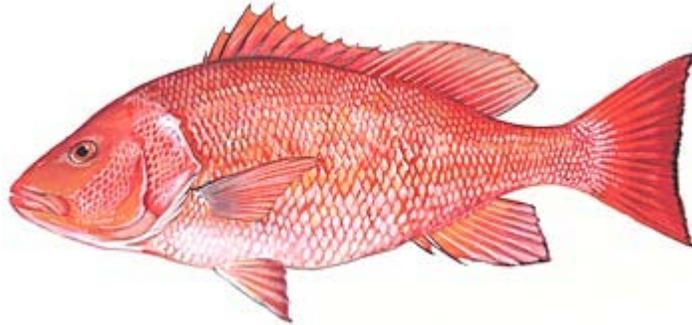


South Atlantic Red Snapper (Amendment 17A)
Frequently Asked Questions
August 2010



GENERAL QUESTIONS:

What is the issue with the South Atlantic red snapper population?

- The most recent stock assessment (2008) indicates the South Atlantic population of red snapper is overfished and is undergoing overfishing.

How do fishery managers determine whether fish populations are undergoing overfishing and/or overfished?

- A fish population is considered to be undergoing overfishing if fish are removed from a population at a faster rate than would produce the maximum amount of fish over time.
- A fish population is considered to be overfished if it declines below a predetermined level called the minimum stock size threshold. These levels are defined differently for each fish population based on life history characteristics and other factors.

What does the law require for fish stocks that are overfished and undergoing overfishing?

- Laws governing federal fisheries of the United States appear in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), which was last reauthorized in 2007.
- The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires fishery managers to end overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks.

What are the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and NOAA Fisheries Service doing to address this issue in the short-term?

- The Council requested NOAA Fisheries Service develop an interim rule that will temporarily prohibit all harvest and possession of red snapper in federal waters of the South Atlantic. The interim rule was implemented January 4, 2010, and has been extended through December 5, 2010.

- Frequently asked questions regarding the interim rule for red snapper are available online at: <https://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>.

What is the Council doing to address this issue in the long-term?

- The Council included permanent measures to end overfishing of red snapper in Amendment 17A to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region. Amendment 17A includes:
 - A rebuilding schedule, or a timeframe within which the stock is expected to be rebuilt;
 - A rebuilding strategy;
 - Annual catch limits and accountability measures as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Act;
 - A total prohibition on harvest and possession of red snapper in federal waters of the South Atlantic. The prohibition on red snapper would also extend into state waters for those vessels associated with federal snapper-grouper permits.
 - An area closure that extends from southern Georgia to Cape Canaveral, Florida where all harvest and possession of snapper-grouper species would be prohibited except when using spearguns or black sea bass pot gear to fish for species other than red snapper;
 - A requirement for the use of non-stainless steel circle hooks north of 28 degrees latitude; and
 - A requirement to monitor the health of the stock and effectiveness of management measures throughout the rebuilding timeframe.
- At their March 2010 meeting, the Council requested a new snapper-grouper amendment (Amendment 22) that would explore alternative management options for red snapper, such as a tagging program.

Why are large area closures being considered?

- Large multispecies closures are being considered because prohibiting harvest of red snapper alone will not end overfishing of this species. Red snapper bycatch mortality is very high and red snapper is often caught and discarded while fishing for other snapper-grouper species.

Where is the preferred area closure located?

- The closed area alternative identified by the Council as preferred at its June 2010 meeting measures an estimated 4,827 square miles and extends from Cape Canaveral, Florida, to southern Georgia.

When will Amendment 17A go into effect?

- Amendment 17A was approved for Secretarial review at the Council’s June 2010, meeting.
- If approved by the Secretary, the amendment and its implementing regulations would be effective in late 2010.

How long would a prohibition on red snapper and/or an area closure for all snapper-grouper fishing last?

- It is the Council's intent to re-open the red snapper fishery and/or the closed area as soon as the science and the law indicate it is possible.
- Over the course of the rebuilding plan, the number of acceptable removals - meaning total fish killed - should increase each year as the stock recovers. At some point, this number will be large enough to support decreasing the size of the area closure or eliminating the area closure and/or reopening the red snapper fishery under an alternative management program.

Who will be affected by red snapper regulations in Amendment 17A?

- Regulations for Amendment 17A would apply to fishermen holding a South Atlantic Unlimited Snapper-Grouper Permit, a South Atlantic 225 lb Trip Limit Snapper-Grouper Permit, a South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Permit for Snapper-Grouper, and private anglers.

SCIENCE/ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS:

How was the most recent assessment conducted for red snapper?

- The 2008 Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) (SEDAR 15) for red snapper, involving three separate workshops and an outside independent review, concluded the stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing. The assessment estimated that red snapper reach a maximum age of 54 years, not 25 years as previously estimated. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee approved the assessment and its conclusions.
- The 2008 stock assessment is available online at: <http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/>.

Where did the data used in the SEDAR stock assessment come from?

- Data used for the assessment consist of commercial landings collected since the 1940s, headboat fishery catch records from the Southeast Headboat Survey since 1972, and recreational catch records from the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS) since 1981. Also included are U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recreational fishery survey data from the 1960s and 1970s. Data through 2006 were included in the assessment.
- Information on size and age is provided by sampling programs that support the catch statistics programs. Information on biological characteristics, such as age, growth, and reproduction, is provided by various research studies.
- Scientists use assessment models that can test the impacts of using different years of data and evaluate assumptions about data reliability and precision. As described in the stock assessment report, they evaluate many different alternatives before deciding on the final configuration.

