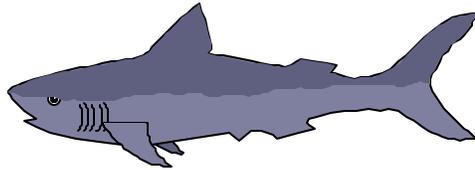


FISH



TALES

Council Begins Work on a Comprehensive Grouper Management Plan

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (“Council”) has started work on an amendment with the potential to provide comprehensive management of the grouper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. This is an excellent step by the Council, enabling them to effectively manage grouper as a complex with other reef fish rather than resort to species by species management.

Unfortunately, the rationale

behind this new amendment is an all too familiar scene in fisheries management today. As seen in our last edition of *Fish Tales*, the National Marine Fisheries Service (“NMFS”) found red grouper, the most important commercial grouper species in the Gulf, in poor health. In addition, gag grouper, a species for which the Council adopted management measures last July (see the gag story on page 2 on why these measures have yet to

be implemented) is considered “approaching an overfished condition” by NMFS. There is also a belief by some scientists that inbreeding may be occurring in the species.

Sadly, scientific information on other grouper species such as scamp, red hind and yellowfin grouper is lacking. As a result, no formal assessment of the health of these and other species has been

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- Special points of interest:
- Council eyes a holistic approach to grouper management in the Gulf
 - Your input will be needed to ensure an ecological reserve is established in the FL keys
 - Council to set catch levels for king mackerel at the May meeting
 - Measures designed to help gag grouper have yet to be implemented
 - Learn more about the proposed Tortugas ecological reserve at our workshop in St. Petersburg, FL

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King Mackerel Highlights May Council Meeting

At its May 2000 Council meeting in New Orleans the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (“Council”) will set total allowable catch (“TAC”) levels for king mackerel in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico for the coming year. King mackerel is one of five species in the Gulf of Mexico officially considered “overfished” by the National Marine Fisheries Service (“NMFS”).

King mackerel are highly mo-

bile schooling fish found throughout the Gulf. King mackerel migrate seasonally



King Mackerel. From the SAFMC web

with water temperature being very important to their movement. Adult king mackerel typically migrate to the northern Gulf in the spring,

move down to South Florida, and then to Mexico in the western Gulf in the fall. Spawning occurs throughout their range from May to October.

While this fishery is still considered “overfished”, the health of King mackerel has been improving over time thanks to actions taken by state and federal regulators. However, heavy fishing pressure on this species has his-

(Continued on page 2)

Plan to Help Grouper Not Implemented In Time

Measures proposed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council ("Council") to curtail overfishing, protect spawning aggregations, and protect male gag grouper have yet to hit the water. Unfortunately, this delay compromises efforts of the Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service ("NMFS") to protect gag grouper in the year 2000, consistent with requirements of federal law.

It is difficult to point the finger at any one entity responsible for the delay but gag grouper is clearly the loser. As seen in past editions of *Fish Tales*, gag was officially designated as "approaching an overfished condition" in 1998 by the NMFS. This listing means gag will most likely be overfished within two years if no management action is taken. It also triggers a requirement that the Council propose measures within one year of listing to end overfishing. Unfortunately this process has taken much longer than expected. In March of 1999, the Council proposed measures to both end overfishing and close a 432 square mile area in

the Gulf to help spawning gag and protect males which are thought to be at very low levels.

Unfortunately, this proposal was withdrawn by the Council and reworked at their meeting in July of 1999 due to heavy pressure from fishermen. The final proposal cut the size of the closure in half and divided it into two separate areas. It also increased the size limit of gag and implemented a month long seasonal closure from February 15-March 15 in order to halt commercial landings of gag, red, and black grouper.

The proposal was sent to the NMFS in late August and published as a proposed rule in the federal register in January 2000. The NMFS received over 400 comments on the proposed rule, delaying implementation in order to determine the validity of the comments. This delay rendered the seasonal closure worthless for 2000. While the GRN still questions the effectiveness of this closure, it would have at least provided guidance to managers.

The regulatory amendment is still undergoing review by the appropriate federal agencies. Thus, almost two years after gag grouper was identified as approaching an overfished condition, no in the water protection has been provided.



Gag grouper. From the SAFMC web page.

King Mackerel....

(Continued from page 1)

torically impeded rebuilding to a healthy level. In addition, scientists have warned that recruitment, the number of young fish entering into the population, has been low for the past few years. This could have negative future implications for the health of the stock.

Under the requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act, the Council must rebuild overfished fisheries such as king mackerel as soon as possible taking into account the needs of fishing communities. In its amendment to the coastal

migratory pelagic management plan last year, the Council proposed a ten year rebuilding period for returning king mackerel to a level scientists consider healthy. The GRN opposed this plan believing that the Council did not justify the need for such a long time period when a shorter time frame is possible.

This plan was disapproved by the NMFS in November of last year based on the criteria utilized for ensuring king mackerel does indeed reach a healthy level. As a result, no rebuilding plan is currently in place for the fishery.

During the month of April, Council scientists, economists, and advisory panels will meet to review the latest scientific information on king mackerel and provide recommendations to the Council on appropriate catch levels for the 2000/2001 fishing season. Once this information is available the GRN will inform our members and friends as to what action will be necessary to ensure that catch levels are based on the science and that a rebuilding plan is implemented.

Tortugas Ecological Reserve Goes to Public Hearings; Anchors Upcoming GRN Workshop in St. Petersburg, FL

Efforts to establish a proposed ecological reserve in the Dry Tortugas area of the Florida Keys continue, with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (“Council”) working to establish fishing regulations in the portion of this reserve under its jurisdiction.

