
GULF FISHERY NEWS

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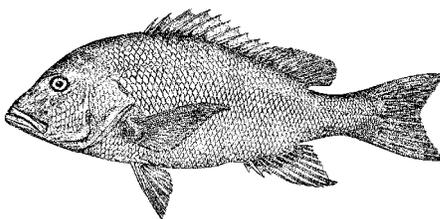
GULF FISHERY NEWS is a publication of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council for persons interested in the Gulf's fishery resources. Editor: Steven Atran.

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RECREATIONAL RED SNAPPER FISHING CLOSED NOVEMBER 27, 1997 FOR THE REMAINDER OF 1997

The Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 requires that the recreational red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico be managed under a quota and closed when that quota is reached, similar to the commercial fishery. For 1997, the red snapper total allowable catch (TAC) in the Gulf of Mexico is 4.47 million pounds (or 49 percent of the TAC of 9.12 million pounds). Based on recreational catch estimates available through August 1997 from Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey (MRFSS) data, and historical trends in recreational fishing patterns, NMFS has projected that the recreational quota will be filled by November 27, and consequently has announced that the recreational bag limit for red snapper will drop to zero effective November 27, 1997, at 12:01 am. This closure will be in effect for the remainder of 1997.



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE RED

SNAPPER RECREATIONAL QUOTA

Why is there a red snapper recreational quota?

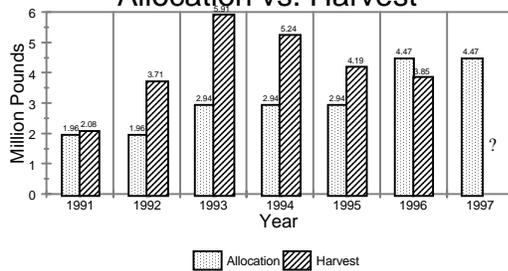
The recreational red snapper fishery has been managed under an allocation since 1991. However, prior to 1997, management of the recreational harvest was accomplished solely through the use of size and bag limits in an attempt to keep the rate of harvest low enough to prevent the recreational fishery from exceeding its allocation. In 5 of the 6 years from 1991 to 1996, that effort was unsuccessful, and the recreational sector exceeded its allocation, sometimes by very large margins (e.g., in 1993 recreational harvest was more than double the allocation). During this time period, the commercial fishery, regulated by quota closures, also frequently exceeded its allocation, but by smaller margins.
(continued on next page)

NEXT COUNCIL MEETING

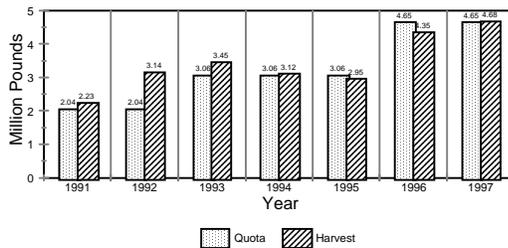
January 19-23, 1998
Marriott's Grand Hotel
One Grand Blvd.
Point Clear, Alabama



Recreational Red Snapper Allocation vs. Harvest



Commercial Red Snapper Quota vs. Harvest



The requirement for a recreational red snapper quota was included by Congress in the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996. Although the Act does not state the rationale, it appears obvious that Congress became impatient with the inability of existing regulations to keep the recreational sector in or even close to its allocation using size and bag limits alone, and decided to impose its own, more restrictive measures.

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Why weren't fishermen notified sooner about the closure?

1997 was the first year for recreational red snapper management under a quota. In 1996, the recreational allocation (4.47 million pounds) had not been exceeded. Preliminary projections suggested that the harvest would stay under the quota in 1997 as well. However, as the year progressed and landings data for 1997 began to be reported, it became apparent that red snapper were being caught at a faster rate than in previous years. The primary data source for monitoring the recreational fishery is the Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey (MRFSS). Because of the way in which this survey is conducted, data does not become available until two to three months after it is collected. In September, wave-3 data (May-June) from the MRFSS was available, and indicated that the recreational fishery would remain within its quota. However, by early November, the wave-4 data (July-August) became available and once analyzed, it became obvious that the recreational harvest would fill its quota before the end of the year. Notification was made by NMFS as soon as a closure date could be determined.

Are any other recreational fisheries managed under a quota?

No other recreational fisheries in federal waters are currently managed by quota. In the late 1980's, there was an attempt to manage king mackerel by quota, but that attempt was unsuccessful because the data did not arrive in a timely enough manner to allow adequate quota monitoring. Additionally, because king mackerel are migratory, quota closures effectively precluded some areas from being able to harvest fish due to their not being available before the quota was filled. In some states, tarpon are managed under a tag system, whereby the state issues a fixed number of tags each year, and a person who wishes to harvest a tarpon must purchase a tag and affix it to the harvested fish. This is a form of recreational quota management.

How is NMFS determining that the recreational fishermen have reached their quota?

The current red snapper quota monitoring system is similar to the earlier king mackerel attempt, but it includes a projection model to predict harvest during the year. As recreational catch data from the early months of the year become available, these data replace the projected catches for those months, and an updated projection for the remainder of the year is made.

