

AMENDMENT 30B - GROUPER MANAGEMENT

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

September 2008



What is the current status of Gulf of Mexico grouper populations?

- The status of only three grouper species (red grouper, gag, and goliath grouper) is known:
 - Red grouper is near its optimal level, which means the size of the red grouper population is above sustainable levels and the fishery is harvesting red grouper at a rate that will not comprise the fishery's ability to produce the optimal amount of fish over time.
 - Gag is undergoing overfishing, which means the fishery is harvesting gag at a rate that compromises the fishery's ability to produce the maximum amount of fish over time.
 - Goliath grouper is rebuilding.
- The status of the remaining grouper species is unknown.

If gag fishing rates are too high, then why are fishermen reportedly seeing so many gag in the water?

- The peer-reviewed, SEDAR assessment supports the observation that the gag population increased in size from the mid-1990s through 2004. During this time, gag catches also increased, resulting in high fishing mortality rates.
- That assessment attributes this population size increase to higher than average reproduction rates since the early 1990s.
- Current fishing mortality rates and harvest levels can not be sustained if higher than average reproduction rates do not persist over the long term.

What are the main regulatory changes the Gulf Council is proposing to end overfishing of gag and to respond to new information indicating the red grouper population is near the target level?

- Establish a commercial quota and recreational target catch level for gag.
- Allowing each recreational fisherman, except for-hire captain and crew, to retain four grouper per day, two of which could be gag and two of which could be red grouper.
- Extending the recreational seasonal closure from February 1 through March 31 each year. The harvest of all shallow-water groupers would be prohibited during the closure.

- Establishing the Edges 40-fathom contour seasonal-area closure (390 nm²). This area will be closed to all fishing from January 1 through April 30 each year and is intended to protect gag and other groupers during their respective spawning seasons.
- Eliminating the commercial seasonal closure from February 15 to March 15 each year.
- Reducing the commercial minimum size for red grouper from 20 to 18-inches total length to reduce bycatch.
- If federal regulations are more restrictive than state regulations for reef fish, then a person aboard a federally permitted Gulf of Mexico commercial or charter vessel/headboat reef fish vessel will be required to comply with federal regulations for these species regardless of where the fish are harvested.

What other measures is the Gulf Council proposing to manage grouper populations?

- Specifying an interim commercial/recreational allocation of gag and red grouper based on the average landings of each sector from 1986 through 2005.
- Using trip limits to delay the commercial sector from reaching its quota once a discard allowance trigger is met.
- Maintain the Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps marine reserves indefinitely.
- Establishing annual catch limits (ACLs) and accountability measures (AMs) for the commercial and recreational shallow-water grouper fisheries.

What is the status of these potential regulatory changes?

- The Gulf Council approved the final proposed regulatory changes at its August 2008 meeting.
- The Gulf Council has submitted the proposed regulatory measures to the Secretary of Commerce for review. The public will have additional opportunities to comment on the proposal and implementing regulations during the Secretarial review process. These regulations are expected to be implemented during the first-half of 2009.

Why is NOAA Fisheries Service developing an interim rule and what measures are included in the interim rule?

- Proposed regulatory measures for grouper discussed above and included in Amendment 30B will not likely be implemented until after January 1, 2009. Therefore, an interim rule is needed to end gag overfishing immediately in the 2009 fishing year.
- Measures in the interim rule include:
 - Establish a 2 gag recreational bag limit (recreational grouper aggregate bag limit will remain at 5 fish).
 - Adjust recreational closed season for gag to February 1 through March 31.

NOTE: the recreational and commercial closed season for red and black groupers will remain February 15 to March 15.

- Establish a 1.32 million pounds (MP) gutted weight commercial quota for gag (there was no quota before this).
- If federal regulations are more restrictive than state regulations for red snapper, greater amberjack, gray triggerfish, or gag, then a person aboard a federally permitted Gulf of Mexico commercial or charter reef fish vessel will be required to comply with federal regulations for these species regardless of where the fish are harvested.

What are annual catch limits (ACLs) and accountability measures (AMs)?

- ACLs and AMs are required by the reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.
- ACLs are catch levels intended to reduce the likelihood of overfishing. If ACLs are met or exceeded, AMs are triggered.
- AMs are intended to prevent ACLs from being exceeded, and correct or mitigate overages in landings if they occur.

What are the ACLs for gag, red grouper and SWG?

- For gag:
 - Commercial ACLs are 1.66 MP in 2009, 1.71 MP in 2010, and 1.76 MP for 2011 and subsequent years
 - Recreational ACLs are 2.59 MP in 2009, 2.64 MP in 2010, and 2.67 MP in 2011 and subsequent fishing years
- For red grouper, the commercial ACL is 5.87 MP and the recreational ACL is 1.85 MP
- For SWG, there are only commercial ACLs of 7.48 MP in 2009, 7.57 MP in 2010, and 7.65 MP for 2011 and thereafter

What are the proposed AMs for the SWG fishery?

- The AMs for the commercial fishery are:
 - If either the gag, red grouper, or SWG quotas are reached, or projected to be reached, the entire SWG fishery will be closed the remainder of the year.
 - If the gag, red grouper, or SWG landings exceed the applicable ACLs for these species despite a commercial quota closure, then the commercial quota for gag, red grouper, or SWG in the following year would be maintained at the prior year's quota.
- For the recreational fishery, the AMs are:
 - If either gag or red grouper recreational landings exceed the ACL, then the target catch level in the following year will be maintained at the prior year's target catch level.
 - The length of the SWG fishing season will be reduced in the following year by the amount necessary to ensure the gag or red grouper target catch level are not exceeded.