


UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

Southeast Regional Office

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St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505

<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>

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Mr. Doug Gregory, Executive Director
 Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
 2203 North Lois Avenue, Suite 1100
 Tampa, Florida 33607

JAN 17 2018

Dear Mr. ^{Doug}Gregory:

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) requests the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council review the enclosed Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) applications at their January 2018 meeting. The EFP proposals were submitted by the Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen's Association, Reef Savers, and Keys Fisheries. If issued, the EFPs would exempt, with certain conditions, the applicants from federal prohibited gear and method regulations found at CFR 622.9(c). Exemptions for any other applicable laws and regulations are not included in these EFPs, and would need to be obtained by the applicants through appropriate regulating agencies. These proposals are listed and summarized below.

Florida Keys Commercial Fishermen's Association (FKCFA)

FKCFA is requesting authorization to test traps currently in use for crustacean fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) and South Atlantic and the black sea bass portion of the snapper-grouper fishery in the South Atlantic, to harvest lionfish aboard commercial fishing vessels year round. Sampling with all trap types would occur in four regions: off South Carolina, both coasts of Florida, and the Florida Keys, twice per month in each region over the course of a year. Vessels would deploy 25 units of four different trap designs to include spiny lobster wood traps, spiny lobster wire traps, rectangular wire traps and sea bass pots (400 traps total, 100 traps max per region). All traps would have modified funnel dimensions. Traps would be deployed at depths from 65-300 feet. Fishing with these traps would not exceed 100 days per year in each area with soak times varying from several hours to a maximum of two weeks per deployment. The proposed research would examine the efficiency and efficacy of the four trap designs for capturing lionfish. The research also would derive biological and life history information to improve lionfish control. Lastly, the EFP would utilize an outreach and education program to inform the public about the status of lionfish as an invasive species, efforts to control the spread of the population, and use of lionfish as a consumer food source. Only lionfish would be harvested.

Reef Savers

Reef Savers is requesting authorization to test purse traps, currently not in use to commercially harvest any species in the Gulf or South Atlantic, to harvest lionfish aboard commercial fishing vessels year round. Sampling would occur in six regions: off the coasts of Louisiana; Alabama; Pensacola, Florida; Tampa, Florida; Jacksonville, Florida; and South Carolina, once or twice per month in each region over the course of a year. Vessels would set a total of 5,000 non-



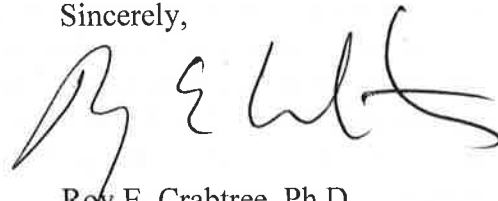
containment purse traps over the timeframe of the EFP. They anticipate that 2,500 traps would be set within the first year. Up to 500 traps would be set off of each area. Traps would be deployed at depths from 90-500 feet. Soak times would range from 1-15 days, depending on area. The proposed research would test the effectiveness of a prototype purse trap developed by NOAA National Ocean Service scientist Steven Gittings and determine optimal catch per unit effort soak time. The study is designed to optimize the removal of invasive lionfish, specifically in deep water, while limiting bycatch and bottom impacts. Only lionfish would be harvested.

Keys Fisheries

Keys Fisheries is requesting authorization to test traps currently in use for crustacean fisheries in the Gulf and South Atlantic and the prototype purse trap to harvest lionfish aboard commercial fishing vessels during the spiny lobster seasonal closure (April 1 – August 5). Sampling would occur with all trap types in the South Atlantic off the Florida Keys and in the Gulf off southwest Florida every 3-4 days. Vessels would deploy a total of 1,500 of the following types of trap per month: wire spiny lobster traps with modified funnels, wire and wood spiny lobster traps with modified funnels, and the prototype purse lionfish trap discussed above. Traps would be deployed via a trawl system with 40 traps per trawl at depths from 150-300 feet. This study is designed to test the validity of a trawl method and limiting protected species interactions with the requested traps. Only lionfish would be harvested.

NMFS is currently analyzing the impacts of these activities and will provide terms and conditions including a sampling authorization for a maximum duration of two years, if the EFPs are granted. The ecological and economic benefits of a well-prosecuted lionfish fishery presents an opportunity to galvanize industry support and provide management information around the use of traps as a viable lionfish harvest gear in the Gulf of Mexico.

Sincerely,



Roy E. Crabtree, Ph.D.
Regional Administrator

Enclosures