South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

News Release

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Council Approves Amendment 15B to End Sale of Bag-Limit Caught Snapper Grouper

Interim rule will be considered to close the red snapper fishery, address overfishing for other species

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council gave final approval to Amendment15B to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan during its meeting in Orlando, Florida this past week. The amendment includes a management measure that will require a federal Snapper Grouper Commercial Permit in order to sell or purchase any species in the snapper grouper management complex. Currently, fishermen may sell fish caught under the bag-limit without the federal permit if they have the proper state commercial permits. The sale of bag limit species counts against current federal commercial quotas. The Council initially delayed final decision on Amendment 15B at its March meeting, citing the addition of available economic data regarding bag-limit sales and concerns from fishermen. The decision to move forward with approval of the amendment came after reviewing public comment received on a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) to address the economic impacts of bag-limit sales, and public comment received at last week's meeting.

"It was never the Council's intent for a fishery to develop based on the sale of bag-limit caught snapper grouper species," stated Council Chairman George Geiger. "Allowing such sales has created incentives for crew on charter and headboat vessels to fish for species they and their customers may not otherwise target, and to sell multiple bag limits. The sale of these species is counted against existing quotas for the federally permitted commercial fishery," noted Chairman Geiger. "These commercial quotas have been, and in some cases will continue to be, reduced along with recreational catches as the Council moves to end overfishing for species such as gag grouper and vermilion snapper." The Council noted that the federal permit requirement will simplify regulations and enhance law enforcement efforts. Amendment 15B also contains management measures to define allocations for snowy grouper and red porgy, monitor and assess bycatch, modify permit renewal and transferability requirements, and other actions. The amendment will be submitted to the Secretary of Commerce for review later this month.

In a separate move, the Council delayed final approval of Amendment 16 to the Snapper Grouper FMP to address overfishing for gag grouper and vermilion snapper. The delay came in order to incorporate additional management measures recommended by the Council's Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel and supported during public comment. The additional alternatives include provisions for a commercial trip limit for both gag grouper and vermilion snapper, a May 1 fishing year start date, additional options for spawning season closures for both commercial and recreational fisheries, and an alternative to allow separate provisions for seasonal closures in the Florida Keys (south of the Miami-Dade/Monroe County line). In addition, the Council removed a provision requiring the use of circle hooks in the snapper grouper fishery. The new alternatives will be included in the updated amendment and analyzed before the Council's September 15-19, 2008 meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. The Council will review all alternatives and is scheduled to approve Amendment 16 in September.

In order to expedite management measures to end overfishing for gag grouper, vermilion snapper, and red snapper, as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Reauthorization Act, the Council has requested that NOAA Fisheries draft an interim rule to close the harvest of red snapper by both commercial and recreational fishermen and implement reductions in fishing mortality as specified in the preferred alternatives

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outlined in Amendment 16 for gag grouper, vermilion snapper, black grouper, and red grouper. A recent stock assessment for red snapper was reviewed by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee, and the SSC concurred that overfishing is occurring at a very high rate and the biomass is at a "critically" low level.

Public comments received by both recreational and commercial fishermen provided consistent reports of an abundance of red snapper and catches of larger fish, especially off the coasts of northern Florida and Georgia. Dr. Luiz Barbieri, Vice Chairman of the SSC, acknowledged the public comments during the SSC's report to the Council and said the incidence of more and larger fish may be attributed to two strong year classes of red snapper that occurred in the mid-1990s. However, he explained that there is little evidence to show "that there is anything following these strong year classes", and the SSC was confident in the stock assessment results for red snapper.

An interim rule can only be used to address species undergoing overfishing. Black grouper and red grouper are also experiencing overfishing and are included in the interim rule because the species are similarly targeted with gag grouper. The draft language for the interim rule will be reviewed by the Council during its September meeting, and if approved, the interim rule will put management measures in place by January 2009. Under an interim rule, the measures will be effective for 180 days and may be renewed for an additional 186 days if necessary. The Council will include permanent measures in Amendment 16 to be finalized at the September 2008 meeting. Management measures in Amendment 16 will be implemented later in 2009. Meanwhile, the Council will continue to develop Amendment 17 to address Annual Catch Limits by 2010 for the 10 snapper grouper species undergoing overfishing. The ACLs apply to both commercial and recreational fisheries and include Accountability Measures (AMs) for ensuring that the catch limits are not exceeded. Public hearings for Amendment 17 are currently scheduled to take place in early 2009.

The next meeting of the Council is scheduled for September 15-19, 2008 in Charleston, South Carolina. For additional information regarding Council meetings, including briefing book materials, committee reports, and summary motions from the June 2008 meeting, visit www.safmc.net or contact the Council office.

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.