

By

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The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council is struggling with how to manage red and gag grouper stocks. Just a few years ago, anglers were allowed to keep five groupers from a list of 10 grouper species (and one per vessel for speckled hind and Warsaw). Then, stock assessments showed that red grouper were undergoing overfishing and the limit on red grouper was reduced to one but anglers could still retain five groupers total. A seasonal closure was also instituted.

The most recent stock assessment shows that red grouper have largely recovered but that gag grouper are now undergoing overfishing. Since several kinds of grouper are often caught together, particularly off of Florida, they cannot be easily managed separately.

As a result, the Gulf Council will be proposing a number of alternatives on the bag limits for gag and red grouper combined with various seasonal closures. All of the proposals include a three grouper limit meaning that the other ten species are also included in the three grouper limit.

One example would be a three grouper limit with a gag limit of one per person and no red grouper limit (up to the three grouper limit). Other grouper species also count in the three grouper limit. In this scenario, the season closes from January 15th – April 15th and the combined regulations result in a 45 percent reduction in gag landings and a 22 percent increase in red grouper landings. Other alternates offer different combinations of gag and red grouper limits within the three grouper limit and different closed seasons. Public hearings for the proposals will be announced soon and be held in early spring.

Current regulations remain in effect until new regulations are passed and approved. Regulations still in effect include a closure for red, black, and gag grouper from February 15th to

March 15th. Length limits are 20 inches for red and yellowfin grouper, 22 inches for black and gag grouper, and 16 inches for scamp. The bag limit is five groupers total per person but no more than one red grouper and no more than one per vessel of speckled hind and Warsaw. Goliath and Nassau groupers are prohibited.