

vehicle's front structure. In testing high-riding LTVs with the ECE barrier in the ODB test configuration, the agency observed that LTVs tended to override the ECE barrier, thus transferring a larger amount of crash energy through their lower load paths. The agency is concerned that this could lead LTV and SUV manufacturers to design unnecessarily stiff lower structures to mitigate intrusion in the ODB test. Stiffening the structure of an LTV or SUV in the region where they are likely to engage with a passenger car would be detrimental to improving vehicle-to-vehicle compatibility. While encouraging a lower load path in LTVs and SUVs would enhance vehicle compatibility through improved load path engagement with passenger cars, the omission of an upper load path for the upper rails during an offset test with the ECE barrier could force some manufacturers to design considerably stiffer lower LTV and SUV structures, negating any gains from aligning the load paths.

By allowing the upper rails of the SUVs and LTVs to engage the upper portion of the Part 587 barrier, manufacturers have more flexibility in designing their front ends to allow a better distribution of force across the full height of the vehicle front structure, thus improving compatibility. Furthermore, Toyota's request for harmonization alone is not sufficient justification to amend Part 587 since the U.S. and European vehicle fleets are very different. The population of SUVs in Europe is around 5 percent of the vehicle population. In contrast, LTVs and SUVs are approximately 50 percent of U.S. vehicle sales and constitute approximately 38 percent of U.S. registrations.

We are also rejecting Toyota's claim that differences in the sample size of the honeycomb used to test the crush characteristics of the barrier, material specifications for backing material, and hole size for deformable face mounting are unduly burdensome. The agency found no difference in the force versus displacement curves for the current sample thickness and the sample thickness proposed by Toyota. (See the test data in this docket.)

Further, Toyota states that the differences in backing material and hole size specifications have no influence on barrier performance. Part 587 does not require manufacturers to follow prescribed specifications. It merely states what specifications the agency will use when we run compliance tests. If differences in specifications have no influence on barrier performance, Toyota and other manufacturers are free

to use the ECE specifications in compliance testing.

*Conclusion:* For the reasons stated above, the agency is denying Toyota's petition for reconsideration.

**Authority:** 49 U.S.C. 30162; delegation of authorities at 49 CFR 1.50 and 49 CFR 501.8.

Issued on: October 29, 2003.

**Stephen R. Kratzke,**

*Associate Administrator for Rulemaking.*

[FR Doc. 03-27656 Filed 11-3-03; 8:45 am]

**BILLING CODE 4910-59-P**

## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

#### 50 CFR Part 622

[I.D. 102803A]

RIN 0648-AP03

#### Fisheries of the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and South Atlantic; Snapper-Grouper Fishery off the Southern Atlantic States; Amendment 13A

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Notice of availability of an amendment to a fishery management plan; request for comments.

**SUMMARY:** The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) has submitted Amendment 13A to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region (FMP) for review, approval, and implementation by NMFS. The amendment would extend the current prohibitions on fishing for South Atlantic snapper-grouper in the experimental closed area and on retaining such species in or from the area. The experimental closed area constitutes a portion of the Oculina Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern (HAPC), which is in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the Atlantic Ocean off Ft. Pierce, FL.

**DATES:** Written comments must be received on or before January 5, 2004.

**ADDRESSES:** Written comments on Amendment 13A must be sent to Julie Weeder, Southeast Regional Office, NMFS, 9721 Executive Center Drive N., St. Petersburg, FL 33702. Comments also may be sent via fax to 727-570-5583. Comments will not be accepted if submitted via e-mail or Internet.

Copies of Amendment 13A may be obtained from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, One

Southpark Circle, Suite 306, Charleston, SC 29407-4699; phone: 843-571-4366 or toll free at 1-866-SAFMC-10; fax: 843-769-4520; e-mail: safmc@noaa.gov. Amendment 13A includes an Environmental Assessment (EA), an Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis that was supplemented by NMFS, a Regulatory Impact Review, and a Social Impact Assessment/Fishery Impact Statement.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Julie Weeder, telephone: 727-570-5753, fax: 727-570-5583, e-mail: Julie.Weeder@noaa.gov.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The snapper-grouper fishery off the southern Atlantic states is managed under the FMP. The FMP was prepared by the Council and is implemented under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) by regulations at 50 CFR part 622.

The Magnuson-Stevens Act requires a regional fishery management council to submit an amendment to a fishery management plan to NMFS for review, approval, disapproval, or partial approval. The Magnuson-Stevens Act also requires that NMFS, upon receiving an amendment, publish a notice in the **Federal Register** stating that the amendment is available for public review and comment.

#### Background

In Amendment 6 to the FMP the Council proposed prohibitions on fishing for South Atlantic snapper-grouper in what is currently known as the experimental closed area and on retaining such species in or from the area. NMFS approved these prohibitions, and they became effective June 27, 1994 (59 FR 27242, May 26, 1994). In the experimental closed area, any South Atlantic snapper-grouper taken incidentally by hook-and-line gear must be released immediately by cutting the line without removing the fish from the water.

The experimental closed area is slightly less than 92 square nautical miles in the EEZ offshore from Ft. Pierce to Sebastian Inlet, FL. The geographical coordinates are specified at 50 CFR 622.35(c)(2). The experimental closed area constitutes a portion of the southern part of the Oculina Bank HAPC. In the entire HAPC no person may: (1) use a bottom longline, bottom trawl, dredge, pot, or trap; (2) if aboard a fishing vessel, anchor, use an anchor and chain, or use a grapple and chain; or (3) fish for rock shrimp or possess rock shrimp in or from the area on board a fishing vessel.