There are three surveys that are used to monitor the recreational red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico:

- 1) In the Gulf states, except for Texas, NMFS conducts the Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey (MRFSS), which samples charter boats, private recreational vessels, and shore or pier based fishermen to determine species caught and average number and weight of fish caught per angler, plus a random telephone survey to determine what proportion of the public went fishing within a given time period.
- 2) The NMFS headboat survey monitors headboats and party boats, and attempts to cover all known headboats and party boats in the Gulf.
- 3) Texas, which does not participate in the MRFSS, has its own similar state recreational sampling program. Except for the headboat survey, these are all sampling programs that try to collect data from a representative portion of the fishery and expand that data to total recreational catches. The surveys use a statistical stratified sampling design. In many areas, the available manpower to conduct the surveys is spread pretty thin, and its entirely possible for one fisherman to never be interviewed while another is interviewed several times. NMFS and the state fishery agencies are working on ways to improve recreational fishery monitoring. A pilot project is being conducted to examine the feasibility of a charterboat logbook program. In addition, the state and federal agencies are working through a cooperative program called the Recreational Fisheries Initiative (RecFIN) to standardize their data collection methods and use their combined manpower and resources more effectively.

These recreational surveys were never designed for quota monitoring of a specific species. They were designed to look at long-term trends and catch data for hundreds of species; consequently, the data collected does not become available until several weeks or months later. Unfortunately, when Congress passed the law requiring a recreational red snapper quota, they did not provide any additional money for quota monitoring, so NMFS has to work with its existing data surveys. In early November, when NMFS announced its November 27 quota closure, it had MRFSS data for 1997 through August and partial data from the headboat survey, but no Texas data (Texas does not release its data until the following year). Consequently, the recreational catch for September through December, and all of the 1997 Texas catch, was projected based on the previous two years monthly patterns of catches. It will be the middle of 1998 before we have the all of the data for 1997 and learn whether the projection was accurate.

Are red snapper that are thrown back dead counted against the quota?

Red snapper that are thrown back dead (due to being undersized or in excess of the bag limits) were, in the past, considered as part of the recreational fishing mortality. In order to treat the recreational quota in an equitable manner to the commercial quota, these dead discards were not counted against the recreational quota this year. However, they accounted for only 5 percent of the recreational fishing mortality, according to MRFSS survey data, and had little impact on the recreational quota closure.

Why are red snapper regulations getting more restrictive when the stocks appear to be improving? Do the biologists think the stocks are still declining?

On the contrary, red snapper stock assessments (or assessment updates) are conducted every year, and the stocks are showing definite signs of improving. The average weight of recreationally caught red snapper has gone up every year since 1989 (from 1.62 pounds in 1989 to 3.43 pounds in 1996), although the periodic size limit increases have likely been a contributing factor, and the recruitment index (a measure of spawning success) has increased every year since 1991. The 1995 red snapper year class was the strongest since 1989, and most of those fish will become large enough to be caught during 1998. However, the resulting increased success rate for recreational fishing is causing red snapper to be caught at a faster rate, forcing more restrictive measures to keep the total annual catch in check.

We are still in the early stages of the rebuilding schedule. It's been estimated that the generation time of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico, in the absence of fishing, is about 19.6 years. Generation time is calculated from the fish's

age-specific fecundity (egg production) which is measurable and known, and the natural mortality rate, which is not known with certainty but is estimated using generally accepted analytical methods. One way of looking at the 19.6 years generation time is that an average female red snapper, which usually matures at about age 3, would in the absence of fishing, have about 17 years of spawning. Currently, only about 12 percent of the juvenile red snapper that would normally survive their first two years are making it to age 3 due to shrimp trawl bycatch mortality, and few of those red snapper are living longer than age 3 or 4 because of the directed commercial and recreational fisheries, although the numbers of older fish appear to be starting to increase.

How do we know if the red snapper stock assessments are being done properly?

In 1997, a Congressionally mandated peer review of the NMFS stock assessment was conducted, as well as an independent stock assessment by Dr. Brian Rothschild of the University of Massachusetts. The results of those projects will be presented to the Gulf Council in January, when they will make their decision on the 1998 total allowable catch (TAC).

If the stock is improving, then why isn't the total allowable catch (TAC) being increased?

The red snapper rebuilding program is based on a "constant catch" strategy, which means that the catch of red snapper must be held at a certain level for the duration of the rebuilding schedule. The allowable catch level may change occasionally, as new biological information is learned about the species growth and mortality rates, or level of shrimp trawl bycatch mortality, but the new catch level is still for a fixed catch based on the new biological parameters.

An alternative to the "constant catch" strategy is a "constant fishing mortality" strategy. In this case, the TAC is allowed to periodically increase as the stock recovers, proportional to the stock recovery. Unfortunately, adopting this strategy requires an immediate initial reduction in TAC. According to one scenario in the current stock assessment, TAC might need to be dropped to as low as 160,000 pounds (from 9.12 million pounds) to switch to this strategy in 1998. The TAC would then gradually increase and eventually exceed the current fixed TAC. It may be possible, as the stock recovers, to eventually switch from a "constant catch" to a "constant fishing mortality" strategy with less drastic short-term consequences.

