

For Immediate Release

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Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council February Update

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met in Gulfport, Mississippi February 7 – 10, 2011, to address numerous fishery issues, including a re-run assessment for gag and an amendment to address crew size limits on dually permitted vessels. Some highlights from the week are noted below.

Gag

The Council asked staff to prepare an interim rule for consideration during the April Council meeting that sets the 2011 recreational season for gag from September 16 through November 15. This request was made after the Council reviewed the results of a re-run of the 2009 gag update assessment. The re-run adjusted the size distribution of undersized released fish in the recreational fishery and used newly available observer data to estimate discards in the commercial fishery. The result was a slight improvement in the total allowable catch for 2011, from 1.01 to 1.28 million pounds. That means 781,000 pounds (61%) for the recreational sector and 499,000 pounds (39%) for the commercial sector.

The 781,000 pound recreational allocation allows enough catch for a two-month fall season, provided Florida adopts a consistent closed season by June 1. Without Florida consistency, it is projected the entire recreational allocation will be caught in state waters, leaving no allocation available for federal waters. The September 16 through November 15 recreational season is contingent upon Florida consistency.

For the commercial sector, a major unknown factor is the levels of dead discards due to the small amount of gag individual fishing quota (IFQ) available, and whether commercial fishermen can successfully avoid catching gag while fishing for red grouper. Because the grouper IFQ system has only been in place for one year, the commercial sector has not established a track record to demonstrate how successfully fishermen can avoid catching fish for which they do not have IFQ shares. As a result, the Council set the 2011 commercial quota at a precautionary level of 430,000 pounds. This includes the 100,000 pounds previously released via interim rule at the beginning of the year.

The Council also continued work on Draft Reef Fish Amendment 32 to establish a rebuilding plan for gag, which has been declared by NOAA Fisheries to be overfished and undergoing overfishing. Amendment 32 will be implemented in 2012 and should allow for an increase in the 2012 total allowable catch of gag, provided that the 2011 catches from recreational and commercial fishing do not exceed the levels needed to rebuild.

To help assure that the rebuilding plan stays on track, the Council directed staff to

include alternatives for recreational quota closure authority for the NOAA Fisheries Regional Administrator, and overage adjustments if a sector exceeds its allocation. This is similar to the quota closure authority and overage adjustments of the greater amberjack fishery, which is also under a rebuilding plan.

The Council also streamlined the amendment by removing several alternatives that were intended to address bycatch, and by moving a section on data collection and monitoring programs out of Amendment 32 and into a more appropriate amendment. In addition, alternatives to increase the recreational bag limit of red grouper will be added to the amendment. Public hearings on Amendment 32 will be scheduled around the Gulf coast this spring or summer.

Goliath Grouper

The Council received a summary of a new stock assessment on goliath grouper. The assessment showed that the goliath grouper stock has clearly improved since the moratorium was implemented in 1990. However, questions still remain about the stock. For example, there is a lack of information about the basic biology of the goliath grouper, such as how long they can live. Estimates range anywhere from 37 years to 80 years.

Another unknown is whether goliath grouper change sex like gag and some other grouper species. Also, the assessment, which was conducted by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute, focused on the south Florida portion of the stock. While that area is the center of abundance, goliath grouper are found throughout the Gulf of Mexico and in the Caribbean, and information about the status of the stock in areas not covered by the assessment is lacking. Because of the biological uncertainties and the limited geographic scope of the assessment, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee was unable to set a level of acceptable biological catch. Instead, they recommended that the moratorium be continued through 2015, and that during this period, a coordinated scientific sampling plan be produced to address the data needs.

The Florida Wildlife Conservation Commission will review the assessment during its February meeting and may consider some sort of limited harvest of Goliath in state waters.

Crew Size Limit for Dually Permitted Vessels

The Council approved a draft scoping document to address the crew size requirements for vessels with both a federal commercial and charter reef fish permit, as well as actions to address issues related to the income qualification requirement for federal commercial permit holders. Scoping meetings will be held in the spring. Scoping is the process of identifying issues, potential impacts, and reasonable alternatives associated with the issue at hand. It provides the first and best opportunity for the public to make suggestions or to raise issues and concerns before the Council begins developing an amendment.

Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Finance Program Availability

New provisions of the existing Federal Fisheries Finance Program allow for some Gulf fishermen to apply for loans to purchase IFQ shares under certain conditions; however, the Council must submit a formal request to participate in the program, as well as define the following terms:

- Entry-level fishermen, and
- Fishermen who fish from a small vessel

The Council agreed to send letters to the Secretary of Commerce requesting participation in the Fishery Finance Program, which could provide financing to qualified fishermen to purchase Red Snapper and Grouper/Tilefish shares. The Council also chose the following definitions and additional guidelines to accompany its request.

- **Red snapper quota share** - a permit granting the owner dedicated access to harvest a specific percentage of commercial red snapper quota.
- **Grouper/tilefish quota share** – a permit granting the owner dedicated access to harvest a specific percentage of the corresponding grouper/tilefish commercial quota.
- **Red Snapper entry-level fisherman** – a federal commercial reef fish permit holder who has not purchased, previously held or currently hold red snapper quota shares in excess of the percentage of shares that produces 4,000 pounds gutted weight of quota allocation.
- **Grouper/Tilefish entry-level fisherman** – a federal commercial reef fish permit holder who has not purchased, previous held, or currently hold grouper/tilefish shares in excess of the percentage of shares that produces 8,000 pounds gutted weight of quota allocation.
- **Red snapper small vessel fishermen** - federal commercial reef fish permit holders who fish from a vessel whose length as defined in the reef fish permit is less than or equal to 45 feet and who have not purchased, previously held, or currently hold red snapper shares in excess of percentage of shares that produces 4,000 pounds gutted weight of red snapper quota allocation.
- **Grouper/tilefish small vessel fishermen** - federal commercial reef fish permit holders who fish from a vessel whose length as defined in the reef fish permit is less than or equal to 45 feet and who have not purchased, previously held, or currently hold grouper/tilefish shares in excess of percentage of shares that produces 8,000 pounds gutted weight of red snapper quota allocation.

The Council also specified that; federal commercial reef fish permit holders may refinance existing debts associated with previous quota share purchases, providing the above qualifications criteria are met at the time of the loan application; financing be limited to a maximum red snapper quota share equivalent to 4,000 pounds gutted weight and a maximum aggregated grouper/tilefish quota share equivalent to 8,000 pounds gutted weight; and applicants be limited to those who hold quota shares

representing no more than 12,000 pounds combined in both IFQ programs.

[Sector Separation Removed from Generic Amendment for Annual Catch Limits and Accountability Measures](#)

The Council selected preferred alternatives for the generic Annual Catch Limits/Accountability Measures amendment, and removed sector separation from the generic ACL/AM amendment. The ALC/AM amendment is scheduled to be finished in June, and removing sector allocation from its current amendment and initiating a new amendment will allow for more thorough consideration of the issue by both the Council and the public.

The Council also selected preferred alternatives that remove yellowtail snapper and mutton snapper from the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan. They removed the level of dead discards from the ACL/ACT control rule as a source of management uncertainty.

A complete list of motions will be made available on the Council web site. Public hearings will be scheduled around the Gulf coast in the spring, with meeting dates and locations to be announced in the coming weeks.

[Allocation](#)

The Council added to its April Agenda a discussion relative to the development of Reef Fish Amendment 28. Amendment 28 deals with grouper allocation.