

(d) When NMFS notifies the permit holder or designated agent of the obligation to carry an observer in response to a notification under this subpart or as a condition of an EFP issued under 50 CFR 660.718, the vessel may not engage in the fishery without taking the observer.

(e) A permit holder must accommodate a NMFS observer assigned under these regulations. The Regional Administrator's office, and not the observer, will address any concerns raised over accommodations.

(f) The permit holder, vessel operator, and crew must cooperate with the observer in the performance of the observer's duties, including:

(1) Allowing for the embarking and debarking of the observer.

(2) Allowing the observer access to all areas of the vessel

necessary to conduct observer duties.

(3) Allowing the observer access to communications equipment and navigation equipment as necessary to perform observer duties.

(4) Allowing the observer access to VMS units to verify operation, obtain data, and use the communication capabilities of the units for official purposes.

(5) Providing accurate vessel locations by latitude and longitude or loran coordinates, upon request by the observer.

(6) Providing sea turtle, marine mammal, or sea bird specimens as requested.

(7) Notifying the observer in a timely fashion when commercial fishing operations are to begin and end.

(g) The permit holder, operator, and crew must comply with other terms and conditions to ensure the effective deployment and use of observers that the Regional Administrator imposes by written notice.

(h) The permit holder must ensure that assigned observers are provided living quarters comparable to crew members and are provided the same meals, snacks, and amenities as are normally provided to other vessel personnel.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 622

[I.D. 112103E]

RIN 0648-AR66

Fisheries of the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and South Atlantic; Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico; Continuation of the Madison/Swanson and Steamboat Lumps Marine Reserves

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

ACTION: Notice of availability of Amendment 21 to the reef fish resources of the Gulf of Mexico; request for comments.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces that the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) has submitted Amendment 21 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico for review, approval, and implementation by NMFS. Amendment 21 would continue the marine reserves at Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps for an additional 6 years and revise the fishing restrictions that apply within the reserves. The intended effects of Amendment 21 are to provide protection for spawning aggregations of gag grouper in order to prevent overfishing, continue protection of a portion of the offshore population of male gag grouper, and evaluate the effect and usefulness of marine reserves as a management tool.

DATES: Written comments must be received on or before February 9, 2004.

ADDRESSES: Written comments must be mailed to Phil Steele, Southeast Regional Office, NMFS, 9721 Executive Center Drive N., St. Petersburg, FL 33702. Comments may also be sent via fax to 727-522-5583. Comments will not be accepted if submitted via e-mail or Internet.

Copies of Amendment 21, which includes an environmental assessment (EA), a supplemental regulatory impact review (RIR) and initial regulatory flexibility analysis (IRFA), and a copy of a minority report filed by three Council members opposing provisions in the amendment that allow seasonal surface trolling within the reserves, may be obtained from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, The Commons at Rivergate, 3018 U.S.

Highway 301 North, Suite 1000, Tampa, FL 33619-2266; phone: 813-228-2815; fax: 813-833-1844; e-mail: gulf.council@noaa.gov.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Phil Steele, telephone: 727-570-5305; fax: 727-570-5583; e-mail: Phil.Steele@noaa.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act), as amended by the Sustainable Fisheries Act, requires each Regional Fishery Management Council to submit any fishery management plan or amendment to NMFS for review and approval, disapproval, or partial approval. The Magnuson-Stevens Act also requires that NMFS, upon receiving a plan or amendment, immediately publish a document in the **Federal Register** stating that the plan or amendment is available for public review and comment.

The Council has submitted Amendment 21 to the subject FMP to NMFS, for Secretarial review. The amendment proposes to: (1) extend the marine reserves at Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps for an additional 6 years; (2) allow surface trolling in the marine reserves during May through October; (3) prohibit all fishing and possession of all fish species in the marine reserves during November through April except for vessels transiting the marine reserves in accordance with the same requirements as those proposed for the Tortugas South and North closed fishing areas (Reef Fish Amendment 19); and (4) prohibit the possession of reef fish within the reserves except for vessels transiting the reserves in accordance with the same requirements as proposed for the Tortugas South and North closed fishing areas (Reef Fish Amendment 19). Additionally, the Council will send a letter to the Highly Migratory Species Division of NMFS requesting that they implement regulations compatible with the proposals in this amendment for species under their jurisdiction.

A proposed rule that would implement measures outlined in the amendment has been prepared. In accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Act, NMFS is evaluating the proposed rule to determine whether it is consistent with Amendment 21, 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.

Comments received by February 9, 2004, 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 21. Comments received after that date will not be

considered by NMFS in this decision. All comments received by NMFS on Amendment 21 or the proposed rule during their respective comment periods will be addressed in the final rule.

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

Dated: December 4, 2003.

Bruce C. Morehead,

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