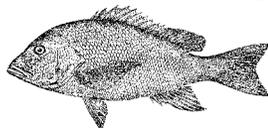
If shrimp trawl mortality of red snapper is a problem, why isn't something being done about it?

The shrimp trawl industry has already been credited with a 10 percent reduction in shrimp trawl bycatch mortality as a result of changes in the locations and methods used to trawl. The Gulf Council has submitted to NMFS a Shrimp Plan amendment to require shrimp trawls to be equipped with finfish bycatch reduction devices (BRDs), and NMFS has published a proposed rule to require shrimp trawls to be equipped with BRDs. We expect the final rule to be implemented in 1998. The rebuilding schedule requires at least a 44 percent reduction in shrimp trawl bycatch of red snapper from BRDs, and testing of various BRD designs suggests that higher bycatch reduction levels may be possible. By the way, the problem with shrimp trawls is not with capture of adult red snapper, but with capture of juvenile (age 0 and age 1) fish, which seem to think that shrimp trawls are habitat and actively try to stay inside of them.

RED SNAPPER SIZE LIMIT TO STAY AT 15 INCHES

In response to public testimony that undersized red snapper suffer a high release mortality, and out of concern that an increase in the red snapper size limit would increase the average weight of recreationally caught red snapper and lead to earlier recreational quota closures, the Council at its November meeting approved a regulatory amendment to maintain the current red snapper size limit of 15 inches total length. The size limit had been scheduled to increase to 16 inches on January 1, 1998, under a provision of reef fish Amendment 5 that gradually raised the size limit from 13 inches to 16 inches in order to provide a faster recovery. The 16-inch size limit was based on an assumed release mortality rate of 33 percent. More recent studies of the impact of size limits indicate that an increase to 16 inches will have little, if any, impact on the long-term spawning potential ratio (SPR) or yield per recruit, and under some scenarios, could actually reduce SPR or yield per recruit.

The regulatory amendment that the Council submitted to NMFS to maintain the 15-inch size limit cannot be implemented before January 1, when the 16-inch size limit takes effect. However, approval by NMFS and implementation is expected within the first few months of 1998. In addition, the Council has learned that Congress, as part of the 1998 appropriations bill for the Department of Commerce, has inserted a provision that prohibits NMFS from implementing or enforcing any regulation that sets the red snapper minimum size limit in the Gulf of Mexico higher than 15 inches total length.



COUNCIL TO FILL VACANCIES ON BILLFISH AND HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES ADVISORY PANELS

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council at its January 19-23, 1998 meeting in Point Clear, Alabama will fill vacancies for its Billfish Advisory Panel (AP) and for a new Highly Migratory Species (HMS) AP. The HMS AP is the result of consolidating the former Shark AP, Swordfish AP, and Tuna AP into a single panel in order to follow the same organization that NMFS uses for its advisory panels. The APs consist of recreational and commercial fishing industry representatives who advise the Council on management of the fishery stocks. These vacancies have been created due to the resignations of former AP members. Currently, there are four vacancies on the Billfish AP and six vacancies on the HMS AP.

Prior to 1997, the Council had not convened any of these APs since authority for management was transferred to NMFS in 1990. However, NMFS is now writing and amending its fishery management plans for highly migratory species. With the adjusted review and comment periods, it is likely that the Council will be able to convene the Billfish AP and the consolidated HMS AP to comment on issues as the FMP for billfishes, sharks, swordfish, and tunas is being prepared.

Persons wishing to be considered for these vacancies should send a resume by January 5, 1998 describing their background to Trish Kennedy at the Gulf Council, 3018 U.S. Highway 301 North, Suite 1000, Tampa, Florida 33619-2266. Applications may also be faxed (813-225-7015) or e-mailed (trish.kennedy@gulfcouncil.org).



DRAFT REEF FISH AMENDMENT 16 SET TO GO TO PUBLIC HEARINGS

At the November meeting, the Gulf Council completed its review and selection of Preferred Alternatives for the public hearing draft of Reef Fish Amendment 16. The following is a summary of the Preferred Alternatives selected by the Council:

SECTION 6.0 - FISH TRAP PHASE OUT

Section 6.1 - Shorter Fish Trap Phase Out

No preferred alternative specified. The alternatives in this section are: 1) prohibit the possession or use of fish traps in the Gulf of Mexico EEZ two years after implementation of this amendment, or 2) status quo - fish traps will be prohibited after February 7, 2007.

Section 6.2 - Spiny Lobster and Stone Crab Reef Fish Trip Limit

Preferred Alternative - Status quo - A vessel with a reef fish permit that is fishing spiny lobster or stone crab traps can retain the same quantities of reef fish as other reef fish permitted vessels.

Section 6.3 - Trap Tag Reductions

The Council voted to delete this section.

