



South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

News Release

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Black Sea Bass Catch Limits Set to More than Double in 2013 *Recovery Highlights Sacrifices and Successes*

Fishermen targeting black sea bass may have a much longer season this year as a recent scientific review shows the stock is rebuilt. The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council has proposed to more than double the current annual catch limit of 847,000 pounds (whole weight) to 1,814,000 pounds. NOAA Fisheries is reviewing this request and expects to publish a proposed rule for public comment this summer. The black sea bass fishery opens for both commercial and recreational fishermen on June 1, 2013 in federal waters from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina southward along the east coast of Florida.

Earlier this month, the Council met during a special session and approved the increase to the overall annual catch limit. The proposed increase is based on the most recent stock assessment update, completed in early 2013 through the Southeast Data, Assessment and Review program. The updated black sea bass stock assessment confirms what fishermen are seeing on the water. The stock is no longer overfished or undergoing overfishing, and is rebuilt.

The increase in the catch limit is proposed through Regulatory Amendment 19 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan and must be approved by the Secretary of Commerce for implementation later this year. The Council is proposing the increase go into effect as soon as possible in order to extend the 2013 fishing season. The current bag limit is 5 fish per person per day with a 13" total length minimum size limit for the recreational fishery. There are no changes proposed to the size and bag limits.

It seems that black sea bass are swimming nearly everywhere these days in the waters along the South Atlantic coast – along rocky outcrops, reefs and ledges, artificial reefs, rock jetties, and even inshore, where fishermen report they've never seen black sea bass before. From the Carolinas to northeast Florida, fishermen are reporting abundant numbers of black sea bass and larger size fish. "We're seeing huge black sea bass," exclaimed Captain Bill Parker, a charter captain from Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. "There are lots of fish on every artificial reef within 10 to 15 miles offshore. It's hard to get a bait down to a grouper without a sea bass taking it, even a live pin fish. I can't wait until June 1st gets here," said Captain Parker.

"The recovery of the black sea bass stock in the South Atlantic has several facets," said David Cupka, Chairman of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. "The Council took action to end overfishing following a 2006 stock assessment, reducing the recreational bag limit, increasing both commercial and recreational size limits, and setting quotas," explained Cupka. "Those measures, coupled with annual catch limits required under the reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Act, led to an early recovery of the stock."

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Black Sea Bass (continued)

“Rebuilding this population has far reaching impacts as black sea bass is one of the most popular recreational and commercial species in the South Atlantic and is of great economic importance in the southeast U.S.” said Roy Crabtree, southeast regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service. “We thank the fishermen and the Council for their commitment and combined efforts leading to more fish and greater fishing opportunities.

A benchmark stock assessment conducted in 2011 showed the stock was improving but still not rebuilt. The 2013 update to the assessment includes two additional years of recent data, showing the stock rebuilt three years ahead of the 10-year rebuilding schedule. “Fishermen have made sacrifices when it comes to black sea bass, including reductions in bag limits, increases in size limits, and shorter and shorter seasons while watching the stock recover,” said Cupka. “The latest stock assessment allowing the Council to propose more than doubling the current annual catch limit is a reflection of those sacrifices. It is a good news story that we are all privileged to share.”

The allocation for black sea bass is divided, with recreational fishermen allocated 57% and commercial fishermen receiving 43% of the total allocation. The fishing year begins June 1st. Recent seasons for the recreational fishery have been limited under the current recreational catch limit as the stock continued to rebuild. The 2011-2012 recreational black sea bass season opened on June 1st and closed October 17, 2011. Last year, the season lasted a little over two months, closing September 4, 2012. The proposed increase to the 2013 recreational catch limit from 409,000 pounds to 1,033,980 pounds may extend the recreational season into December, depending on fishing activity and the level of harvest.

The commercial black sea bass season has lasted less than a full calendar year since 2008. As the stock recovered and the fish became more abundant, a derby fishery developed and the seasons became shorter and shorter. The season that began in June of 2011 lasted less than two months. With the proposed increase in the commercial catch limit from 309,000 pounds to 780,020 pounds the commercial season may extend beyond November 1st.

Over 80% of the commercial catch is harvested using pots, primarily off the coasts of the Carolinas. The Council recently implemented an endorsement program for the commercial pot fishery, strictly limiting the number of participants and pots used by individuals, and requiring pots be brought back to shore after each trip. Regulatory Amendment 19 would prohibit the use of pots to commercially harvest black sea bass from November 1st through April 30th as a precautionary measure to prevent unlikely interactions with large whales during migrations and the right whale calving season. However, commercial fishermen could still use vertical hook and line gear to harvest the commercial catch limit should the season be expanded as anticipated. Having an increase in the catch limit is likely to reduce the derby fishery created by shortened seasons in both commercial and recreational fisheries.

Prized as a food fish due to its firm white flesh and mild flavor, black sea bass is a very important species for both commercial and recreational fishermen. Black sea bass live for as long as 10 years, reach a maximum size of 26 inches and can weigh up to 8 pounds. Black sea bass are related to groupers and similar to groupers change sex from female to male as they grow older and larger. They spawn from February through October. Because they are a relatively short-lived species, the population is able to recover more quickly from a depleted condition.

“The black sea bass closures have been really tough on a lot of businesses, with lost customers and income in the past few years. We need to return the fish to the fishermen,” said Captain Parker. “Slowly but surely this is happening.”

Additional information about Regulatory Amendment 19 and black sea bass is available from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council at www.safmc.net and NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office at http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable_fisheries/s_atl/sg/bsb/index.html.