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**NOAA Establishes Annual Catch Limits for Some South Atlantic Snappers and Groupers**  
*New Rule Includes Prohibition on Deepwater Harvest of Select Species*

NOAA's Fisheries Service today announced a final rule establishing annual catch limits designed to prevent excessive fishing pressure on nine species of snappers and groupers. The rule becomes effective on January 31, 2011 and applies to federal waters off North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida's Atlantic coast.

The rule also prohibits the harvest of six deepwater snapper and grouper species in depths beyond 240 feet, and reduces the recreational bag limit of snowy grouper to one fish per vessel per day.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council recommended these actions to the fisheries service earlier this year.

"I'd like to commend the council for their hard work on this action," said Roy Crabtree, southeast regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries Service. "The goal of these catch limits is to sustain these stocks and promote productive fisheries."

Annual catch limits, which are harvest levels designed to prevent fish from being removed from the population at too fast of a rate, are required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The limits vary by fishing sector, species, or groups of fish. If annual catch limits are met or exceeded, corrective actions such as a seasonal or quota closure will be implemented.

Specifically, this rule establishes commercial and recreational annual catch limits for gag grouper, red grouper, black sea bass, vermilion snapper, snowy grouper, speckled hind, warsaw grouper, golden tilefish, and black grouper.

Under these new annual catch limits, each of these species will continue to have some level of allowable commercial and recreational harvest, except for speckled hind and warsaw grouper. The annual catch limits for speckled hind and warsaw grouper will be set to zero, meaning there will be a harvest prohibition on these two species in South Atlantic federal waters when this rule goes into effect.

Additionally, to further protect speckled hind and warsaw grouper, the rule also prohibits the deepwater harvest of snowy grouper, blueline tilefish, yellowedge grouper, misty grouper, queen snapper, and silk snapper in depths beyond 240 feet. Speckled hind and warsaw grouper can be caught as bycatch when fishermen are targeting these other deepwater species, and typically do not survive being reeled up from such great depths.

The South Atlantic Council will re-address the deepwater prohibition at future meetings to determine if there are more effective measures to reduce bycatch of speckled hind and warsaw grouper that would further minimize the impact to other fisheries.

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