SECTION 7.0 - MINOR AMBERJACK MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Section 7.2.1 - Minor Amberjack Size Limits

The following were all selected as Preferred Alternatives:

Set a slot limit for the recreational fishery of 14 inches to 20 inches fork length for banded rudderfish and lesser amberjack.

Set a slot limit for the commercial fishery of 14 inches to 20 inches fork length for banded rudderfish and lesser amberjack.

Prohibit the sale of lesser amberjack and banded rudderfish less than the commercial minimum size limit for greater amberjack.

Section 7.2.2 - Banded Rudderfish and Lesser Amberjack Bag Limits

Preferred Alternative: Set an aggregate bag limit of 5 fish for banded rudderfish and lesser amberjack.

SECTION 8.0 - SPECIES LISTED AS NOT IN THE MANAGEMENT UNIT

No Preferred Alternative. The alternatives in this section are: 1) Remove sand perch, dwarf sand perch, and queen triggerfish from the Reef Fish FMP, 2) Move hogfish into the list of species in the management unit, 3) Remove the distinction in the Reef Fish FMP between species in the management unit and those in the fishery but not in the management unit, or 4) Status quo - leave the list of species in the fishery but not in the management unit as is.

SECTION 9.0 - FLORIDA COMPATIBLE SIZE LIMITS

No Preferred Alternative, but delete gray snapper from the list of subject species. Proposed size limits are 20 inches for scamp and yellowmouth grouper, 16 inches for mutton snapper, and 12 inches for blackfin snapper, cubera snapper, dog snapper, mahogany snapper, schoolmaster, silk snapper, mutton snapper, queen snapper, scamp, yellowmouth grouper, gray triggerfish, and hogfish.

SECTION 10.0 - FLORIDA COMPATIBLE BAG LIMITS

Preferred Alternative - Adopt the following recreational bag limits for the entire Gulf EEZ: a) Include the red snapper bag limit as part of the snapper aggregate bag limit (currently 10), and b) hogfish - 5 fish.

SECTION 11 - SPECKLED HIND AND WARSAW GROUPE

Preferred Alternative - Set a recreational bag limit of 1 speckled hind and 1 warsaw grouper per person, to be included within the grouper aggregate bag limit.

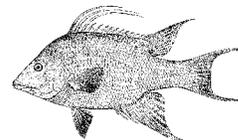
SECTION 12 - REVISIONS TO THE FRAMEWORK PROCEDURE FOR SETTING TAC

The Council voted to delete this section.

The Public Hearing Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16 will be available from the Council office in January. Public hearings will be scheduled in February 1998, and the Council will take final action at its March 1998 meeting in Duck Key, Florida. Public hearings will be in the following towns and dates:

- February 9 - Key West, Florida
- February 10 - Ft. Myers, Florida
- February 11 - Tampa, Florida
- February 12 - Crystal River, Florida
- February 19 - Perry, Florida
- February 23 - Panama City, Florida*
- February 24 - Gulf Shores, Alabama*
- February 25 - Biloxi, Mississippi*
- February 25 - Galveston, Texas*
- February 26 - Larose, Louisiana*
- February 26 - Port Aransas, Texas*

* - Reef Fish Amendment 16 public hearings will be held jointly with Mackerel Amendment 9 public hearings at these locations.



COUNCIL SELECTS PREFERRED ALTERNATIVES FOR DRAFT MACKEREL AMENDMENT 9

At the November 10-13, 1997 meeting, the Gulf Council selected preferred alternatives for "Draft Amendment 9 to the Fishery Management Plan for Coastal Migratory Pelagic Resources in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Including Environmental Assessment, Regulatory

Impact Review, and Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis.", also known as Draft Mackerel Amendment 9. Because the Mackerel FMP is a joint plan, amendments must also be approved by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC). The SAFMC reviewed this document at their November 17-20, 1997 meeting. The comments and suggestions of the SAFMC will be combined with those of the Gulf Council to produce a public hearing draft. The following is a summary of the Preferred Alternatives adopted by the Gulf Council:

SECTION 2.0 - MANAGEMENT MEASURES

Section 2.1 - Fishing Year

Preferred Alternative, Section 2.1.4 - Status Quo - no change - Recreational fishing year begins January 1, and commercial fishing year begins July 1 of each year.

Section 2.2 - Sale of King and Spanish Mackerel

Preferred Alternative 2.2.4, Option a. - Prohibit the sale of both Gulf group and Atlantic group king and Spanish mackerel by all persons fishing under the recreational allocation (bag limits), including charter and head boat operators.

Section 2.3 - Mandatory Reporting

The Council voted to delete this section.

Section 2.4 - Re-allocation of TAC for the Commercial and Recreational Sectors for Gulf Group King Mackerel

Commercial Reallocations by Area
- No Preferred Alternative was specified.

Reallocations by User Group

Preferred Alternative, Section 2.4.4 - Increase the recreational allocation from the current 68% of TAC to 70%; however, all catches/landings by the for-hire sector shall be counted against the recreational allocation only.

