

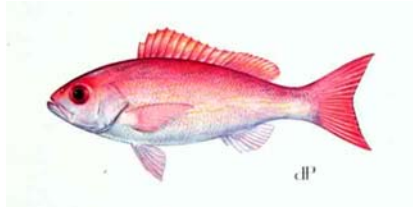
Snapper and Grouper Management in South Atlantic Federal Waters

Amendment 16 and the Interim Rule

Vermillion Snapper, Gag, Black Grouper, and Red Grouper

Frequently Asked Questions

October 2008



Amendment 16 – Long-term Management Measures

Why are additional management measures being proposed for vermilion snapper, gag, black grouper, and red grouper in the South Atlantic?

- Vermillion snapper, gag, black grouper, and red grouper are undergoing overfishing. Overfishing means that fish are being harvested from a particular stock at too high of a rate.
- Thus, a reduction in harvest from the commercial and recreational sectors is needed to end overfishing for these species.

What is Amendment 16 to the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Fishery?

- The amendment identifies the preferred management measures identified by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) as the measures needed to address overfishing in vermilion snapper, gag, red grouper, and black grouper.
- The Council approved Amendment 16 during its meeting in Charleston, SC the week of September 15, 2008, and submitted the amendment to NOAA Fisheries Service for review.

Why include management measures for all the shallow water grouper species rather than just gag?

- Red grouper and black grouper are also experiencing overfishing and the overfishing status of rock hind, red hind, coney, graysby, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, and tiger grouper is unknown.
- Therefore, the intent of Amendment 16 is to improve the status of all shallow-water grouper species, some of which are taken incidentally when targeting gag and vermilion snapper.

What species are included in the South Atlantic shallow-water grouper complex?

- Black grouper, red grouper scamp, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, tiger grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney.

What would Amendment 16 do if approved by NOAA Fisheries Service?

This amendment would:

- Implement measures to address overfishing of gag, vermilion snapper, red grouper, and black grouper;
- Allow the Regional Administrator to adjust management measures pending the outcome of a new benchmark stock assessment for vermilion snapper;
- Specify the total allowable catch and define interim allocations for gag and vermilion snapper;
- Update management reference points for gag and vermilion snapper; and
- Reduce bycatch of snapper grouper species by requiring the use of venting tools and de-hooking devices (as needed) for a person on board a vessel to fish for snapper-grouper species in the South Atlantic EEZ.

What is the reduction in harvest being proposed for gag?

- The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommended that the reduction in harvest be set at a lower level than what would simply end overfishing. The recommendation will increase the probability that overfishing does not occur, which is mandated by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act of 2006 (Magnuson-Stevens Reauthorization Act).
- Thus, the recommendation represents a 35% reduction in the average commercial and recreational landings from 2004-2006.

Why is a four-month commercial and recreational closure being proposed for gag and the shallow-water grouper species?

- Gag and other shallow-water grouper species are vulnerable to overfishing because they change sex, many are long lived, and some species (e.g. gag, black grouper, scamp, red hind, and tiger grouper) are known to form spawning aggregations at locations known to fishermen.
- Therefore, extending the spawning season closure for just gag and black grouper to other shallow water groupers could have positive biological effects including protecting spawning aggregations, increasing the percentage of males, enhancing reproductive success, and increasing the magnitude of recruitment.
- Gag and other shallow-water grouper species (black grouper, red grouper, scamp, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, tiger grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney) spawn during January-April.

What is the Council's preferred allocation alternative for gag and what is the rationale for setting it at this level?

- The Council's preferred alternative would allocate 51% of the total allowable catch to the commercial sector and 49% to the recreational sector.
- This is based on landings data from 1999-2003 and is closest to the September 2007 Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel's (AP) recommendation for a 50/50 allocation.
- The AP examined the allocation tables and noted the distribution of catch was about 50/50 in recent years and they felt this was fair among the two sectors.

