



Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

Managing Fishery Resources in the U.S. Federal Waters of the Gulf of Mexico

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Meeting Notice

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Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council August 2012 Update

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 20 - 23, 2012, to discuss a number of fishery issues. During the weeklong meeting, the Council took the following actions:

Gray Triggerfish - Reef Fish Amendment 37

The Council voted to send draft Reef Fish Amendment 37 out for public hearings. The Amendment considers modifying the rebuilding plan for gray triggerfish and making changes to commercial and recreational management measures so that the overfished stock can rebuild as fishing continues.

The Council also requested that NOAA Fisheries Service extend the interim rule that reduces overfishing of gray triggerfish by lowering commercial and recreational Annual Catch Limits for another 186 days until Amendment 37 can be approved and implemented.

Information on the Council's preferred alternatives and the public hearing dates and locations will be made available soon.

Shallow-Water Grouper Accountability Measures - Amendment 38

The Council gave final approval to Reef Fish Amendment 38, which revises the accountability measures for shallow-water grouper. Currently, if the recreational annual catch limit for gag or red grouper is exceeded, the season for all recreational shallow-water grouper is required to be shortened in the following year. Under this revision, only the species for which the annual catch limit was exceeded will have its season shortened. The amendment also revised the Generic Framework Procedure to allow future changes to accountability measures through a framework process (also called a regulatory amendment), rather than require a full plan amendment.

The final amendment will be submitted to NOAA Fisheries, which must review and approve the amendment before it is implemented.

2013 Recreational Gag Season

The Council also approved for public hearings, a draft framework action that considers a split recreational gag season for 2013. Some fishermen have asked for a split season to allow for two or three fishing seasons during the year. Changing the season could reduce the total number of fishing days but would allow for fishing at more desirable times of the year. However, the Council has asked for an analysis of reducing the gag bag limit from 2 to 1 fish per person, which could extend the recreational season.

The framework also includes alternatives to modify or eliminate the annual February-March recreational shallow-water grouper closure. The closure was put in place primarily to protect gag-spawning aggregations, which occur over shelf-edge reefs in depth of 25 to 70 fathoms. The closure was eventually applied to all shallow-water grouper to protect other groupers that may be spawning and to prevent bycatch of gag by anglers targeting other groupers. The commercial shallow-water grouper closure was replaced with a seasonal closed area known as *The Edges* to protect gag-spawning aggregations over part of their primary spawning grounds.

Given the regional differences in recreational harvest of gag, the Council also directed staff to begin development of a plan amendment for regional management of the recreational gag harvest.

Regional Management of Red Snapper

In June, the Council directed staff to develop a scoping document for regional management of recreational harvest of red snapper. In August, the Council received additional details from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries about a proposed pilot project for regional management of red snapper, and they reaffirmed the motion to pursue regional management of red snapper.

Sector Allocation - Reef Fish Amendment 28

The Gulf Council reviewed a scoping document that explores setting allocations for gag, red grouper, black grouper, and red snapper, based on various scenarios, including separating the recreational sector into two or three subsectors.

After receiving extensive public testimony, the Council agreed to table discussion on the amendment until after it receives the 2013 red snapper benchmark assessment. The assessment is expected to be complete in the summer of 2013.

Coastal Migratory Pelagic Amendments 19 and 20

The Council continued to work on Amendments 19 and 20 to the Coastal Migratory Pelagic Fishery Management Plan. Amendment 19 considers limiting the sale of recreationally caught fish and making changes to the permit requirements for Coastal Migratory Pelagic fisheries. Amendment 20 considers modifying commercial zone boundaries, changing the commercial opening date for the western zone, and establishing a transit provision.

Generic Amendment for Dealer Permits and Electronic Reporting

The Gulf Council gave final approval to an amendment that changes federal seafood dealer permit and reporting requirements. Because this is a joint amendment, approval by the South Atlantic Council is necessary before the amendment can be sent to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation.

If approved, the amendment would require a universal dealer permit to purchase all federally-managed species, except South Atlantic coral, South Atlantic *Sargassum*, Gulf of Mexico coral and coral reefs, and penaeid shrimp species.

Permitted dealers would also be required to report purchases weekly, via computer or Internet. Forms from trips landing between Sunday and Saturday will need to be submitted to the Science and Research Director (SRD) by 11:59 pm local time on the following Tuesday.

