

SEA GRANT

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By

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Purposed red snapper regulations are back in the news. Here is a brief overview of the regulatory process and the proposed rule changes.

At the last meeting of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, the Council voted to delay moving forward with proposed regulations to reduce both the red snapper quota and red snapper bycatch until more up-to-date information was available. The National Marine Fishery Service (NMFS) which oversees the Council has decided to proceed by proposing interim rules that would reduce the likelihood of overfishing for red snapper in 2007. The interim rules call for management actions that would reduce the overall quota on red snapper from 9.12 million pounds to 6.5 million pounds while keeping the historic allocation between commercial (51%) and recreational fishermen (49%). To achieve this reduction in the recreational quota, a two-fish limit would be imposed and the captain and crew of charter boats could no longer be counted as part of the bag limit per boat. The 16 inch recreational size limit would remain as would the existing April 21st to October 31st fishing season. The commercial fishery would close when the commercial quota is reached and the minimum commercial size limit would be set at 13 inches to reduce bycatch mortality. A target reduction of 50% would be established for red snapper bycatch in the shrimp fishery.

At the same time, NMFS is also pursuing longer range plans for managing red snapper. The proposed management actions and alternatives can be found in "Draft

Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) to Evaluate Alternatives to set Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Total Allowable Catch (TAC) and Reduce Bycatch in the Gulf of Mexico Directed and Shrimp Trawl Fisheries”. This document has a wide array of quotas, bag limits, size limits and seasons that would reduce or eliminate overfishing of red snapper. For example, one of many possibilities would be to have a seven million pound quota, a three fish bag limit, a 16 inch size limit and 154 day fishing season (May 15th – Oct 15th). This season would be forty days shorter than the current April 21 – Oct 31st season (194 days). Scenarios that retain relatively high quotas are contingent on reducing bycatch mortality in the directed fishery (recreational and commercial) and in the shrimp fishery by 74 percent. Bycatch mortality can be reduced in the directed fishery by reducing the commercial size limit, using circle hooks, venting fish before releasing back to the water, and using de-hooking devices.

Comments on the proposed interim rule or on the longer term proposals (DEIS) should be sent to Roy E. Crabtree, Regional Administrator, NOAA Fisheries Service, 263 13th Avenue South, St Petersburg, FL, 33701 by November 27, 2006. Comments can also be faxed to 727-824-5308 or sent by email (0648-AT87.DEIS@noaa.gov) by putting 0648-AT87 in the subject line.