



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Regional Office, 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida 33701

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Reminder of New Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Fishing Requirements for Non-stainless Steel Circle Hooks, Venting Tools, and Dehooking Devices

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries Service) reminds Gulf of Mexico recreational and commercial reef fish fishermen of new fishing gear requirements effective June 1, 2008. The purpose of these requirements is to reduce the discard and bycatch mortality in the reef fish fishery. These requirements do not apply to fishermen fishing in South Atlantic waters.

Non-stainless Steel Circle Hooks

A circle hook is defined as a fishing hook designed and manufactured so that the point is turned perpendicularly back to the shank to form a generally circular, or oval, shape. Research has found that circle hooks are more likely to hook fish in the mouth, instead of in the esophagus or stomach. This reduces damage to the fish. **The requirement for circle hooks only applies to fishing with natural baits, such as cut or live bait.** J-hooks may be used with artificial lures or artificial baits (e.g., plastic shrimp).

Some circle hooks are offset, meaning there is some sideways bending of the end of the hook in relation to the hook shank. The federal requirement for circle hooks allows the use of offset circle hooks in federal waters. However, some research has indicated the greater the degree of offset, the greater the likelihood of injuring a hooked fish. Therefore, the use of offset circle hooks is discouraged. Some states, such as Florida, will not allow offset circle hooks to be used when fishing for reef fish in state waters, so it is important to check with the state fishery management agency where you are fishing to determine if similar measures apply.

The non-stainless steel hook requirement will allow hooks to corrode over time. This reduces the possibility of damage to the fish or to fish predators such as sharks, birds, and dolphins.

Venting Tools

A venting tool is a device used to deflate the expanded

air from the body cavity of a fish with minimum damage. A venting tool must be a sharpened, hollow instrument, such as a hypodermic syringe with the plunger removed, or a 16-gauge needle fixed to a hollow wooden dowel. A tool such as a knife or an ice-pick cannot be used. **At least one venting tool is required onboard when reef fish fishing and must be used when needed to deflate the body cavity of reef fish that will be released.**

Many marine reef fish have a gas-filled swimbladder that controls buoyancy to allow the fish to maintain a certain depth in the water column. When a fish is retrieved from deeper waters, the gas in the swimbladder can over-expand and fill the body cavity with trapped gases when the fish is brought quickly to the surface. As a result, the fish can sustain serious injury. If released in this buoyant condition, fish may float away and die from exposure to the elements or become an easy target for predators. Venting allows the fish to return to deeper waters more quickly and increases its chance of survival.

Dehookers

A dehooking device is a tool intended to remove a hook embedded in a fish. It allows a fish to be released with minimum damage. **At least one dehooking device is required when fishing for reef fish in Gulf of Mexico federal waters.** Dehookers do not need to be used if it is safer for the fish and the angler to cut the line rather than trying to remove a deeply imbedded hook.

A dehooker must be constructed to allow the hook to be secured and the barb shielded without re-engaging during the removal process. The dehooking end must be blunt, all edges rounded, and the device must be of a size appropriate to secure the range of hook sizes and styles used in the reef fish fishery. Examples of allowable dehooking devices include tools with a long shaft with an inverted V or other hook capturing device, blunt-nosed pliers, alligator pliers, or dehooking forceps. While pliers and forceps can be used as a dehooking

device, the use of dehooking tools that can grab the fishing line, slide down the line, and remove the hook quickly are encouraged because these tools require less handling of the fish and are better able to secure the hook during removal. Dehooking devices can be purchased from many retail outlets.

Other Gear Requirements

NOAA Fisheries Service also reminds operators of all vessels with commercial and for-hire reef fish vessel permits in the Gulf of Mexico of current requirements for sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish release gear. The following must be onboard these vessels:

- One dipnet;
- One pair of long-nose or needle-nose pliers;
- One pair of bolt cutters;
- One pair of monofilament line cutters;
- One auto tire or other cushioned surface;
- Two types of mouth openers/mouth gags; and
- One short-handled dehooker.

Vessels with a freeboard height greater than 4 feet must also have onboard:

- One long-handled line clipper;
- One long-handled device to pull an “Inverted V”; and
- One long-handled dehooker.

Vessels with commercial and for-hire reef fish vessel permits must also possess a copy of the protocol titled “Careful Release Protocols for Sea Turtle Release with Minimal Injury” either inside the wheelhouse or within a waterproof case if no wheelhouse. Operators of these

vessels must also post the sea turtle handling and release guidelines laminated placard inside the wheelhouse or in an easily viewable area if no wheelhouse. The protocol and placard can be found online at: <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/> and can also be requested from the Southeast Regional Office at 263 13th Avenue South, St. Petersburg, Florida 33701.

More Information on Reef Fish Regulations

For more information on these reef fish regulations, visit the NOAA Fisheries Service Southeast Regional Offices’ Web site at <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/>. The final rules, amendments, frequently asked questions, and Fishery Bulletins are available for review. In addition, links to other Web sites about circle hooks, dehookers, and venting tools are provided.

How Can We Improve These Fishery Bulletins?

If you have any suggestions on how we may improve the contents of future fishery bulletins, please contact: Kim Amendola, Communication Specialist, Phone: 727-551-5707, FAX: 727-824-5320, e-mail: SERO.Communications.Comments@noaa.gov

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