Seasonal Area Closures would benefit not only fish species but also fishermen and consumers is: When I was a little boy my daddy owned an LP gas business in rural south GA. He furnished gas to farmers who cured their tobacco with gas burners. He loved to fish and he was teaching me how to fish. He asked permission to fish in the farmers' ponds.

We fished in this one and fished in that one, and then we came upon me Taylor's pond. Mr. Taylor's pond had more fish and larger fish than almost all the other ponds put together, even though it was fished year round and by more fisherman than the other ponds. I asked Daddy how this could be, since all the ponds looked alike to me. He said, "Because Mr. Taylor put a painted cork line around the area where the fish spawned every year during the entire spawning season and forbid fishing in that area during that time." Mr. Taylor allowed fishing in the remainder of the pond all year long. After the spawning period was finished, he then opened the spawning area also. Mr. Taylor understood how Mother Nature works. Although he is dead now and may not have known it, he was the first person I know who implemented a Seasonal Area Closure.

I was very fond of Mr. Taylor, as were his many friends who gathered together for many a fish fry in his barn.

The Gulf of Mexico is just one big pond. Saltwater fish reproduce in the same manner as freshwater fish. Why don't we turn the Gulf of Mexico into one of Mr. Taylor's pond?

The February 15 to March 15 closure is very destructive to the intent of the MSA. Although it is intended to protect the fish during spawning, it does just the opposite. Most fishermen can barely make ends meet. They mostly fish because they love it. With no income for this months closure, they have to feed their families, so what do they do? They fish as hard and often (sometimes in deadly weather) as they can before and after the closure. When these large amounts of fish are brought to the docks, the prices plummet. What do they do then? They go back and fish even harder.

If fishermen were allowed to fish in all areas of the gulf that were not in the Seasonal Closed Areas, they would not have to pound the fish and consumers would have fresh grouper year round, instead of frozen Mexican grouper; or even worse, fish labeled grouper but are not grouper.

A single male grouper is needed to fertilize about fifty female grouper (and are about 90% fewer than thirty years ago¹). By closing only one month during the three to four month spawning season, many males are caught before they have a chance to fertilize not just millions, but billions of eggs.

As any mother knows, when she is pregnant, that baby is going to be born when it is ready, whether she has a husband or not. Likewise, a female grouper is going to lay her eggs when she

is ready, whether there is a male present to fertilize them or not. The only difference is that without a male grouper present to fertilize her eggs, they all die. As more and more grouper are pulled out of the water (as documented over past years), when they are needed for fertilization, fewer and fewer fish are born and mature to a harvestable size.

All grouper are born female. If there are too few males, then dominant females will change sex so the following spawning season, more males are available.¹ They turn into males only as needed to fertilize female eggs. When the males are caught (and they are much easier to catch) during the spawning season, there is not enough time for a female to turn into a male and replace it. It takes several months for this sex change to occur. Seasonal Area Closures will help solve this problem.

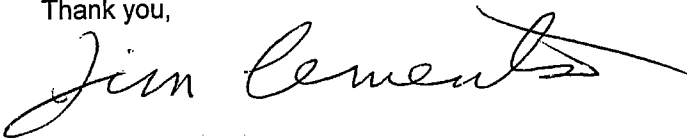
Mother Nature will have the remainder of the year to change the required number of females into males. She has been doing this for millions of years. That is why not only fish, but all living species have propagated. That is until man appeared. Man can not control nature. Even with the present thirty and counting laws attempting to preserve fish stocks, they continue to decline. It is time man steps aside and lets Mother Nature do what she has been doing for those millions of years. When a mother wolf, coyote or fox knows there is going to be a harsh winter (and she does), she will have a single cub. When she knows there will be a mild winter, she will have three or more cubs. A Seasonal Area Closure will allow Mother Nature to convert the number of female grouper into males, as needed.

With Seasonal Area Closures we may not need some of the 30 and counting fishing laws. We may not need anymore of the 31 and counting Amendments to the FMP.

Please add Seasonal Area Closures as an alternative in Amendment 30B. If this alternative is selected, then the whole country can have many a fish fry in memory of Mr. Taylor!

¹Coleman and Koenig. Grouper Ecology. 2/12/08.

Thank you,



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PS if you like what I say, please respond. If you don't like what I say, have a nice day.