Finally, "No purchase forms" must also be submitted at the same frequency, via the same process, and for the same species as specified for "purchased forms." A dealer would only be authorized to receive commercially harvested species if previous reports were submitted and received by NOAA Fisheries in a timely manner. Delinquent reports would need to be submitted and received before a dealer could receive commercially harvested species from a federally permitted vessel.

For-Hire Charter Vessel Electronic Reporting

The Gulf Council has directed staff to work with the Southeast Fishery Science Center to develop an amendment to require electronic reporting for for-hire charter vessels. The amendment will also include options to bring headboat reporting requirements in line with current Southeast Fishery Science Center electronic reporting requirements.

The intent of the amendment is to improve the timeliness and accuracy of fisheries data in the for-hire sector.

The Council also directed staff to develop a scoping document for a days-at-sea pilot program for the red snapper recreational for-hire sector. The intent of this proposal is to allow for-hire vessels to optimize their use of available fishing days given the short red snapper season and potential loss of days due to weather.

Fixed Petroleum Platforms and Artificial Reefs as Essential Fish Habitat

In order to consider artificial substrates for description and identification as essential fish habitat (EFH), and to conduct subsequent EFH consultations, the Council needs information and advice regarding the implications of including manmade substrates and structures for federally managed fish species.

The Council agreed to form an Ad Hoc Artificial Substrate Advisory Panel made up of members of the petroleum industry, state artificial reef biologists, and others as appropriate, to assist the Council with our fixed petroleum platforms and artificial reefs as potential essential fish habitat.

The charge of the Ad Hoc Advisory Panel is to consider:

1. The myriad of similar artificial substrates in the aquatic environment that provide structure and habitat functions for fishery resources.
2. Emerging scientific research and economic activities related to artificial habitats and fisheries.
3. Ocean dumping and debris disposal that otherwise mimics the establishment of an "artificial reefs".
4. Perspectives from industry representatives relative to the potential impacts of considering artificial substrates as Essential Fish Habitat in the Gulf of Mexico.

Exempted Fishing Permit - Recreational Harvest of Red Snapper at Fishing Tournaments

Earlier in the year, the Council recommended, and NOAA Fisheries approved, an exempted fishing permit (EFP) application from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to allow a limited harvest of red snapper taken in association with seven selected fishing rodeos held outside of the recreational fishing season. The tournaments did not use all of their allotted fish tags. Therefore, LDWF submitted a new EFP application proposing that the Department be allowed to use the remaining tags at an additional tournament, the Louisiana Saltwater Series recreational tournament, (September 28-30, 2012, with a weather date of October 26-28, 2012). Since this request does not increase the take of red snapper beyond what was previously authorized, the Council recommended that NOAA Fisheries approves the EFP.

Red Snapper Recreational Catch Overrun in 2012 and Reevaluation of 2013 Quotas

The Council received preliminary catch estimates for the recreational red snapper season. Currently collected data accounts for 3.23 mp, or about 82% of the 3.959 mp recreational quota. Private recreational data from July and data from Texas' creel survey are still needed to finalize catch estimates. NOAA Fisheries projects recreational landings will be 4.4 to 4.8 million pounds of red snapper so far this year. Part of the reason for the increase in landings is because the average weight of recreationally caught red snapper continues to increase. The average weight for 2012 was projected to be 6.34 - 6.97 pounds, but the observed average weight was 7.14 pounds. Because the red snapper quota will be exceeded in 2012, there will not be an automatic increase in 2013. Instead, the Council has requested that the Southeast Fisheries Science Center rerun the red snapper projections incorporating the most recent landings, and report the results to the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee and the Council during their October meetings.

Vermilion Snapper Emergency Rule Requested to Increase 2012 Annual Catch Limit

Based on a recent update stock assessment that found the vermillion snapper stock is neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing, the Council began developing a regulatory amendment to increase the vermillion snapper annual catch limit beginning in 2013. However, preliminary landings data suggest that the 2012 vermillion snapper annual catch limit may be reached before the end of the year, resulting in a closure of both the commercial and recreational vermillion snapper seasons. In order to avoid social and economic disruptions from an early closure, and based on a recommendation from the Reef Fish Advisory Panel, the Council has requested that NOAA Fisheries implement an emergency rule to increase the 2012 vermillion snapper annual catch limit from 3.42 mp to 4.19 mp.

To comment on active amendments, please visit

http://www.gulfcouncil.org/fishery_management_plans/scoping-thru-implementation.php.

About Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council is one of eight regional Fishery Management Councils established by the Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976. The Council prepares fishery management plans, which are designed to manage fishery resources within the 200-mile limit of the Gulf of Mexico.

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