

Dated: May 30, 2001.

Alexandra Pitts,

Acting Manager, California and Nevada
Operations Office.

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 648

[Docket No. 010515128-1128-01; I.D.
041801C]

Fisheries of the Northeastern United States; Black Sea Bass Fishery

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

ACTION: Advance notice of proposed
rulemaking; notice of a control date for
the purposes of controlling capacity or
latent effort in the black sea bass
commercial fishery.

SUMMARY: NMFS announces that it is
considering, and is seeking public
comment on, a proposed rulemaking to
place additional controls on access to
the black sea bass (*Centropristis striata*)
fishery under the Magnuson-Stevens
Fishery Conservation and Management
Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act). This
announcement is intended, in part, to
discourage speculative increases in
effort or capacity while the Mid-Atlantic
Fishery Management Council (Council)
and NMFS are considering whether and
how to additionally control access in
this fishery. The date of publication of
this announcement, June 5, 2001, shall
be known as the control date and may
be used for establishing revised
eligibility criteria for participation in
the fishery; i.e., the level of fishing
activity after this date will not
necessarily be used for future eligibility
criteria.

DATES: Written comments must be
received on or before 5 p.m., local time,
July 5, 2001.

ADDRESSES: Written comments should
be sent to Daniel T. Furlong, Executive
Director, Mid-Atlantic Fishery
Management Council, Room 2115
Federal Building, 300 South Street,
Dover, DE 19904. Mark the outside of

the envelope, "Comments on Black Sea
Bass Control Date." Comments also may
be sent via facsimile (fax) to (302) 674-
5399. Comments will not be accepted if
submitted via e-mail or the Internet.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Jennifer L. Anderson, Fishery
Management Specialist, (978) 281-9226,
e-mail: Jennifer.Anderson@noaa.gov or
Christopher M. Moore, Ph.D., Deputy
Director, Mid-Atlantic Fishery
Management Council, (302) 674-2331.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The black
sea bass fishery is a major fishery on the
Atlantic coast that extends from Cape
Hatteras north to Maine. Regulations
implementing Amendment 9 to the
Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea
Bass Fishery Management Plan (FMP)
(61 FR 58461, November 16, 1996)
control fishing mortality on black sea
bass through a variety of management
measures including a commercial quota,
a limit on the number of commercial
permits, gear regulations, and minimum
fish size restrictions.

The most recent assessment on black
sea bass, completed in June 1998,
indicates that black sea bass are over-
exploited and at a low biomass level
(27th Stock Assessment Workshop).
However, more recent results from the
Northeast Fisheries Science Center's
spring survey indicate that the black sea
bass biomass has increased in recent
years. In fact, the preliminary biomass
index for 2000 is the highest in the time
series since 1976.

Commercial landings of black sea
bass, which are harvested in Federal
and state waters using a variety of gears,
have varied without trend since 1981,
ranging from a low of 2.0 million lb
(907.2 mt) in 1994, to a high of 4.3
million lb (1950.4 mt) in 1984. Since
1998, commercial landings have been
constrained by quotas at an annual level
of 3.025 million lb (1372.1 mt).

A moratorium on the entry of
additional commercial vessels into the
black sea bass fishery was put in place
on November 16, 1996, with the
implementation of Amendment 9 to the
FMP. However, the qualifying criteria
for obtaining initial permits under the
moratorium were liberal and only
required that vessels provide a black sea
bass landing receipt demonstrating at
least 1 lb (0.45 kg) of black sea bass
landed between January 26, 1989, and
January 26, 1993. Based on this
criterion, a number of vessels attained a
permit even though those vessels only

rarely or occasionally landed black sea
bass during this period. There were 992
and 974 Federal black sea bass permit
holders in 1999 and 2000, respectively.
Based on dealer reports, 795 and 727 of
these vessels in 1999 and 2000,
respectively, landed black sea bass.
However, 83 percent of the permit
holders participating in the black sea
bass fishery in 1999 accounted for less
than 9 percent of the black sea bass
landings. The 1999 fishing year is the
last full fishing year of complete
landings information.

The management measures for black
sea bass implemented under
Amendment 9 to the FMP have begun
to rebuild the black sea bass stock.
Although the Council and NMFS are
concerned that increasing stock
abundance may stimulate the use of
unused capacity or effort by permit
holders, there is equal concern that
management measures have reduced
fishing opportunities and income for
commercial fishermen who have
historically depended on black sea bass
for a major portion of their income. An
activation of latent effort could quickly
erode the benefits to traditional
operators who have sacrificed income as
part of the rebuilding program.

A control date of June 5, 2001 is
intended to discourage speculative
activation of previously unused effort or
capacity in the black sea bass fishery
while alternative allocation schemes
and potential management regimes to
control capacity or latent effort are
discussed and possibly developed and
implemented. The control date may be
used by the Council and NMFS in
determining historical or traditional
participation in the black sea bass
fishery. The control date communicates
to black sea bass permit holders that
performance or fishing effort after that
date may not be treated the same as
performance or effort that was expanded
prior to the control date. The Council
and NMFS could choose different and
variably weighted methods to qualify
fishermen based on the type and length
of participation in the fishery or on the
quantity of landings. A control date
does not commit the Council or NMFS
to develop any particular management
regime or criteria for participation in
this fishery. The Council or NMFS may
choose a different control date, or may
choose a management program that does
not make use of such a date.

The Council and NMFS may also choose to take no further action to control entry or access to the fishery, in which case the control date may be rescinded. Any action by the Council or NMFS will be taken pursuant to the requirements for FMP development established under the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

This notification also gives the public notice that interested participants should locate and preserve records that substantiate and verify their participation in the black sea bass fishery in Federal waters.

This control date has been determined to be not significant under Executive Order 12866.

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

Dated: May 24, 2001.

John Oliver,

Acting Deputy Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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