The proposed reserve is 185 square nautical miles that is separated into two parts— Tortugas North and Tortugas South. The area selected falls within the jurisdiction of a number of agencies including the National Park Service (“NPS”), the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Program (“FKNMS”), the National Marine Fisheries Service (under “NOAA”), the state of Florida, and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. This proposed ecological reserve provides the opportunity to protect a relatively pristine marine area from increasing pressures. The area selected for the reserve was chosen by the Tortugas 2000 working group, a diverse group of stakeholders assembled by the FKNMS advisory council, in order to protect the high degree of biodiversity in the area, protect critical habitat of many species, and for its value in supplying fish larvae to other portions of the keys.

The Council, having jurisdiction over thirteen square nautical miles in Tortugas North and sixty in Tortugas South, have been asked by the NMFS and National Ocean Service to implement fishing regulations consistent with the establishment of an ecological reserve. As a result, the Council has drafted a plan for implementing regulations in portions of the ecological reserve that are within its jurisdiction. At its March meeting in San Antonio, the Council selected “preferred alternatives”- those measures it is leaning towards to implement the reserve. Thus far, the Council has chosen to concur with the need for protection identified by

the FKNMS by proposing to prohibit any type of fishing in the closed areas. This draft amendment will be finalized in May, be available for public comment, and then subject to final action at the July Council meeting in Key Largo, FL.

At the same time the NOAA, the NPS, the Council and the state of Florida will be conducting joint public hearings to get comment on the overall proposal. The Council will consider input provided at these meetings as well.

Friends and members of the GRN are urged to become involved at every possible opportunity. The Council in conjunction with NOAA, the NPS and the state will conduct public hearings at the following locations:

June 12: Homestead, FL at the Homestead High School;

June 13: Naples, FL at the Naples Comfort Inn;

June 14: St. Petersburg FL at the University of South Florida;

June 21: Marathon, FL at the Sombrero Country Club;

June 22: Key West, FL at the Key West Holiday Inn; and

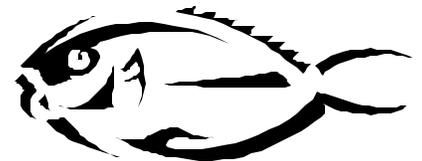
July 11: Washington D.C. at the Department of Commerce building.

The Council will also be accepting written comments on their proposal up until their July meeting in Key Largo as well as public comment at the meeting, most likely on July 12.

If, not surprisingly you are confused by this whole process and are lost in the sea of agencies involved, I urge you to at-

tend our upcoming workshop on June 3 in St. Petersburg to learn more about the reserve. This workshop, co-sponsored by the Center for Marine Conservation, Environmental Defense, World Wildlife Fund, and Reefkeeper International will include discussions on the grouper species of the state of Florida, discussions on the importance of seagrasses and corals in the state, a presentation on the proposed ecological reserve, the use of marine reserves as fishery management tools, and finally a roundtable discussion on the Tortugas reserve with representatives involved in the process. Most importantly, speakers at the workshop will help you sort out who is involved in the reserve process, how it got started, what it will do, and how to stay informed.

Please contact the GRN at (504)525-1528 or cdgrn@igc.org for further details on our workshop and ways to get involved.





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“Working to Protect and Preserve the Gulf of Mexico”

This publication is the product of the GRN working on the following issues of concern: overfishing, essential fish habitat, full implementation of the Sustainable Fisheries Act, and public education on the importance of sustainable fisheries management.

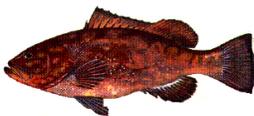
The GRN would like to thank Pew Charitable Trusts, Rockefeller Brothers, Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and the Trull Foundation for making our work possible.

Comprehensive Grouper Amendment in the Works...

done. In short, the health of the grouper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico is predicted to be poor.

While the particulars of this amendment are still in the works, the GRN will be working with the Council and NMFS to ensure that it provides sufficient protection for grouper species whose health is unknown while rebuilding those species we know are in poor health. Stay tuned to learn what you can do to help groupers in the Gulf.

In coming issues of *Fish Tales* we will feature information on grouper species in the Gulf. Here is a look at a few:



Red Grouper

Red grouper are the most important grouper species for commercial fishermen in the Gulf, comprising about two-thirds of the grouper catch. Red grouper spend their first four to five years near shore, then move into deeper offshore waters upon reaching sexual maturity. Red grouper are sequential hermaphrodites meaning all fish begin their lives as females with the larger fish becoming males over time. The latest scientific assessment conducted by the NMFS found red grouper significantly overfished. The current estimate of time needed to rebuild this fishery to a healthy level is between ten to eighteen years.

Gag

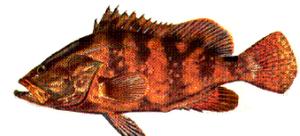


Grouper

Gag grouper are the second most important grouper species to commercial fishermen in the Gulf. Like red grouper, gag spend their first four to five years nearshore before

moving offshore when sexually mature. Gag are also sequential hermaphrodites, but unlike red grouper, they form aggregations for spawning purposes. Gag are currently classified by the NMFS as “approaching an overfished condition”. In addition, scientists believe that the low percentage of males in the population may be causing inbreeding in the species.

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Nas-Grouper

Nassau grouper are found throughout the Gulf and Caribbean. Like gag, Nassau grouper aggregate for spawning purposes. Due to low numbers of Nassau grouper in the Gulf, Nassau grouper is deemed overfished by the NMFS. Accordingly, the capture of this species is