South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

News Release

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Council Moves Forward to End Overfishing of Snapper Grouper Species

Management options for vermilion snapper and gag grouper will go to public hearings in May

During its March meeting in Jekyll Island, Georgia, members of the South Atlantic Council continued to fine tune a list of fishery management alternatives required to reduce harvest and end overfishing for vermilion snapper and gag grouper, two economically important species in the snapper grouper management complex. Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act, the Council must end overfishing within a one year period once overfishing is identified. Stock assessment results for gag and vermilion snapper were received in June 2007, prompting the development of Amendment 16 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (FMP). The Council considered public input received on management alternatives proposed in Amendment 16 during public scoping earlier this year.

Management alternatives under consideration in Amendment 16 include: (1) a gag spawning closure January – April that applies to both recreational and commercial sectors. This includes all shallow water groupers (black grouper, red grouper, scamp, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, tiger grouper, yellowfin grouper, grasby, and coney); (2) a gag commercial quota, that when reached, would prohibit the harvest and possession of gag and all other shallow water groupers: (3) two separate quotas for gag (one for the Carolinas and another for Georgia and Florida); and (4) modifications to the gag and black grouper aggregate bag limit. Management measures for vermilion snapper include seasonal closures, two commercial quotas occurring at different times of the year, and adjustments to the size and bag limits. Additional alternatives being considered include exclusion of the captain and crew on for-hire vessels from possession of the bag limit for shallow water groupers and vermilion snapper, a requirement for vessels to carry dehooking and venting tools, and the use of circle hooks. Alternatives for interim commercial and recreational allocations are also included in the document. The Council chose their preferred alternatives to take to public hearings in early May. To obtain a copy of the public hearing document, contact the Council office.

The Council moved forward with developing management alternatives in Amendment 17 to the Snapper Grouper FMP after considering comments received during public scoping. As outlined in the Magnuson-Stevens Reauthorization Act, the Council must establish Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) for the ten snapper grouper species experiencing overfishing, which must be implemented beginning in 2010. The ACLs apply to both commercial and recreational fisheries and include Accountability Measures (AMs) for ensuring that the catch limits are not exceeded. Amendment 17 establishes ACLs, AMs, alternatives to reduce bycatch, and other measures to protect snapper grouper stocks. Public hearings for Amendment 17 are currently scheduled for October 2008.

The Council will have to address overfishing for red snapper as well, based on reports from the recent stock assessment. As a result, the Council removed red snapper as a species for consideration in Amendment 17 and will address management measures necessary to end overfishing in a separate amendment. The Council will solicit public comment on management options for red snapper during public scoping to be held in conjunction with public hearings for Amendment 16 in May.

Other Actions

The Council delayed taking final action on Snapper Grouper Amendment 15B until the Council's June 2008 meeting. The amendment includes measures to prohibit the sale of fish caught under the recreational bag limit. The decision came after reviewing comments received from fishermen and in light of new economic data on the

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magnitude of bag-limit sales in North Carolina by non-federally permitted fishermen fishing legally with a state commercial license. Similar data for South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida is also being compiled. A Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) will be completed to incorporate this new economic data analysis and will include a 45 day comment period between now and the Council's June 8-13 meeting in Orlando, Florida. The Council's preferred management alternative would prohibit the sale of bag-limit caught fish. The non-federally permitted sale of bag-limit snapper grouper species counts against shrinking commercial quotas.

The Council chose to continue education and outreach efforts regarding Limited Access Privilege (LAP) Programs for the commercial snapper grouper fishery and explore options for implementing a program for the golden tilefish fishery. The decision came after hearing a report from its Limited Access Privilege (LAP) Program Exploratory Workgroup and reviewing input received during public scoping meetings.

The Council also approved the Fishery Ecosystem Plan and Comprehensive Amendment for public hearings. The Comprehensive Amendment would establish deepwater coral areas as Habitat Areas of Particular Concern, thus providing protection for these unique and valuable marine ecosystems.

Through a series of public meetings, the Council will conduct public hearings for Snapper Grouper Amendment 16 and the Fishery Ecosystem Plan and Comprehensive Amendment. Public scoping will also be conducted for management measures to address ovefishing of red snapper. The meetings will be held May 7th in Homestead, FL; May 9th in Port Canaveral, FL; May 12th in Brunswick, GA; May 13th in N. Charleston, SC and May 15th in New Bern, NC. Additional information regarding the meetings will be publicized as it becomes available.

The next meeting of the Council is scheduled for June 8-13, 2008 in Orlando, FL. For additional information regarding Council meetings, including briefing book materials and a summary of the motions from the March 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.