Section 2.5 - Subdivision of the Commercial Hook-and-Line King Mackerel Allocation of TAC for the Gulf Group, Eastern Zone, South/West Area (Florida West Coast) by Area and Season

Preferred Alternative - Section 2.5.1.1, option b - Subdivide the commercial hook-and-line king mackerel allocation for the Gulf group, eastern zone, south/west area by establishing 2 subzones: Subzone 1 - Dade/Monroe to Collier/Lee county line, and Subzone 2 - Collier/Lee county line to Alabama/Florida state line.

Section 2.5.1.2 - Area subdivisions with 3 subzones

The Council voted to delete this section.

Section 2.5.2 - Seasonal subdivisions

The Council voted to delete this section.

Section 2.5.3 - Establish regional allocations of TAC for the commercial hook-and-line king mackerel fishery in the South/West Area of the Eastern Zone based on the historical catches:

Preferred Alternative Section 2.5.3.1, option b - Establish regional allocations based on the historical catches from subzones indicated in 2.5.1.1 (2 subzones) using the average of the 1992-1993 through 1996-1997 fishing years, excepting the 1994-1995 fishing year with the Monroe/Collier county split: 79% for subzone 1 and 21% for subzone 2.

Section 2.5.3.2 (3 subzone allocations) and Section 2.5.3.3 (adding seasons to subzone allocations)

The Council voted to delete these sections.

Section 2.6 - Subdivision of the Commercial King Mackerel Allocation of TAC for the Gulf Group, Western Zone

No Preferred Alternative was specified.

Section 2.7 - Establish Trip Limits for Commercial Vessels Fishing for Gulf Group King Mackerel in the Western Zone (AL/TX)

No Preferred Alternative was specified.

Section 2.8 - Restrictions on the Use of Net Gear to Harvest King Mackerel in the South/West Area of the Eastern Zone

Preferred Alternative Section 2.8.2, option a - Establish a moratorium on the issuance of commercial king mackerel gill net endorsements. Reissue commercial king mackerel gill net endorsements to only those vessels that: (1) had a commercial mackerel permit with a gill net endorsement on or before the moratorium control date of October 16, 1995, and (2) (option b) had landings of king mackerel using a gill net in 1 of the 2 fishing years 1995-1996 or 1996-1997 as verified by NMFS or trip tickets from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. (A vessel that received a permit through transfer from another vessel that met the qualifications in [1] and [2] above between the close of the season in fishing year 1995-1996 and the effective date of regulations implementing this amendment would also qualify for a commercial king mackerel gill net endorsement.)

Preferred Alternative Section 2.8.3, option b - Allow transfer to immediate family members (son, daughter, father, mother, or spouse) only.

Preferred Alternative Section 2.8.4 - Prohibit the use of gill nets or any other net gear for the harvest of Gulf group king mackerel, except: Option a: in NMFS statistical grids 1, 2, and 3; and Option b: south of an east/west line at the Collier/Lee county line.

Section 2.9 - Size Limits

Preferred Alternative Section 2.9.1 - Increase the minimum size limit for Gulf group king mackerel from 20" FL to 24" FL, and delete 2.9.2 and 2.9.3 from the amendment.

Section 2.10 - Establish a Purse Seine Allocation for Gulf Group Spanish Mackerel

No Preferred Alternative was specified.

Section 2.11 - Allow the Retention and Sale of Cut-off (damaged) Legal-sized King and Spanish Mackerel Within Established Trip Limits

No Preferred Alternative was specified.

The Public Hearing Draft Mackerel Amendment 9 will be available from the Council office in January. Public hearings will be scheduled in February 1998, and the Gulf Council and South Atlantic Council will take final action at their respective March 1998 meetings (Duck Key, Florida and Jekyll Island, Georgia). Public hearings in the Gulf region will be in the following towns and dates:

- February 17 - Key West, Florida
- February 18 - Ft. Myers, Florida
- February 19 - Tampa, Florida
- February 23 - Panama City, Florida*
- February 24 - Gulf Shores, Alabama*
- February 25 - Biloxi, Mississippi*
- February 25 - Galveston, Texas*
- February 26 - Larose, Louisiana*
- February 26 - Port Aransas, Texas*

* - Reef Fish Amendment 16 public hearings will be held jointly with Mackerel Amendment 9 public hearings at these locations.

HEARINGS SCHEDULED ON DRAFT STONE CRAB AMENDMENT 6 - EXTENSION OF MORATORIUM

The Gulf Council has scheduled public hearings on Draft Stone Crab Amendment 6. The amendment includes a proposal to extend a moratorium on the registration of stone crab vessels by the NMFS Regional Administrator. The original fishery management plan provided that persons could fish commercially in the federal waters if they had either a state stone crab permit or registered their vessel with NMFS. No one has ever registered a vessel with NMFS.

In 1995, by Stone Crab Amendment 5, the Council placed a moratorium on registration of vessels by NMFS, and the state of Florida, by legislative act, placed a moratorium on the issuance of any additional stone crab permits. The purpose of both actions was to provide time for the stone crab industry to consider whether a limited access system was needed for the fishery and to develop such a system for implementation by the Florida Legislature. The

purpose of the Council action proposed in Draft Amendment 6 is to prohibit registration of vessels for up to an additional four years so that the industry, state, and Council have adequate time to develop and implement a limited access system.