Both the proposed and final rules for Amendment 6 stated that the measures applicable to the experimental closed area "... will "sunset" after 10 years if not reauthorized by the Council." (59 FR 9721, March 1, 1994 and 59 FR 27242, May 26, 1994, respectively).

Measures applicable to the experimental closed area were intended to enhance stock stability and increase recruitment of South Atlantic snapper-grouper by providing an area where deepwater snapper-grouper species could grow and reproduce without being subjected to fishing mortality. The measures were based on the Council's concern that traditional fishery management measures, such as minimum size limits and quotas, might not be sufficient to protect fully the snapper-grouper resources. The Council believed the measures would provide protection for overfished species in the management unit while minimizing adverse impacts upon user groups.

Based on limited information, there appear to be some encouraging signs of positive biological impacts from the initial nine-year prohibition of fishing for snapper-grouper species within the experimental closed area since it was established in 1994. A study conducted in 2001 found that, in the few areas where habitat remained intact, there were more and larger groupers than observed in a 1995 study, and male gag and scamp were also common. The observation of male gag and scamp is particularly of interest because size, age, and proportion of males of these species have declined both in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic regions. Other encouraging signs include the observation of juvenile speckled hind, which is a candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act. However, species in the management unit remain overfished and continued protection is required.

#### Proposed Actions

Amendment 13A proposes to continue the current measures applicable to the experimental closed area indefinitely. The Council would review the configuration and size of the experimental closed area within 3 years of the publication date of the final rule that would implement Amendment 13A and would re-evaluate all measures applicable to the area after 10 years.

The Council believes these actions provide the most biological, social, and economic benefits while allowing for adaptive management. Extending the prohibition on fishing for snapper-grouper species in the experimental closed area for an indefinite period will continue to protect snapper-grouper

populations and protect *Oculina* coral and associated habitat. Such extension will also provide a hedge against the high degree of scientific uncertainty associated with the status of snapper-grouper species and reduce the possibility that these populations may fall below sustainable levels.

Economically it is expected that the long-term benefits, such as "insurance" against the uncertainty of stock assessments and the non-use benefits of extending the prohibitions on snapper-grouper fishing in the closed area, outweigh the short-term benefits of opening the area to harvest. These measures are also expected to provide the most long-term positive social impacts because they allow for adaptive management which can be seen as an assurance to the public that the area will be monitored and reviewed. Should the Council find after the 3-year review on size and configuration that the boundaries of the area are not appropriate, they can be changed at that time. In addition, the 10-year re-evaluation period will assure the public that the area will not be closed and forgotten.

Additional background and rationale for the measures discussed above are contained in Amendment 13A.

#### Proposed Rule

A proposed rule that would implement the measures in Amendment 13A has been received from the Council. In accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Act, NMFS is evaluating the proposed rule to determine whether it is consistent with the FMP, the Magnuson-Stevens Act, and other applicable law. If that determination is affirmative, NMFS will publish the proposed rule in the **Federal Register** for public review and comment.

#### Consideration of Public Comments

Comments received by the end of the comment period of the notice of availability of the FMP, whether specifically directed to the FMP or the proposed rule, will be considered by NMFS in its decision to approve, disapprove, or partially approve Amendment 13A. Comments received after that date will not be considered by NMFS in this decision. All comments received by NMFS on Amendment 13A or the proposed rule during their respective comment periods will be addressed in the preamble of the final rule.

**Authority:** 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: October 29, 2003.

**Bruce C. Morehead,**

*Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.*

[FR Doc. 03-27686 Filed 11-3-03; 8:45 am]

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## DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

### National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

#### 50 CFR Part 679

[Docket No. 031016262-3262-01; I.D. 100603E]

RIN 0648-AR08

#### Fisheries of the Exclusive Economic Zone off Alaska; Recordkeeping and Reporting

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Proposed rule.

**SUMMARY:** This action revises the descriptions of Gulf of Alaska (GOA) statistical and reporting areas 620 and 630 in Figure 3b to part 679 to include the entire Alitak/Deadman's/Portage Bay complex of Kodiak Island within area 620. This action is necessary to improve quota management and fishery enforcement in the GOA. This action is intended to meet the conservation and management requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) and to further the goals and objectives of the GOA groundfish fishery management plan.

**DATES:** Comments must be received by December 4, 2003.

**ADDRESSES:** Comments should be sent to Sue Salvesson, Assistant Regional Administrator, Sustainable Fisheries Division, Alaska Region, NMFS, P.O. Box 21668, Juneau, AK 99802-1668, Attn: Lori Durall, or delivered to the Federal Building, NMFS, 709 West 9th Street, Room 420, Juneau, AK 99801. Comments may be sent via facsimile to 907-586-7557. Comments will not be accepted if submitted by email or the Internet. Copies of the regulatory impact review/initial regulatory flexibility analysis (RIR/IRFA) prepared for this action may also be obtained from the same address, or by calling the Alaska Region, NMFS, at 907 586-7228.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Patsy A. Bearden, 907-586-7008 or [patsy.bearden@noaa.gov](mailto:patsy.bearden@noaa.gov).

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** The U.S. groundfish fisheries of the GOA in the