



South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

News Release

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CONTACT: Kim Iverson
Public Information Officer
Toll Free 866/SAFMC-10 or 843/571-4366

Council Approves Changes to Black Sea Bass Management ***Measures also slated for red grouper and wreckfish upon approval by the Secretary of Commerce***

Members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council approved management measures impacting federal fisheries for black sea bass, red grouper, and wreckfish through three separate amendments to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan during its meeting last week in Raleigh, NC. The amendments must now go through the Secretarial review process before any regulations go into place. The Council considered recommendations from its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), advisory panels, testimony received during public hearings, and written comments before making its final decisions on its preferred management alternatives within the amendments. A final public hearing was held during last week's meeting.

Proposed changes to the black sea bass fishery are designed to reduce the rate of harvest in order to help extend the current fishing year for both the commercial and recreational fisheries and include increases in the minimum size limit, a commercial trip limit, and the implementation of an endorsement program for the commercial black sea bass pot fishery. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, Amendment 18A will increase the recreational size limit from 12" to 13" total length and the commercial size limit from 10" to 11" total length. The amendment would also implement a commercial trip limit of 1,000 pounds (for all gear types), limit the number of commercial pots that can be fished on a single trip to 35, and require all pots be retrieved at the end of each fishing trip.

Amendment 18A would create an endorsement program for the commercial black sea bass pot fishery, reducing overcapacity by creating qualifying criteria based on average landings over a 12-year period. After reviewing public comment, the Council lowered the requirement for qualifying for an endorsement to an average of 2,500 pounds. Approximately 30 of the 50 commercial pot fishermen who reported landings in 2010 will qualify for endorsements under the new plan.

The black sea bass stock is currently listed as overfished and undergoing overfishing. The Council implemented regulations to end overfishing in 2010 as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, including establishment of an Annual Catch Limit (ACL) of 409,000 pounds (gutted weight) for the recreational sector and 309,000 pounds (gutted weight) for the commercial sector. The fishing year for black sea bass begins June 1st and both the commercial and recreational catch limits were met before the end of the 2010/2011 fishing year. The fishery reopened on June 1, 2011 and the commercial fishery closed after meeting its catch limit in less than 45 days. The recreational fishery closed on October 17, 2011.

The Council received the results of a new benchmark stock assessment for black sea bass, showing the stock is no longer considered overfished but overfishing is continuing at a low level. The stock is in Year 6 of a 10-Year rebuilding plan and fishermen have reported increases in the numbers and sizes of black sea bass encountered in recent years, as would be expected. Based on the recent stock assessment, the Council chose to modify the current rebuilding strategy that would not allow for an increase in harvest as the stock rebuilds. The new approach would keep the current ACLs in place for the next two years. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee will review an updated stock assessment after the next two fishing seasons and then provide the Council with an acceptable catch level, factoring in any overages in harvest and estimated changes to the stock. The catch levels must continue to maintain a 66% probability that the stock would rebuild by 2016.

The Council also approved Amendment 24 that includes measures to end overfishing and rebuild the red grouper stock, based on a stock assessment completed in 2010. The amendment establishes a rebuilding plan,

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Amendments Approved *(continued)*

Annual Catch Limits and Accountability Measures and revises certain population parameters for red grouper. The amendment would eliminate the current aggregate ACL for gag, black grouper and red grouper, set an ACL of 647,000 pounds (whole weight) for red grouper beginning in 2012, and establish sector allocations of 44% commercial and 56% recreational. Regulation changes are not expected for the recreational sector but commercial fishing season may be shortened in the future based on previous landings.

Amendment 20A was also approved for submission to the Secretary of Commerce. The amendment would modify the Individual Transferable Quota (ITQ) program currently in place for the commercial wreckfish fishery. The amendment allows for the consolidation of shares issued through the ITQ program for the relatively small, deepwater fishery. It is anticipated the ACL for the fishery will be reduced significantly in 2012, based on scientific recommendations.

Other Actions

The Council continued to develop and refine management alternatives for amendments addressing spiny lobster, golden crab, golden tilefish, mackerel, designation of Habitat Areas of Particular Concern for protection of deepwater corals, gear restrictions, and measures to protect speckled hind and warsaw grouper. The Council will hold a series of public hearings and scoping meetings in late January/early February 2012 from Key Largo, FL to New Bern, NC. Details regarding the public hearings will be publicized as they become available and copies of the public hearing documents will be posted on the Council's website.

The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council is scheduled for March 5-9, 2012 in Savannah, GA. Details regarding Council meetings and meeting materials are available from the Council's website at www.safmc.net.

<p>The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.</p>
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