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NOAA Extends Fishing Ban for South Atlantic Red Snapper
Area closure to prevent snapper bycatch temporarily delayed

In order to protect the red snapper population in the South Atlantic, NOAA's Fisheries Service will extend the ban of commercial and recreational fishing for the red snapper in federal waters off North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and the Atlantic coast of Florida.

This prohibition takes effect today, December 3, replacing a temporary fishing prohibition due to expire December 5. The final rule authorizing the action filed in the Federal Register today.

The final rule also includes an area closure off southern Georgia and northeastern Florida, which would prohibit commercial and recreational fishing for snappers, groupers, and some other bottomfish species to reduce bycatch of red snapper. However, the area closure will be delayed until June 1 to allow time to consider the results of a new scientific assessment that the red snapper population may be in better condition than was previously estimated.

The assessment was completed after the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council submitted its request for NOAA's Fisheries Service to implement the final rule. By delaying the area closure, the agency is providing additional time for the council to review the new scientific assessment and reconsider the area closure.

"These assessment results are consistent with what the fishermen are reporting," said Roy Crabtree, southeast regional administrator for NOAA's Fisheries Service. "We are delaying implementation of the area closure because we believe it is important for the council to be given the time they need to respond to these findings."

The final rule also requires fishermen to use non-stainless steel circle hooks, which can reduce hook-related injuries, when fishing for snapper-grouper species with natural bait in federal waters north of the 28 degrees north latitude. The circle hook requirement becomes effective March 3.

Even though the red snapper population is in better condition than previously estimated, the assessment still shows too many red snapper are removed from the population too quickly, with most of the remaining population consisting of smaller, younger fish that produce fewer eggs than older fish. This rule is intended to provide the necessary protection required under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Next week, the South Atlantic Council will review the new assessment and discuss the area closure at its meeting in North Carolina. NOAA's Fisheries Service continues to work with the council to explore alternative management measures for red snapper that may allow some directed red snapper harvest as the stock rebuilds.

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On the Web:

South Atlantic Red Snapper Final Rule and Supporting Documents:

<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/SGAmendment17A.htm>

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