A total of three public hearings will be held to obtain public comments on this plan amendment with one additional final hearing held during the Gulf Council meeting in Point Clear, Alabama on January 21, 1998. The public comment period for this amendment ends on January 15, 1998.

Public hearings are scheduled as follows from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

January 6, 1998
Regional Service Center
County Building
2796 Overseas Highway
(U.S. Highway 1)
Marathon, Florida

January 7, 1998
Naples Depot Civic-Cultural Center
1051 5th Avenue South
Naples, Florida

January 8, 1998
Plantation Inn & Gulf Resort
9301 West Fort Island Trail
Crystal River, Florida

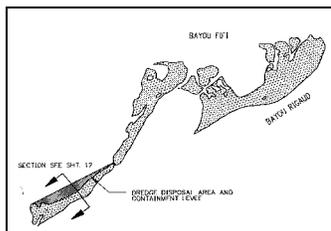
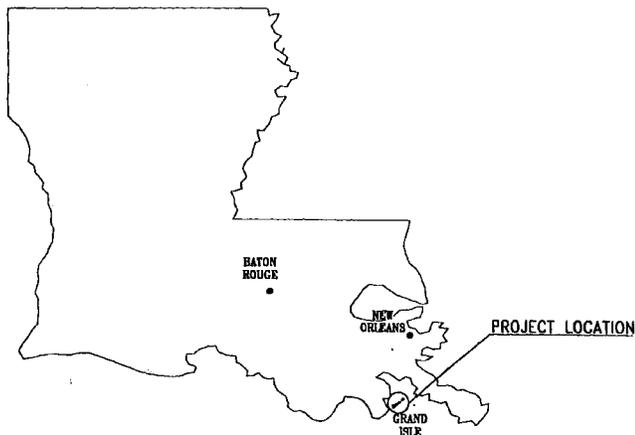
A copy of the amendment can be obtained by calling the Council office.

PROPOSED GRAND ISLE, LOUISIANA RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT OPPOSED

At the November meeting, the Gulf Council discussed a proposed Grand Isle (Caminada Cove) residential development project in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. The proposed area of development is located on the north side of Grand Isle and would access Bayou Rigaud via dredged access canals. Eight boat slips would be dredged along with the construction of three roadways to access the lots. This development is expected to destroy about 115 acres of estuarine habitat, composed of tidal salt marsh and associated water bottoms.

The project area is considered to be an important aquatic resource as both a nursery area and foraging habitat for a variety of economically important marine fishery species including gulf menhaden, red and black drum, sand and spotted seatrout, striped mullet, southern flounder, brown and white shrimp, and blue crab. Wetlands at the project site also provide essential water quality support functions by filtering runoff from adjacent developed areas on Grand Isle.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers still has not issued the dredge and fill permit for the development. The Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, NMFS, and Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries have all written letters expressing their concern over this proposed development. The Gulf Council is also in opposition to this development project and a letter of opposition to the project was sent to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers after the November meeting.



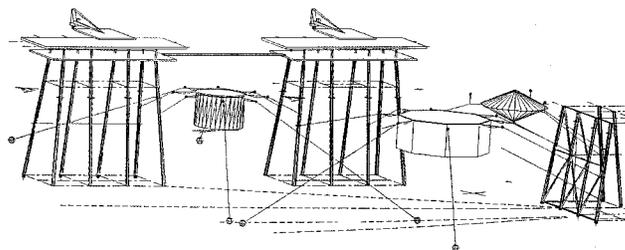
Grand Isle, Louisiana

TEXAS MARICULTURE PROJECT TO USE OIL AND GAS PLATFORMS

Mr. Joe Hendrix of Aquaculture Projects was invited to the Gulf Council meeting in November to give a presentation on the proposed SeaFish Mariculture Project. The SeaFish Mariculture Project will raise fish in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico adjacent to an oil and gas production platform. The project will use an oil and gas platform located 48 nautical miles south-southwest of Freeport, Texas. The main goals of this pilot project are to determine what type of cages should be used and determine the optimum grow-out technique that will work in the Gulf. A grow-out is the time to raise fish from fingerlings to marketable size. The project will initially run for a 26-month period. This will allow the project to have two complete grow-out cycles of fish.

All fish used in the project will be from hatcheries and no wild stock fish will be used. The project will start off raising red drum fingerlings. The project will also raise dolphin, amberjack, pompano, red snapper, and southern flounder. The fish will be kept in circular net cages adjacent to the oil and gas platform. The net cages will have a mesh size of two inches stretched knotless nylon mesh. Outside the net cages will be a predator net of approximately 3-4 inch stretch-mesh that will be weighted to keep the net tight.

The mariculture project was approved on an exempted fishing permit (EFP) by the NMFS. This permit was needed to possess certain species, to possess undersize fish during grow-out, and to harvest and sell these fish in Texas.



