

Framing the Red Snapper Issue in the Gulf of Mexico

Although red snapper are recovering quickly in the Gulf of Mexico, the recreational fishing season has grown shorter. In the story below, NOAA Fisheries explains the challenges of managing a recovering fishery.

There are more red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico today than there have been in decades, and that's good news for a lot of people. This progress is thanks to rebuilding measures that began in 2007 and to the fishermen who have endured lower catch limits. Catch limits are almost back to where they were before the plan started and are on track to rise well beyond that level.

But while a growing red snapper population is good news for many people, it has unexpectedly—and somewhat counter intuitively—cost the charter boat industry and private anglers by reducing their opportunity to fish. That's because the recreational fishing season is getting progressively shorter even as the red snapper population grows. The 2013 federal season is estimated to be the shortest ever at 28 days if all states including Texas were to implement compatible regulations. The federal season will be even shorter if Texas, Louisiana, and Florida finalize their current proposed, less restrictive regulations.

But the Recreational Fishing Season is Shorter?

Why are fishing regulations becoming more and more restrictive even as the red snapper population increases? Because more fish means people are catching them faster. Today, recreational fishermen land fish at three times the rate they did in 2007—an estimated 18,000 fish per day now as compared to 6,000 fish per day before. At the same time, the fish are getting bigger. On average, each one weighs twice as much as before.

Overall, for each day of the season, recreational fishermen land six times as many pounds of red snapper as they did before the population began to recover. So while the fish population is growing rapidly, the rate of catch is growing more rapidly. At this point, even though NOAA Fisheries has been able to raise the catch limit each year since 2010, we've had to progressively shorten the recreational season to stay within the increasing quotas.

While the fish are growing in numbers and size, a healthy population also requires an appropriate mix of fish of different ages. Red snapper is a species with a long life-span—they can reach over fifty years of age—and older red snapper females are the biggest egg producers. Since catch limits were reduced six years ago, none of the resulting young fish have yet reached their peak productive years. Continued restrictions are designed not only to increase abundance, but also to allow females to come of age. That's the most effective way to achieve the still higher yields expected in the future.

Catch Limits Are Up

Before we reduced catch levels in 2007 to allow for rebuilding, the combined commercial and recreational catch limit for red snapper was 9.12 million pounds, and the recreational red snapper season lasted for more than six months. But at that level, catch rates remained too high, which

resulted in a depleted population. The rebuilding plan was designed to end overfishing of red snapper and ensure long-term harvest opportunities.

The total catch limit for both commercial and recreational sectors combined was reduced to 5 million pounds in 2008 and 2009, but since then, the limits have risen steadily as the stock rebuilds. In 2013, the combined catch limit will be set, according to current projections, at 8.46 million pounds—almost back to where it was before the rebuilding plan started, with further increase possible later this year when a new stock assessment is completed. The current assessment projects the catch limit will continue increasing until it reaches 14 million pounds when the stock is fully rebuilt, which is expected to happen in 2032.

Inequities among States Make Short Season Even Shorter for Some

Texas and Louisiana have indicated they do not intend to adopt compatible regulations in state waters for the 2013 fishing season. And Florida recently proposed to provide a lengthier season in Florida state waters, with a final decision pending in April.

Historically, NOAA Fisheries shortens the federal season off all states by the same amount to correct for any additional harvest resulting from inconsistent state regulations regardless of where they are adopted. But this year, to ensure fair treatment of all Gulf fishermen, the Council asked us to implement an emergency rule that would enable us to shorten the federal season off only those states that adopt less restrictive regulations in state waters.

If Texas, Louisiana and Florida finalize their proposed regulations, then the emergency rule the Gulf Council requested would authorize us to provide a 28-day season in federal waters off Alabama and Mississippi, compared to 21 days in federal waters off Florida, 12 days in federal waters off Texas, and nine days in federal waters off Louisiana.

Without an emergency rule, the federal season would be just 22 days Gulf-wide, reducing fishing opportunities for those fishing in federal waters off Alabama and Mississippi by 20 percent (from 28 days to 22 days) because of actions taken by other states....

Other Options for the Future

So how do we improve the situation for charter boats and private anglers who sacrificed so much to support this recovery? During a recent Gulf Council meeting in Mobile, Alabama, state and federal fishery managers discussed options for extending the 2013 recreational fishing season. Those included reducing the daily bag limit from two fish per person per day to one fish per person per day and allocating a higher proportion of future catch limit increases to the recreational sector as the population continues to grow. Lowering the bag limit would provide as many as 45 days of fishing if all the states chose to implement consistent regulations. At that meeting, the Council voted to maintain the two fish bag limit, although there was mixed support for that decision. The Council also deferred any discussion of modifying catch allocations between the commercial and recreational sectors until the new red snapper assessment is completed in June.

The Gulf Council has also discussed several long-term options, focusing mostly on a regional management strategy, which would allocate the recreational catch limit among the states, then

authorize each state to set their own bag limits and determine when fishing could occur. Other options being discussed include a days-at-sea program for the for-hire sector, intersector trading and a fish tag program. A days-at-sea program would allow those participating in the program a certain number of days to fish per year that they would choose. Intersector trading would allow charter boat permit holders and potentially private anglers to trade quota with commercial red snapper fishermen in order to increase the amount of fish available to the recreational sector. A tagging program might be like those used for hunting and would limit the amount of fish harvested while providing recreational fishermen greater flexibility in when fish could be caught.

The council process is designed to allow the public to participate, engage regional stakeholders and promote state and federal cooperation on fishery issues. It is critical that all parties work together to find a way forward in the cooperative spirit that the council process promotes.