Why are management measures for vermilion snapper included in Amendment 16 when the new benchmark stock assessment has not been completed?

- The Council was notified in June 2007 that vermilion snapper is experiencing overfishing; therefore, the Council is legally obligated to develop a plan to end overfishing within one year.
- Since efforts to reassess vermilion snapper are proceeding, NOAA Fisheries Service would have the opportunity to review the new assessment results prior to implementing any vermilion snapper regulations proposed by the Council to address the June 2007 overfishing notification.
- In order to proceed with an amendment, while recognizing the new assessment may alter the type of actions required to end overfishing, the Council has developed scenarios that would allow the NOAA Fisheries Service Regional Administrator to alter current management measures, as per the Council's instruction outlined in this amendment, if the assessment results require a harvest reduction different from that proposed in Amendment 16.
- The assessment is ongoing; the review workshop will be conducted in October 2008 and the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee will review the assessment in December 2008.

What is the preferred allocation alternative for vermilion snapper and what is the rationale for setting it at this level?

- The Council's preferred alternative would allocate 68% of the total allowable catch to the commercial sector and 32% to the recreational sector.
- The Council examined the complete time series for landings data and noticed little fluctuation in the commercial and recreational landings over time. The proposed allocation reflects this continuous landings trend.

The Interim Rule – Short Term Measures

Is it true that some South Atlantic grouper regulations may change as early as January 1, 2009?

- Yes, the Council asked NOAA Fisheries Service to draft and implement an interim rule (short term measures) to address overfishing in gag, black grouper, and red grouper as quickly as possible.
- The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council was notified gag is experiencing overfishing in June 2007.
- The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act requires the Council to prepare a plan amendment or proposed regulations to end overfishing within one year of notification of an overfishing determination.
- Therefore, the interim rule allows some of the management measures from Amendment 16 to be put into place to reduce fishing pressure in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Act while Amendment 16 is being finalized.

What will the interim rule include?

- The measures proposed in the interim rule are based on those recommended by the Council in Amendment 16. These interim rule measures would:
 1. Prohibit recreational and commercial harvest or possession of gag, black grouper, and red grouper during January-April 2009;
 2. Establish an annual 352,940 lb gutted weight commercial quota for gag;
 3. Prohibit the commercial harvest of gag, black grouper, and red grouper if the gag quota is met;
 4. Reduce the recreational bag limit from 2 gag or black grouper (combined) to 1 gag or black grouper (combined) within the existing 5-grouper aggregate bag limit;
 5. Reduce the bag limit for red grouper to a maximum of 3 fish within the existing 5-grouper aggregate bag limit.
 6. The provisions of the interim rule with respect to federally permitted vessels for South Atlantic snapper grouper would apply regardless of where the fish are harvested (e.g., in state or federal waters).

Why was the January-April 2009 time period chosen for the seasonal closure?

- This time period was chosen for the seasonal closure because it is when many of the shallow-water grouper species (including gag) spawn. So, the closure protects spawning stocks.

How long will the interim rule be in effect?

- The interim rule will be effective for 180-days.
- If the final rule for Amendment 16 is not published by the end of that timeframe, NOAA Fisheries Service can extend the interim rule an additional 186-days.

Why is red snapper not included in either the interim rule or Amendment 16?

- The Council considered the possibility of including red snapper in the interim rule; however, an addendum to the red snapper assessment has just been completed.
- Once these new data are analyzed, the Council will discuss management measures needed to end overfishing at their December 2008 meeting.
- Management measures for red snapper will be included in Amendment 17.

Will there be additional opportunities to comment on Amendment 16?

- Yes, the public will have the opportunity to comment on Amendment 16 and the associated Environmental Impact Statement.
- The public will be informed about these comment periods through a Fishery Bulletin and information on our Web site.

Where can I find a copy of Amendment 16?

- The most recent draft of Amendment 16 can be found on the Council's Web site at <http://www.safmc.net/Library/SnapperGrouper/tabid/415/Default.aspx>