

GAG AND RED GROUPEL MANAGEMENT MEASURES FOR GULF OF MEXICO FEDERAL WATERS

Proposed Rules to Temporarily Change Red Grouper and Gag Regulations for 2011

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

October 2010



What is the status of gag and red grouper populations?

- Updated population assessments for gag and red grouper were completed in 2009
- Both update assessments indicated the stock sizes have declined since 2005
- A large part of the declines were attributed to an episodic mortality event in 2005 (most likely associated with red tide) that resulted in a little over 20 percent of the red grouper stock and 18 percent of the gag stock being killed, in addition to fish dying from normal natural and fishing mortalities
- The decline for red grouper was not severe enough for the stock to be considered overfished (population abundance is too low)
- The decline in the gag populations was severe enough for the stock to be considered overfished, and because current fishing rates will not allow the stock to recover quickly enough, gag are also considered to be undergoing overfishing (rate of removal is too high)

Why is a rebuilding plan required for gag?

- The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires fishery managers to establish a schedule and strategy to rebuild overfished populations
- A rebuilding plan is a strategy used to manage harvest over a specified time period so that an “overfished” stock can increase in size to a legally mandated target level
- The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) is developing a rebuilding plan for gag in Amendment 32 to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan

What red grouper regulations are proposed to be changed for 2011?

- The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended the total allowable catch (commercial catch and recreational catch), or the maximum amount of fish that can be safely harvested while minimizing the risk overfishing could occur, be adjusted from the existing 7.57 million pounds to 5.68 million pounds
- Based on the 76:24 ratio for the commercial and recreational allocation, respectively, established by the Council for red grouper, the commercial quota is proposed to be reduced from 5.68 million pounds to 4.32 million pounds
- For the individual fishing quota program for red grouper, the conversion of red grouper allocation to multi-use allocation for harvesting either red grouper or gag is proposed to be temporarily suspended so red grouper multi-use allocation cannot be used to harvest gag
- No changes are proposed for the recreational sector because the harvest in recent years has been below sector target catch levels

What gag regulations are proposed to be changed for 2011?

- Because gag are considered overfished and undergoing overfishing, initial estimates of harvest reductions were between 70 and 74 percent based on the updated population assessment
- However, the Council has not yet determined the exact amount of long-term harvest needed because of outstanding questions regarding the amount of gag that do not survive catch and release (dead discards)
- Until the issue of dead discards is resolved, the Council has asked for temporary measures to reduce the gag harvest and allow the gag population to begin to rebuild
- For gag, the commercial quota is proposed to be temporarily reduced from 1.49 million pounds to 100,000 pounds as a precautionary measure until a better estimate of the needed harvest reductions is available
- For the recreational fishery, the bag limit is proposed to be temporarily reduced to zero, temporarily closing the fishery
- Once the dead discard issue is resolved, 2011 commercial and recreational long-term measures corresponding to the harvest reductions needed for a gag rebuilding plan will be implemented through Amendment 32

Why is the recreational gag fishery proposed to be temporarily closed?

- To minimize the number of dead discards in the fishery, the Council requested the temporary closure until they can implement 2011 management measures through Amendment 32
- Based on the projections from the recent updated population assessment, if the recreational sector were to fish for gag at the beginning of the 2011 fishing year, the fishery would likely close within a short period of time thereafter
- The Council favored a 2011 summer fishing season for gag because it would maximize the amount of time fishing could occur, thus proposing to close the fishery earlier in the year instead

What is the problem with dead discards in the gag update assessment?

- Most gag caught and released (discarded) are regulatory discards, which means they cannot be kept because the fish is too small, because the fisherman's individual fishing quota or bag limit has already been filled, because the fish was caught during a closed season, or because the retention of the fish is prohibited for other reasons
- In the course of developing management alternatives to end overfishing and rebuild gag, fishery managers discovered potential inconsistencies in commercial and recreational dead discard estimates
- For commercial gag discards, preliminary estimates of dead discards were much greater when estimated using reef fish observer data compared with methods used to estimate dead discards in the updated population assessment
- For the recreational fishery, size and age distributions of discarded gag estimated for some sectors of the fishery (private angler and charter) in the population assessment were clustered close to the minimum size limit while observer and tagging data indicated a much broader size range for recreational dead discards
- The Council discussed these inconsistencies at their August 2010 meeting, and asked that they be further evaluated and addressed in a review of the gag population assessment later in 2010

Did this problem with dead discards also occur in the red grouper assessment?

- The Council did not have the same concerns for red grouper because of differences in how discarded fish were estimated in the red grouper updated population assessment compared to the gag updated population assessment
- Estimates of commercial red grouper discards using reef fish observer data were similar in magnitude to the number of dead discards estimated in the red grouper updated population assessment
- Because all recreational red grouper discard sizes were estimated from headboat observer data, the concerns expressed about the size and age distributions of private angler and charter discards used in the gag updated population assessment did not apply to the red grouper updated population assessment
- The Council did request an analysis to see what would happen if observer-based commercial discard estimates were used in place of the existing estimates

Are other species of grouper also subject to proposed changes in the regulations?

- The commercial shallow-water grouper quota is calculated as the sum of the gag and red grouper quotas as well as a 410,000 pound allowance for other shallow-water grouper species
- Given the reductions in the gag and red grouper quotas, the 2011 shallow-water quota would be reduced from 7.65 million pounds to 4.83 million pounds
- Species in the shallow-water grouper complex are red, gag, black, scamp, yellowfin, yellowmouth, rock hind, and red hind grouper

Can I comment on the proposed changes to the red grouper and gag regulations?

- Comments for red grouper may be submitted until November 2, 2010
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- Instructions for how to submit comments can be found
 - For red grouper at:
http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/bulletins/pdfs/2010/FB10-091_Comments_on%20PR_to_Decrease_Red_Grouper_Quota_in_the_Gulf.pdf
 - For gag at:
http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/bulletins/pdfs/2010/FB10-090_NOAA_Seeks_Comments_to_Reduce_Harvest_of_Gag_in_the_Gulf.pdf

How can I participate in grouper management?

- For more information about current regulations and opportunities to become involved in the Council process, visit: www.gulfcouncil.org

Related Links:

- Red grouper regulatory amendment:
 - http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/pdfs/2010_Red_Grouper_Regulatory_Amendment_91710_final.pdf
- Gag interim rule Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Impact Review, and Regulatory Flexibility Act analysis
 - http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/pdfs/EA_2010_Gulf_Gag_Interim_Rule_92810.pdf
- Frequently Asked Questions on Gulf of Mexico Grouper Management in Federal Waters
 - http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/pdfs/Gulf_Grouper_FAQs_Feb_2010.pdf