



PUBLIC HEARING GUIDE

10/4/12



Framework Action to set the 2013
Gag Recreational Fishing Season and
Bag Limit and Modify the February-March
Shallow-Water Grouper Closed Season



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What is a Public Hearing?

A public hearing gives you an opportunity to comment on a fishery management plan or amendment that the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council is developing. Public hearings are conducted after the Council has selected a preferred alternative for each proposed action, and comments should focus on possible benefits and drawbacks of the alternatives contained in each action. Suggestions, issues, and concerns expressed during the public hearings will be presented to the Council for review and consideration before final action is taken.

How does a public hearing affect fisheries management?

Comments provided during the public hearing process are witnessed by at least one Council member and are reported to the full Council prior to final action. Your input is considered as the Council deliberates and chooses the most appropriate management measures to address the issue(s) at hand.

How else can I get involved?

There are many ways you can help the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council identify fishery management needs and develop reasonable management alternatives, each dependent on how actively involved you want to become. The first step to becoming involved is to educate yourself about the management process by visiting our website at www.gulfcouncil.org, signing up to receive our communications, and contacting council members and staff to discuss management. You can attend meetings, serve on panels and committees that advise the Council on fishery issues, and even apply to become a Council member.

Gag Rebuilding History

1997 – The first assessment of the gag stock concluded that, although not overfished, gag may be undergoing overfishing.

2006 & 2007 – A stock assessment (SEDAR 10) concluded that the gag stock was undergoing overfishing.

Overfished

Population is too low

Overfishing

Rate or removals is too high

2008 – Council created Amendment 30B to address the overfishing of gag grouper. The Amendment:

- Set Annual Catch Limits and Accountability Measures for the commercial and recreational gag fisheries.
- Set the commercial gag quota at 1.32 million pounds.
- Replaced the commercial closed season with commercial time and area closures.
- Reduced the gag recreational bag limit to two fish.
- Reduced the aggregate grouper bag limit from five fish to four fish.
- Increased the length of the recreational gag season closure.
- Expanded the closure from gag, red grouper, and black grouper to all shallow-water groupers.

2009 – Gag was determined to be overfished and undergoing overfishing after an updated stock assessment indicated that the gag stock had gotten smaller. It is believed that a red tide occurring in 2005 is to blame for an 18% increase in gag mortality.

2011 – In response to the update stock assessment, the Council requested temporary measures that:

- Reduced the commercial and recreational Annual Catch Limits.
- Closed the recreational season except for a two-month opening between September 16 and November 15.

2012 – A gag rebuilding plan is implemented (Amendment 32) that:

- Established a rebuilding plan for gag.
- Set recreational bag limits, size limits, and closed seasons for gag and red grouper in 2012.

- Established a commercial gag and shallow-water grouper quota adjustment to account for dead discards.
- Made adjustments to multi-use IFQ shares in the grouper Individual Fishing Quota program.
- Reduced the commercial gag size limit.
- Modified the offshore time and area closures.
- Revised gag, red grouper, and shallow-water grouper Accountability Measures.

Gag Season

The current recreational gag season was set in Reef Fish Amendment 32. As the Council developed the amendment, it became clear that people from different parts of the coast wanted gag fishing to be open at different times of the year. Some fishermen from the northern Gulf requested the gag season open during red snapper season in June and July, while some fishermen in southwest Florida requested that gag season open in the winter when the fish are found closer in-shore, and tourism is greater.



The Council chose a season that would provide the most possible fishing days; July 1 through October 31. However, many fishermen have suggested alternative seasons. In April 2012, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission requested that the Council consider a split gag season for 2013.

Summary of Actions

Action 1. 2013 Recreational Gag Season and Bag Limit

The current gag season is open for 123 days from July 1 through October 31, with a 2 fish bag limit. The gag recreational Annual Catch Target for 2013 is 1,287,000 pounds gutted weight. The measures chosen in this action aim to constrain the recreational harvest so that the Annual Catch Target is not exceeded. The Council is considering changing the season and bag limit for gag grouper to meet the needs of the recreational fishery while constraining harvest to a level that is consistent with the gag rebuilding plan.

Note: In the alternatives below, the final closing date will be determined by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Southeast Regional Office. The expected numbers of fishing days are shown in parentheses.

Alternative 1: No action.

Alternative 2: Retain a single season that will remain open until the date that the ACT is projected to be reached. The opening date for the season will be:

Option 2a: March 1

Suboption 2a(i): two-fish bag limit (72-88 days open)

Suboption 2a(ii): one-fish bag limit (81-98 days open)

Option 2b: June 1

Suboption 2b(i): two-fish bag limit (86-137 days open)

Suboption 2b(ii): one-fish bag limit (95-149 days open)

Option 2c: July 1

Suboption 2c(i): two-fish bag limit (133-155 days open)

Suboption 2c(ii): one-fish bag limit (141-168 days open)

Alternative 3: Establish two sub-seasons. The dates of each sub-season will be:

Option 3a: March 1 - March 31 and June 1 until the remainder of the ACT is projected to be caught.

Suboption 3a(i): two-fish bag limit (67-96 days open)

Suboption 3a(ii): one-fish bag limit (80-112 days open)

Option 3b: June 1-June 30 and November 1 until the remainder of the ACT is projected to be caught.