DICK HOOGLAND, COUNCIL HABITAT BIOLOGIST, PASSES AWAY

Richard (Dick) Hoogland, the Council's biologist/ecologist for habitat related activities, passed away October 17, 1997, at the age of 67 after a long battle with cancer.

Dick had worked for the Council since 1988 and was involved with development of the Council's policy on wetland management¹ and the monitoring of issues that affect wetlands. Prior to coming to the Council, he worked for the National Marine Fisheries Service, where he helped develop that agency's first habitat conservation program for the southeast region. Dick also worked in wetland regulation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and in wetland ecology research with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

¹ It is the policy of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council to support wetland management plans that provide all the following conditions. The proposed projects: a) do not impair the integrity and productivity of the natural ecosystem; b) maintain the natural diversity of the fish and wildlife species dependent upon wetlands in the proposed area; c) provide adequate ingress and egress for marine species to and from managed areas; and d) help preserve the natural productivity, or to restore productivity of altered or degraded wetlands. (Adopted September 20, 1990).

He is survived by his wife, six daughters, three brothers, a sister, and four grandchildren. His body was donated to the University of Florida for scientific study.

All who knew Dick will remember him for his efforts in protecting and conserving wetlands and other coastal habitats.

He will be greatly missed.

NMFS DECLARES FIVE GULF SPECIES OVERFISHED AND ONE APPROACHING OVERFISHED

A new provision in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires NMFS to report annually to Congress on the status of fisheries within each Council's geographical area of authority and identify those fisheries that are overfished or are approaching an overfished condition. At the November Council meeting, NMFS Regional Administrator Andrew Kemmerer presented the first annual findings for Gulf of Mexico stocks. Out of the 79 stocks that are managed either by the Gulf Council or jointly by the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils, 5 stocks are classified as overfished, 1 is approaching an overfished condition, 11 are classified as not overfished, and 62 are classified as status unknown. Nationwide, NMFS declared 86 stocks overfished, 10 approaching an overfished condition, 183 not overfished, and 448 status unknown. A stock is considered to be approaching an overfished condition if it is estimated that the stock will become overfished within two years.

The stocks in the Gulf of Mexico that are classified as overfished are red snapper, Nassau grouper, jewfish, red drum, and Gulf group king mackerel.

The stock classified as approaching an overfished condition is vermilion snapper.

Stocks classified as not overfished are Atlantic group king mackerel, Atlantic group Spanish mackerel, Gulf group Spanish mackerel, cobia, greater amberjack, spiny lobster, royal red shrimp, white shrimp, pink shrimp, brown shrimp, and stone crab.

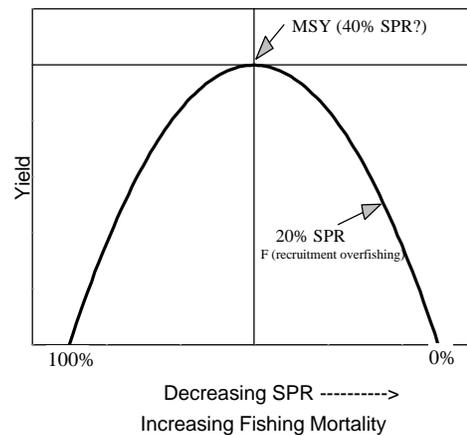
For stocks that are overfished, the Council must, by September 1998, submit a management plan to NMFS to rebuild the stock within 10 years, or as short a time period as possible in cases where the biology of the stock, environmental conditions, or international agreements dictate otherwise. For stocks that are approaching an overfished condition, the Council must take action to prevent overfishing from occurring.

The above classifications are based on the current definitions of overfishing and overfished stocks contained

in each fishery management plan. By October, 1998, each Council must submit to NMFS new definitions of overfishing and overfished stocks that are based on a rate or level of fishing mortality that jeopardizes the capacity of a fishery to produce the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) on a continuing basis. In most cases, this will result in more conservative definitions of overfishing and overfished stocks, and some stocks currently listed as not overfished could be reclassified as overfished.

Currently, the Council sets its overfishing threshold at the level beyond which recruitment overfishing was likely to occur, i.e., below which the spawning stock would be insufficient to produce enough recruits to replace itself more than 50 percent of the time. For most reef fish stocks, this corresponds to a spawning potential ratio (SPR) of 20 percent. Under the new criteria, overfishing definitions must be based on MSY. The SPR level that will support MSY is currently unknown for all of the Gulf of Mexico reef fish species and it is unlikely that accurate estimates can be made anytime in the near future. Given the analyses reported in the recent literature, an interim working value of 40 percent SPR as a proxy for MSY was recommended by the Reef Fish Stock Assessment Panel. However, the selection of appropriate SPR proxies for MSY, not only for red snapper but for other species, requires a more detailed evaluation than the Panel could provide. Therefore, the Panel recommended that the Council consider sponsoring an MSY working group to establish this SPR at MSY criteria for Gulf of Mexico fish stocks.

A copy of the NMFS "Report to Congress: Status of Fisheries of the United States" is available by calling the Council office.



