



# NEWS FROM NOAA

NATIONAL OCEANIC & ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION • US DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

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## **NOAA ACTS TO RESTORE GULF OF MEXICO GROUPERS**

NOAA Fisheries Service has reduced the recreational red grouper catch limit in the Gulf of Mexico from two fish per person per day to one fish per person per day and closed the recreational grouper fishery in November and December of this year. The federal agency took this action today to reduce overfishing and get the species back on track with its 10-year rebuilding program. The new regulations take effect August 9.

In addition, NOAA temporarily has reduced the aggregate grouper retention limit for recreational fishermen to three groupers per person per day to prevent overfishing of the whole grouper complex.

NOAA is implementing these measures at the request of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, which is responsible for developing management strategies for fish stocks in federal waters off the Gulf coast. Groupers in the Gulf are rebuilding under a strict 10-year timeframe, which began in January 2003. In order for the rebuilding plan to be successful, total recreational and commercial fishing had to be reduced by 9.4 percent, based on average landings from 1999 through 2001.

The initial red grouper total allowable catch (TAC) for commercial and recreational harvest is 6.56 million pounds annually during the first three years (2003-2005) of the rebuilding plan. The TAC is allocated among the commercial and recreational sector based on historical landings during 1999-2001. The allowable commercial harvest is 5.31 million pounds (81 percent of the TAC) and the allowable recreational harvest is 1.25 million pounds (19 percent of TAC).

Catch estimates for the recreational fishing sector show that anglers exceeded their harvest limit last year by 1.8 million pounds, prompting scientists to call for cuts in catches to reduce overfishing.

"The Gulf Council was right in requesting an interim rule for this action. I know fishing cuts are difficult, but we have to take the measures necessary to ensure a long-term, sustainable recreational grouper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico," said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA Fisheries Service. "The fishery will be worth more to everyone once it is rebuilt. We cannot keep exceeding our allowable catch levels or we will never reach our rebuilding goal."

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Hogarth noted that the historic, cultural and economic importance of red grouper to coastal communities in the Gulf of Mexico makes this action necessary, and that these important temporary restraints on fishing will lead to a more sustainable future for all Gulf grouper fishermen.

These measures are part of an overall reduction in grouper fishing implemented by NOAA Fisheries Service. The commercial grouper fishery is regulated with trip limits and the shallow-water grouper fishery is closed once the red grouper quota is reached. In 2004, the shallow-water grouper fishery was closed on November 15.

NOAA obtains annual recreational fishing effort and catch estimates through telephone, shore-side, and dockside surveys that are based on randomized sampling designs. These surveys provide reliable information on fishing trends. Though the data collection methods have been reviewed by scientists and deemed appropriate for producing statistically valid results, some in the recreational fishing sector have expressed distrust in the data.

In response, last year Hogarth asked the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a thorough review of the current regional state-federal cooperative recreational fishery monitoring programs supported by the Agency. The National Research Council will evaluate the current program and recommend possible improvements that may better support the needs of fishery managers. The review will be completed in April 2006.

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.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, an agency of the U.S. Commerce Department, is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and 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 our federal partners and nearly 60 countries to develop a global Earth observation network that is as integrated as the planet it observes, predicts and protects.

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