



# Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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## EARLY CLOSURE OF THE RED SNAPPER RECREATIONAL FISHERY IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

### New Regulatory Action:

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) announces the recreational fishery for red snapper in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico will **close effective 12:01 a.m. local time August 5, 2008**, through December 31, 2008, the end of the current fishing year. The recreational fishery in federal waters will reopen on June 1, 2009, the beginning of the 2009 federal recreational fishing season. NOAA Fisheries Service has determined this action is necessary to prevent overfishing and to keep the recreational fishery from exceeding its quota during the 2008 fishing year.

Closure of the recreational red snapper fishery in federal waters complies with regulations implemented under the Fishery Management Plan for Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico (Reef Fish FMP), and in accordance with requirements specified in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. NOAA Fisheries Service is required to close a fishery or fishery sector in federal waters when the quota is met or projected to be met.

### Background:

Constraining harvest to the quota is crucial to meeting the legal requirements to prevent and end overfishing and rebuild the red snapper resource of the Gulf of Mexico. A Court ruling in 2007 required NOAA Fisheries Service and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) to revise the red snapper rebuilding plan with a goal of having a 50-percent probability, or greater, of ending overfishing for red snapper between 2009 and 2010 and rebuilding the stock by 2032.

Subsequently, NOAA Fisheries Service implemented temporary regulations in 2007 for federal waters to reduce harvest and fishing mortality for red snapper. These regulations included a recreational quota of 3.185 million pounds (MP) and a commercial quota of 3.315 MP. The recreational bag limit was reduced to two fish,

with a zero-fish bag limit for captains or crews of for-hire vessels. The minimum size limit for the recreational fishery remained at 16 inches total length (TL) and the federal fishing season remained April 21 through October 31. These harvesting restrictions were intended to constrain the recreational fishery to the quota for the fishing year. However, Texas kept its state waters open year-round and anglers were allowed a daily bag limit of four fish. Similarly, Florida maintained a fishing season of April 15 through October 31 during 2007 in its state waters, and a four-fish recreational bag limit. These incompatible regulations in state waters contributed to a recreational harvest that exceeded the recreational red snapper quota by approximately 1.0 MP in 2007. The commercial fishery landed 3.22 MP, or 97 percent of the 2007 commercial quota.

### 2008 Regulations:

In January 2008, NOAA Fisheries Service published a final rule implementing actions in the Council's joint Amendment 27 to the Reef Fish FMP and Amendment 14 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Shrimp Fishery of the Gulf of Mexico. These regulations further reduced the 2008 recreational quota for red snapper to 2.45 MP, and the commercial quota to 2.55 MP. To keep the recreational fishery's harvest within the quota, the recreational red snapper fishing season in federal waters was reduced to June 1 through September 30. No changes were made to the established bag limits and minimum size limits.

To ensure the 2008 recreational red snapper quota would not be exceeded during the fishing year, NOAA Fisheries Service and the Council requested the five Gulf of Mexico states adopt compatible regulations for 2008. Louisiana and Mississippi implemented regulations compatible with federal regulations, and Alabama is undecided. Florida implemented a two-fish bag limit, compatible with federal regulations, but maintained its recreational fishing season of April 15 through October 31; 78 days longer than the federal fishing season.

Texas maintained its existing year-round fishing season and a four-fish bag limit in state waters, thus not complying with federal regulations.

**Analysis Summary:**

The June 1 through September 30 federal recreational fishing season was based on the assumption of compatible recreational red snapper regulations in state waters. NOAA Fisheries Service's analyses indicate the longer fishing seasons and less restrictive bag limits in state waters will result in a recreational quota overage for the 2008 fishing year.

Substantial quantities of red snapper are harvested by the recreational fishery from state waters. For example, reported recreational red snapper landings from state waters off the west coast of Florida in 2007 represented more than 25 percent of the total Gulf of Mexico recreational red snapper landings, and more than 50 percent of the total reported recreational landings of red snapper for the state. Similarly, landings from Texas state waters constitute more than 30 percent of the state's total recreational red snapper landings.

With this concern in mind, NOAA Fisheries Service conducted an analysis to project 2008 red snapper recreational landings in accordance with the established federal and state recreational fishing seasons and harvesting restrictions. Recent and historical landings were used to project both landings and season length for

each state by recreational sector (charter, private, and headboat). Where necessary, landings were adjusted for changes in regulations (e.g., lower bag limit, shorter season length). The full analytical report can be found on the Southeast Regional Office Web site: <http://www.seo.nfms.noaa.gov>. In summary, NOAA Fisheries Service projects the recreational red snapper landings for January 1 through December 31, 2008, will be approximately 2.78 MP; a 13.5-percent overage in the 2008 recreational quota.

These projections likely represent an underestimate of the landings because they do not account for shifts in fishing effort or non-compliance that are likely to occur as a result of incompatible state and federal regulations. NOAA Fisheries Service is increasingly concerned there will be substantial overages, and a concomitant failure to maintain the established rebuilding targets. Quota overages severely impact the ability of NOAA Fisheries Service and the Council to attain required reductions in fishing mortality and comply with the legal requirements to end overfishing of red snapper.

NOAA Fisheries Service estimates there is a 75-percent probability the 2.45 MP recreational quota will not be exceeded during the 2008 fishing year if the federal fishery is closed on August 5, 2008. NOAA Fisheries Service believes the timing of the closure is necessary to adequately account for anticipated but unquantifiable shifts in effort into state waters once the federal fishery closes.

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