Why do scientists say red snapper are overfished when I have been seeing many more red snapper in recent years?

- A spike in 2007 and 2008 recreational landings indicates that fishermen are seeing more fish now than in previous years. This spike in landings is likely due to a strong year class that occurred in 2005 or 2006.
- The 2008 stock assessment reflects an increase in abundance since 1995; in fact, abundance estimated for the start of 2007 is nearly twice that estimated for 1995. Strong year classes that occurred in 1998 and 1999 and moved through the fishery over the last several years are also partially responsible for the perception that the stock has improved recently.
- Despite these spikes in harvest, the age structure of the population remains truncated (there are not enough older fish). Red snapper live to 54 years of age, but the assessment indicates that most red snapper are less than 10 years of age.
- NOAA Fisheries Service Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) evaluated several concerns raised by fishermen regarding the assessment and subsequent analyses. The SEFSC concluded that altering model assumptions based on fishermen's concerns would impact the magnitude of required harvest reductions but would not change the assessment conclusions regarding the status of red snapper.
- Although the 2008 stock assessment shows some signs of improvement, overfishing is still occurring and must be addressed within the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

We're also seeing more of the larger fish than we have in the past few years. Aren't these larger fish a sign that the population is healthy?

- For red snapper, larger fish don't always represent older fish. There is a great deal of variability in the age of red snapper at larger sizes. For example, the average size of a 10 year old red snapper is around 32 inches, but 10 year old fish range in size from 27 to 40 inches.
- Age samples from the fishery reveal that most of the fish caught in recent years are younger than age 10.
- Fish are being caught before they become old enough to reach their peak reproductive levels. Although the 20-inch size limit allows some fish to spawn before they become vulnerable to harvest, these younger, mostly first-time spawners are less productive than the older and heavier fish. A 10-year old red snapper may have reached 90–95 percent of its maximum length but only 80 percent of its potential maximum weight.
- Increasing the abundance of older, mature fish is important to long-term sustainability. Increasing the number of mature age classes in the population would allow it to take greater advantage of favorable conditions to produce a large number of recruits (fish that are born within a given year) while also ensuring a buffer to sustain the population during periods of less than optimal conditions for spawning.

When will the next stock assessment update be completed?

- A benchmark stock assessment update for red snapper will be completed in 2010.

Why is a new benchmark assessment being conducted for red snapper?

- Fishermen reports reflect a spike in discarded fish during 2007, and landed fish in 2008 and 2009.
- The SEDAR Steering Committee, which creates the benchmark assessment and assessment update schedule, felt the 2007-2009 increase in landings and discards should be incorporated into a new benchmark assessment for the species.

Will the 2010 assessment mean a delay for Amendment 17A implementation?

- Postponing development of Amendment 17A until after the assessment is completed would substantially delay implementation of measures to end overfishing and rebuild the stock, which are required by law.

What happens if the assessment shows different harvest reductions are needed than indicated by the current assessment?

- NOAA Fisheries Service is committed to work with the Council to respond to the new assessment findings with any needed management adjustments as quickly as possible.

ADMINISTRATIVE/PROCESS QUESTIONS:

When can I comment on issues regarding South Atlantic red snapper?

- A 60-day comment period for Amendment 17A is open from July 29, 2010, to September 27, 2010, and a 45-day comment period on the proposed rule is open from August 13, 2010, through September 27, 2010. You may submit comments by the following methods:
 - **Electronic Submissions:** Federal e-Rulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov> using the following docket ID in the search box: **NOAA-NMFS-2010-0035**. All comments received are part of the public record and will generally be posted to <http://www.regulations.gov> without change. All personal identifying information (for example, name, address, etc.) voluntarily submitted by the commenter may be publicly accessible. Do not submit confidential business information or otherwise sensitive or protected information. NOAA Fisheries Service will accept anonymous comments. Attachments to electronic comments will be accepted in Microsoft Word, Excel, WordPerfect, or Adobe PDF file formats only.
 - **Mail:** Kate Michie
NOAA Fisheries Service
Southeast Regional Office
Sustainable Fisheries Division
263 13th Avenue South
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701-5505
- Any scheduled Council meeting (four are held every year). Comments to be submitted to the Council.
- Fishery bulletins will be sent out to permit holders and other fishery-related entities, and posted on the NOAA Fisheries Service and Council Web sites. The

bulletins will inform constituents of when comment periods are open and how comments may be submitted.

Will my comments be considered by the Council and/or NOAA Fisheries Service?

- All written comments submitted to NOAA Fisheries Service during a formal comment period are considered and responded to by NOAA Fisheries Service, either in the final environmental impact statement or in the final rule. Comments on the same subject are grouped together and addressed with one response; however, each comment is counted individually.
- Comments submitted to the Council are reviewed at their scheduled meetings.

Where can I get more information on red snapper and the most recent version of Amendment 17A?

- More information on red snapper and Amendment 17A may be obtained via the Web at: <http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov> or <http://www.safmc.net>.
- Hardcopies of the most recent version of Amendment 17A and environmental impact statement may be requested from:

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toll free (866) SAFMC-10
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