Suboption 3b(i): two-fish bag limit (61-89 days open)

Suboption 3b(ii): one-fish bag limit (73-103 days open)

Option 3c: January 1-January 31 and June 1 until the ACT is projected to be caught.

Suboption 3c(i): two-fish bag limit (60-86 days open)

Suboption 3c(ii): one-fish bag limit (77-108 days open)

Alternative 4: Establish three sub-seasons. The dates of each sub-season will be:

Option 4a: March 1-March 31, June 1-June 21, and November 1 until the remainder of the ACT is projected to be caught.

Suboption 4a(i): two fish bag limit (68-89 days open)

Suboption 4a(ii): one fish bag limit (79-104 days open)

Option 4b: April 1-April 30, July 1-July 31, and a projected winter season ending December 31 that allows the remainder of the ACT to be caught.

Suboption 4b(i): two fish bag limit (88-108 days open)

Suboption 4b(ii): one fish bag limit (103-130 days open)

Shallow-Water Grouper Season

The primary purpose of the February 1 through March 31 shallow-water grouper closed season was to protect gag spawning aggregations. The closure was also used as a tool reduce the harvest of red grouper, and to a lesser degree protect other groupers that are spawning around the same time. The closed season currently

applies only to recreational fishing because the commercial closed season was discontinued and replaced with different management measures. Commercial harvest of both gag and red grouper is now controlled using an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) program, and time and areas closures in the northern Gulf were established to protect gag spawning aggregations. Recent public input has questioned the utility of the recreational shallow-water grouper closed season. The gag spawning aggregations that are

Shallow-Water Groupers

- Black Grouper
- Red Grouper
- Gag
- Yellowfin Grouper
- Scamp
- Yellowmouth Grouper

protected during this closure are found far off-shore beyond the range of many recreational fishermen. Furthermore, recent changes in the gag season structure have limited gag fishing to an abbreviated season that is managed separate from the other shallow-water grouper fishing. Part of the reason for closing the gag spawning season to all shallow-water grouper was to prevent bycatch of gag while fishing for other grouper. However, bycatch of gag may still occur when fishing for other reef fish species, making the effectiveness of a shallow-water grouper closure for this purpose questionable.

Red and black grouper are not considered overfished or experiencing overfishing, so the protections offered by the shallow-water grouper closed season are no longer necessary.



Spawning seasons for shallow-water grouper:

Species	Peak Season	Total Season
Gag	February - March	December - May
Red grouper	March - May	February - mid-July
Black grouper	Feburary - April	November - May
Scamp	March - mid-May	February - July
Yellowmouth Grouper	April - May	January - December
Yellowfin grouper	Unknown	March - August

Action 2. February - March Recreational Shallow-water Grouper Closure

The Council is considering changing the February through March recreational shallow-water grouper closure because the closure may no longer be relevant due to shifts in grouper stocks and changes to recreational and commercial management measures.

Alternative 1: No action.

Alternative 2: Modify the closed season as follows:

Option 2a: Shorten the season to February 15 through March 15 (return to the original closed season, during peak gag spawning).

Option 2b: Shift the closed season to March through April in order to include spawning seasons for more species.

Alternative 3: Eliminate the February 1 through March 31 recreational (shallow-water grouper) closed season. This does not preclude including these months in a closed season for an individual stock.

Alternative 4: Eliminate the February 1 through March 31 recreational (shallow-water grouper) closed season in federal waters shoreward of the 20 fathom boundary. Seaward of the boundary, the closed season remains in effect.



The Council is collecting input on this amendment both online and through a series of meetings across the Gulf coast. Each of the following meetings will begin at 6 p.m. local time and conclude no later than 9:00 p.m.

October 15, 2012

Destin, Florida

Country Inn & Suites
4415 Commons Dr. E.
Destin, FL 32541
(850) 650-9191

Naples, Florida

Courtyard Marriott
3250 Tamiami Trail N.
Naples, FL 34103
(239) 434-8700

October 16, 2012

St. Petersburg, Florida

Sirata Hotel
5300 Gulf Blvd.
St. Petersburg, FL 33706
(727) 363-5100

Gulf Shores, Alabama

Holiday Inn Express
160 W. Commerce Blvd.
Gulf Shores, AL 36542
(251) 948-6191

October 17, 2012

D'Iberville, Mississippi

Courtyard Marriott
11471 Cinema Drive
D'Iberville, MS 39540
(228) 392-1200

Galveston, Texas

Hilton Galveston
5400 Seawall Blvd.
Galveston, TX 77551
(409) 744-5000

October 18, 2012

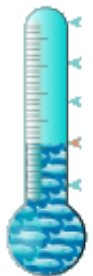
Corpus Christi, Texas

Harte Institute
6300 Ocean Dr., Rm. 127
Corpus Christi, TX 78412
(361) 825-2000

Kenner, Louisiana

Crowne Plaza Airport
2829 W. Williams Blvd.
Kenner, LA 70062
(504) 467-5611

If you are unable to attend a public hearing, your input is still important. A virtual presentation is also available. To view the online presentation or to comment on the proposed changes, please visit: <http://tinyurl.com/8gzj87p>, or click on the thermometer icon on our home page at www.gulfcouncil.org.





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