South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

News Release

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Council Proposes Reduction in Black Sea Bass Limits

Bag limit reductions aimed at maintaining year-long recreational fishing season

In an effort to keep recreational fishermen from exceeding annual catch limits (ACLs) set for black sea bass in the coming fishing year, members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council approved an amendment that, if approved by the Secretary of Commerce, will reduce the recreational bag limit for black sea bass from 15 per person/day to 5 per person/day beginning June 1, 2011. The recreational fishery for black sea bass closed on February 12th of this year after NOAA Fisheries Service projected the recreational allocation of 409,000 pounds had been met. The fishing year for black sea bass in the South Atlantic region is from June 1st through May 31st. The recreational allocation includes both private anglers and for-hire (charter and headboat) landings and represents 57% of the total ACL.

The Council approved Regulatory Amendment 9 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan during its meeting last week in St. Simons Island, GA. In addition to decreasing the bag limit for black sea bass, the amendment also allows that in the future, any unused portion of the commercial ACL may be carried over from one half of the fishing season to the next (the commercial quota is divided into two seasons). However, under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, for stocks listed as overfished, any *overages* of the current ACL, both commercial and recreational, must be deducted from the next fishing year's ACL. The black sea bass stock is currently listed as overfished and recreational anglers may have exceeded the ACL this past season. NOAA Fisheries Service is responsible for providing the final catch numbers and will do so prior to June 1st.

A new benchmark stock assessment for black sea bass will be completed later this year and the results presented to the Council during its December 5-9, 2011 meeting in Raleigh, NC. The stock is currently in year 5 of a 10 year rebuilding program, and the Council may develop additional management measures based on the updated stock assessment. Fishermen have repeatedly provided comments to the Council regarding the negative economic impacts of the recreational closure that began in February. Charter and headboat operators rely on black sea bass for their fishing trips during the shallow-water grouper spawning season closure from January through April, an annual recreational vermilion snapper closed season November through March, and the current year-round prohibition on the harvest of red snapper for both commercial and recreational fishermen. Approximately 65 fishermen attended the public comment period held during last week's meeting.

In addition to measures affecting black sea bass, Regulatory Amendment 9 would also create commercial trip limits of 1500 pounds gutted weight (gw) for vermilion snapper and 1000 pounds (gw) for gag, both measures designed to help extend the fishing season. The proposed trip limit for greater amberjack would increase slightly from 1,000 to 1,200 pounds (gw).

The Council's intent is to have the amendment approved by the Secretary of Commerce in time to implement the management measures, including the bag limit reductions for black sea bass, by June 1, 2011.

Other Actions:

The Council reviewed public comments received regarding development of the Comprehensive ACL Amendment and continued to choose preferred management measures. The amendment sets ACLs and accountability measures for snapper grouper species not listed as overfished and undergoing overfishing,

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as well as dolphin (fish) and wahoo. Preferred measures for wahoo would keep the current management measures in place. Measures for dolphin would keep current recreational bag limits, prohibit bag limit sales by the for-hire sector (bag limit sale is currently prohibited by private anglers), and establish a 20" size limit off the coast of SC. The Council is scheduled to approve the amendment during its June 2011 meeting for review by the Secretary of Commerce.

The Council also reviewed public comments relative to the use of catch shares in commercial fisheries and approved a motion to terminate all work relative to catch share development as currently outlined in draft Amendment 21 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (excluding catch share development for the golden crab and wreckfish fisheries).

Work continues on the development of an amendment to consider options for addressing overfishing of speckled hind and warsaw grouper. Recent regulations restrict fishing for or retention of deepwater species (snowy grouper, blueline tilefish, yellowedge grouper, misty grouper, queen snapper, and silk snapper) in waters greater than 240 feet deep. The intent is to eliminate bycatch mortality when speckled hind and warsaw grouper are caught while fishermen are targeting other deepwater species. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee will review the draft amendment when it meets April 5-7, 2010 and the Council will review the SSC recommendations during its June meeting in Key West, FL.

The Council approved Amendment 18 to the Coastal Migratory Pelagics Fishery Management Plan for public hearings. The amendment establishes ACLs and accountability measures for king mackerel, Spanish mackerel and cobia. Public hearings are scheduled for April 2011. Details regarding the hearings, including the Amendment 18 Public Hearing Document, will be posted on the Council's website at www.safmc.net as they become available.

The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council is scheduled for June 12-17, 2011 in Key West, FL. Details, including the meeting agenda and briefing book materials will be posted as they become available at www.safmc.net.

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.