



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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NOAA Fisheries Announces Changes to the Recreational Red Snapper Season in the Gulf of Mexico

On March 25, 2013, a temporary emergency rule will publish in the *Federal Register* that gives NOAA Fisheries the authority to set separate closure dates for the recreational red snapper season in federal waters off individual Gulf of Mexico states. The closure dates will depend on whether state regulations are consistent with federal regulations for the recreational red snapper season length or bag limit. This action was requested by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council at their February meeting to provide a fairer and more equitable distribution of recreational red snapper fishing opportunities among anglers in all the Gulf of Mexico states.

The federal recreational season for Gulf of Mexico red snapper begins June 1 each year with a 2-fish bag limit. The length of the season is determined by the amount of the quota, the average weight of fish landed, and the estimated catch rates over time. NOAA Fisheries is responsible for ensuring the entire recreational harvest, including harvest in state waters, does not exceed the recreational quota. Therefore, if states establish a longer season or a larger bag limit for state waters than the federal regulations allow in federal waters, the federal season must be adjusted to account for the additional harvest expected in state waters.

If all states were to implement consistent regulations, the 2013 recreational season would be 28 days, assuming the recreational quota is increased to 4.145 million pounds through separate rule-making. However, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida have indicated they will implement inconsistent red snapper regulations for their state waters. Therefore, without this emergency rule, the 2013 federal season would be reduced to 22 days to compensate for that additional expected harvest.

This emergency rule allows NOAA Fisheries to calculate the recreational red snapper fishing season separately in the EEZ off each state to account for any inconsistency of regulations in state waters. Based on

the expected regulations for Texas, Louisiana, and Florida, the **preliminary** season lengths would be as follows: Texas, 12 days; Louisiana, 9 days; Mississippi and Alabama, 28 days; and Florida, 21 days. The method for calculating these dates can be found in a report (SERO-LAPP-2013-02) at http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable_fisheries/gulf_fisheries/red_snapper/documents/pdfs/2013_red_snapper_emergency_regs.pdf. **NOAA Fisheries will officially announce the closure dates through a separate Southeast Fishery Bulletin.**

All other federal regulations for recreational red snapper are still in effect. In particular, if federal regulations for red snapper are more restrictive than state regulations, a person aboard a vessel for which a federal charter/headboat permit for Gulf reef fish has been issued must comply with federal regulations regardless of where the fish are harvested. Relative to this emergency rule, that means if the federal waters off a particular state are closed for recreational red snapper harvest, then vessels with a federal charter/headboat permit may not harvest red snapper in those state waters even if the waters off the vessel's home state are still open.

The emergency rule, a map showing federal waters off each state, and a list of Frequently Asked Questions are on the NOAA Fisheries Web site:

http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable_fisheries/gulf_fisheries/reef_fish/2013/rs_er/index.html.

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