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Recreational Grouper Fishing Closure Announced for Gulf of Mexico
Seasonal Closure to happen February 15 through March 15

NOAA Fisheries Service announces a February 15 through March 15 seasonal closure for the recreational red grouper, black grouper, and gag fisheries in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The seasonal closure will occur annually, and coincides with the commercial grouper fishery closure established in 2000.

NOAA Fisheries Service initially intended to implement the recreational seasonal closure when it reduced the recreational red grouper bag limit earlier in 2006. However, the agency delayed implementation of the seasonal closure in response to concerns about the closure and knowledge that a new gag assessment was pending. The gag assessment, completed in August 2006, indicates the stock is undergoing overfishing.

“We thought it was a good idea to wait for the gag assessment before determining the need for a seasonal closure,” said Dr. Roy Crabtree, NOAA Fisheries Service’s Southeast Regional Administrator. “Now there is no question the closure is needed to protect and conserve these grouper populations.” Thus, in light of the results of the recent gag assessment, the fisheries service published a final rule on November 17, 2006 implementing the seasonal closure.

This closure is one of many management measures recently proposed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) and approved by the Secretary of Commerce in response to a plan set up to rebuild the Gulf of Mexico red grouper population by 2012. This 10-year rebuilding plan was implemented in 2004 after an assessment of red grouper populations completed two years earlier indicated the species was being fished too heavily. Other measures implemented earlier this year to reduce red grouper landings to levels specified in the rebuilding plan include: a 6,000-pound commercial grouper trip limit; a recreational bag limit reduction to one red grouper per person per day within the five grouper aggregate bag limit; and a zero bag limit for captains and crews of for-hire vessels while under charter.

All of these management actions will help reduce red grouper landings to levels specified in the rebuilding plan. Additionally, the management actions will help address overfishing of gag. Implementing a seasonal closure for all three species, which represent over 90 percent of the recreational grouper harvest, will also reduce bycatch and discard mortality of these species. Although the current status of the black grouper population has not been assessed, it is included in the seasonal closure because black grouper is similar in appearance to gag and, therefore, difficult for fishers to distinguish from gag.

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The Council is considering the need for additional reductions in fishing mortality on gag. The detailed process for developing management alternatives will provide many opportunities for public participation and input before the Council recommends any regulatory changes to NOAA Fisheries Service and the Secretary of Commerce. Also, a new red grouper assessment is scheduled for completion in early 2007. As a result, NOAA Fisheries Service continues to encourage grouper constituents to stay informed and involved in the rulemaking process. Information about Council meetings, meeting agendas, public workshops or hearings, and grouper frequently asked questions is available at the Web sites listed below.

NOAA Fisheries Service is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries Service provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public. To learn more about NOAA Fisheries Service, please visit: www.nmfs.noaa.gov.

In 2007, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, celebrates 200 years of science and service to the nation. From the establishment of the Survey of the Coast in 1807 by Thomas Jefferson to the formation of the Weather Bureau and the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries in the 1870s, much of America's scientific heritage is rooted in NOAA.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and information service delivery for transportation, and by providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources. Through the emerging Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS), NOAA is working with its federal partners, more than 60 countries and the European Commission to develop a global monitoring network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

On the Web:

Frequently Asked Questions – Red Grouper, Black Grouper, and Gag Management
<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/grouper/gomGrouper2.htm>

Red Grouper and Gag Population (Stock) Assessments
<http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/>

NOAA Fisheries Service
www.noaa.nmfs.gov

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
<http://www.gulfcouncil.org/>