A conceptual Schaefer surplus yield curve. This is a highly simplistic way of presenting MSY and SPR levels, but it serves to demonstrate the difference between the old and (proposed) new overfishing thresholds.

GULF AND SOUTH ATLANTIC COUNCILS AGREE TO SET A CONTROL DATE FOR DOLPHIN AND WAHOO

The Gulf Council agreed to proceed with establishing a consistent control date with the South Atlantic Council for dolphin and wahoo. By establishing a control date, the Councils are alerting fishermen that if they receive a permit to harvest these species after this date, they are not assured of continued participation in the fishery in the future if a license limitation system is approved.

NMFS OFFERS \$5,000 REWARDS FOR INFORMATION IN SEA TURTLE MUTILATION INVESTIGATIONS

The National Marine Fisheries Service is continuing its enforcement efforts off Texas to help solve two incidents of apparent sea turtle mutilation. The agency is offering two separate \$5,000 rewards in hopes of gaining information that leads to solving the investigations with resulting prosecution.

On Oct. 20, a sea turtle with a chain attached washed ashore and during the week of Nov. 2, 18 sea turtles washed ashore on Texas beaches. Thirteen of those turtles were endangered Kemp's ridleys, six of which were adults.

The Kemp's ridley that washed ashore on Oct. 20 was found near the South Ferry Landing area in Galveston after apparently drowning because a chain was attached to one of its flippers. A necropsy conducted recently as part of the agency's investigation into that case confirmed that the animal was healthy and feeding when it died. The fisheries service is consulting with the Federal Bureau of Investigation's forensics laboratory in Washington, D.C. on these cases.

In the case of those animals that washed up the week of Nov. 2, nine had straight edge cuts. Agency officials believe the November strandings were isolated incidents because sea turtle strandings have abated since then.

One \$5,000 reward is being offered in the chained sea turtle case and another is in being offered in the apparent mutilations case. The rewards are available for information which leads to an arrest, a criminal conviction, civil penalty assessment or forfeiture of property of anyone associated with these incidents. The agency has recently authorized and funded six new enforcement positions in the Southeast that will be dedicated to various protected species issues.

Anyone with information about these cases and violations of the Endangered Species Act are encouraged to contact NMFS Special Agent in Charge Gene Proulx in St. Petersburg, FL 813-570-5344 or call the NMFS Enforcement Hotline at 1-800-853-1964.

ICCAT ADOPTS MANDATORY INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION MEASURES FOR ATLANTIC MARLIN

First-ever mandatory conservation measures for Atlantic blue and white marlin have been adopted at the annual meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). Proposed and negotiated by the U.S. delegation, the ICCAT agreement requires countries to reduce landings of these severely overexploited marine species by at least 25 percent.

ICCAT continued to take steps to increase compliance with existing conservation and management measures by both member and non-member countries. Last year's historic compliance agreement on swordfish was extended to cover south Atlantic swordfish quotas. A new agreement regarding member nations' compliance with regulations on undersized fish was also adopted. In addition, a package of measures on monitoring and compliance was adopted, including an ICCAT port inspection program, restrictions on transshipments at sea, and a pilot program to implement vessel monitoring systems for high-seas vessels. ICCAT initiated diplomatic approaches to several non-member countries whose fishing activities are of concern to ICCAT.

ICCAT also adopted a sharing arrangement for south swordfish in south Atlantic oceans, together with a total allowable catch (TAC) and country quotas for 1998 through 2000, representing the first time quotas have been imposed for this fishery. South Atlantic albacore catches are to be curtailed through a TAC to be shared among four countries, with minor fishing countries limiting their catches according to bycatch allowances or a cap relative to recent levels.

Concern over the status of Atlantic bigeye tuna stocks led to several measures on the conservation and management of this species. These included registration and possible limits in the future on the number of commercial vessels greater than 80 gross weight tons targeting bigeye tuna, and a 35 percent reduction in the catches of Atlantic bigeye tuna by Chinese Taipei.

ICCAT, a 25-nation organization charged with the management of Atlantic tunas, swordfish, marlins, and sailfish, met in Madrid, Spain, Nov. 14-21, 1997.



VOTING COUNCIL MEMBERS

1997/98 Council Chairman: Maumus Claverie

Vice-Chairman: Hal Osburn

The Chairman and Vice-Chairman are elected at each September Council meeting and serve through the following September meeting.

Appointed Voting Members

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DR. ANDREW J. KEMMERER	NMFS	813-570-5301	813-570-5300	andrew.kemmerer@noaa.gov

(d) - Designee who usually attends Council meetings on behalf of the state fisheries management director.

Nonvoting members include representatives of the U.S. Coast Guard (Seventh and Eight Districts), Department of State, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission.

GULF FISHERY NEWS WANTS YOUR NEWS AND VIEWS

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The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council is one of eight regional fishery management councils that were established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 1976. The Council is responsible for the development and modification of fishery management plans (FMPs) that are designed to manage fishery resources in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Gulf of Mexico from state boundaries to the 200-mile limit. This is a publication of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and financial assistance for this news release was provided by grant funds pursuant to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Award No. NA77FC0001.
