



South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

News Release

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Red Snapper Moratorium to Remain but Managers Find Large Area Closure Unnecessary

Members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, meeting in New Bern, NC this week, concluded that a 4,800-square mile area closure off the coast of southern Georgia and north/central Florida where the harvest of snapper grouper species would be prohibited is unnecessary. The area closure, included in Amendment 17A to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan, was initially proposed by the Council to further reduce the fishing mortality of red snapper by restricting fishing for 73 species of snappers, groupers, grunts, triggerfish, and other species in the snapper grouper management complex that commonly co-occur with red snapper.

Management measures in Amendment 17A are designed to end overfishing of red snapper as mandated by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Measures in the amendment approved by the Secretary of Commerce on December 3, 2010, continue a moratorium on the harvest of red snapper for both commercial and recreational fishermen in federal waters (ranging from 3 to 200 miles) throughout the South Atlantic region.

Regulations in Amendment 17A implementing the area closure were delayed by NOAA Fisheries Service, giving the Council time to review information from a new red snapper stock assessment completed in October 2010. In anticipation of the new stock assessment, the Council had requested staff begin to develop Regulatory Amendment 10 to look at options for modifying the area closure if necessary. Regulatory Amendment 10 includes various alternatives, which the Council considered, including an alternative to eliminate the area closure.

After reviewing the alternatives in Regulatory Amendment 10 and the latest scientific information, and considering public comment received at the meeting, the Council voted to approve the alternative in the regulatory amendment that will eliminate the area closure. The unanimous decision was made after considering recent data relative to the updated stock assessment for red snapper and other factors influencing the harvest of red snapper.

“The Council considered a number of factors before deciding to eliminate the area closure off southern Georgia and the north/central coast of Florida,” said Council Chairman David Cupka. “We considered the reductions required by the new stock assessment, the impacts of the current prohibition on red snapper, the reduction in fishing trips as documented by the most recent recreational data, comments received from hundreds of fishermen regarding the larger numbers of red snapper available and the effects of the downturn in the economy that have negatively impacted fishing activities.”

(Continued)

Red Snapper (Continued)

According to the recent stock assessment, a 70% reduction in fishing mortality (including dead discards) is required to end overfishing for red snapper. Initial analyses incorporating effort reductions from recent regulations suggested the moratorium on fishing for red snapper was not adequate to end overfishing. However, reductions in effort are possibly greater than expected from regulatory impacts alone and the decline in recreational red snapper mortality under the moratorium during 2010 may be greater than initially estimated. For example, the most recent preliminary data from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) for the private and charter sectors, including January through August 2010, show a 33% decline in fishing trips in the South Atlantic region compared to 2007-2009 and about an 80% decline in red snapper mortality. This reduction in fishing effort is consistent with fishermen's reports and possibly reflects the current economic downturn, while the decline in mortality may reflect fishermen's efforts to avoid red snapper. Incorporating the mortality reductions observed in the 2010 preliminary MRIP data suggested the current moratorium could provide as much as a 77% reduction in total mortality.

“The Council will continue to closely monitor the Fishery Independent Sampling Program now in place for red snapper to follow the results of the continued moratorium on the harvest of red snapper,” explained Chairman Cupka. “We are hopeful that the stock assessment scheduled for 2013 will show a marked improvement in the red snapper stock and managers will be able to allow some harvest as the stock continues to rebuild.”

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.