



Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

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New Grouper Rules Proposed for the Federal Waters of the Gulf of Mexico

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council on Thursday voted to send Reef Fish Amendment 30B, which deals with gag and red grouper, to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation. The Amendment addresses the overfishing status of gag and the recovered status of red grouper in the Gulf of Mexico, and is expected to become effective in late 2009 or early 2010.

In the meantime, the Council requested that NOAA Fisheries implement an interim rule to implement those portions of Amendment 30B that pertain to ending overfishing of gag, red snapper, greater amberjack and gray triggerfish as quickly as possible. The interim rule, which can only be used to address those provisions that deal specifically with overfishing, is expected to become effective by January 1, 2009, and will put in place temporary regulations until Amendment 30B can be fully implemented.

Here's a rundown of what the interim rule will do:

- * Set the recreational gag bag and possession limit to 2 per person, per day. The aggregate bag limit will remain at five.
- * Extend the recreational closed season for gag from February 1 through March 31. The closed season for black and red grouper will remain February 15 to March 15.
- * Charter boat and headboat operators who possess a Gulf reef fish permit must comply with Federal regulations those reef fish species experiencing overfishing (gag, red snapper, greater amberjack, and gray triggerfish) regardless of where the fish are harvested, if those regulations are more restrictive than state regulations.

The interim rule will eventually be replaced by Amendment 30B, which establishes a recreational grouper aggregate of 4 fish with a 2 gag and 2 red grouper bag and possession limit. It also includes a recreational closed season for all shallow-water grouper from February 1, through March 31. Additionally, charter and headboat operators who possess a Gulf reef fish permit must comply with Federal regulations when more restrictive than state regulations, for those reef fish species experiencing overfishing (gag, red snapper, greater amberjack, and gray triggerfish), regardless of where the fish are harvested.

On the commercial side, Amendment 30B reduces the minimum size limit for commercial red grouper to 18" and repeals the commercial February 15 to March 15 closed season on gag, black grouper and red grouper. Instead, a commercial January through April seasonal area closure is established at the Edges 40 fathom contour, a 390 nautical square mile gag spawning region northwest of Steamboat Lumps.

Amendment 30B also sets total allowable catch (TAC) for both gag and red grouper. The gag TAC will be set at variable levels – 3.38 mp in 2009, 3.62 mp in 2010, and 3.82 mp in 2011, with the red grouper TAC set at 7.57 mp. Interim allocation of TAC between the recreational and commercial fisheries will be set at 61% recreational and 39% commercial for gag, and 24% recreational, 76% commercial for red grouper.

Finally, the amendment sets annual catch limits (ACLs) and accountability measures (AMs) for recreational and commercial gag and red grouper, and for the commercial shallow-water grouper aggregate. For the commercial sector this means the shallow-water grouper fishery will close when gag, red grouper, or the shallow-water grouper (SWG) quota is met. For the recreational sector, if at the end of the fishing year it is determined that the gag or red grouper annual catch limit (ACL) has been exceeded, then any scheduled increase in the recreational

allocation will be canceled. In addition, the recreational fishing season for SWG in the following year will be reduced by the amount necessary to ensure that red grouper or gag target levels are not exceeded for that year.

The regulations are necessary because the latest stock assessment completed under the Southeast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR) program, indicates that gag are undergoing overfishing. The Magnuson-Stevens Reauthorization Act of 2006 mandates that once a stock is determined to be experiencing overfishing, the Council must take action to end overfishing immediately.

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council is one of eight regional fishery management councils established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council prepares fishery management plans designed to manage fishery resources in the U.S. Gulf of Mexico.

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