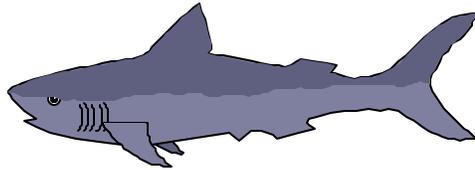


FISH

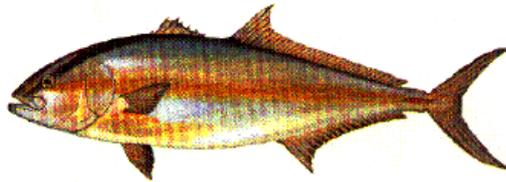


TALES

Report Assessing the Status of Gulf Fisheries Issued to Congress

In late January of 2001, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issued its 2000 Report to Congress on the Status of Fisheries of the United States. This annual “report card”, assessing the health of our nation’s fisheries, is produced annually and submitted to the United States Congress.

The 2000 report assesses the condition of the 905



Our newest overfished species in the Gulf, Greater Amberjack. Courtesy of the South Atlantic

managed fishery species in U.S. waters. Of these 905, the Report finds that 72 stocks are being taken

at a rate that is higher than can be sustained

(overfishing), 92 are below a level scientists consider healthy (overfished), and the status of 709 species (78.3%) is unknown. According to an analysis

done by Dr. Josh Sladek Nowlis of the Center for Marine Conservation, of

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Gulf Council Plan Aims to Rebuild Red Snapper by 2032

The latest chapter in the red snapper saga unfolded at the January 2001 meeting of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council), with an approval of a plan to return red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico to a healthy level by 2032. While the approval of this long awaited new rebuilding plan may seem to be a momentous occasion, the

specifics of the plan leave much to be desired.

Pursuant to the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 (SFA), the Gulf Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) are responsible for ending the overfishing of depleted species and rebuilding those fisheries in poor health. To meet these requirements, the Gulf

Council approved a thirty plus year rebuilding plan to return red snapper to a healthy level. Unfortunately, the path chosen by the Gulf Council raises cause for concern.

For starters, the first four years of the rebuilding plan will retain the “status quo”. That is, the total allowable catch level from

(Continued on page 2)

- Special points of interest:
- Permits for shrimp vessels approved by the Gulf Council
 - Council approves a 32 year rebuilding plan for red snapper
 - Status report of Gulf fisheries identifies half of the species we have scientific information for are overfished
 - Greater amberjack officially becomes the seventh “overfished” species in the Gulf of Mexico
 - NRC Panel investigating the impacts of trawling gear in the Gulf of Mexico

Gulf Council Approves Permits for the Shrimp Fishery

In a move applauded by the conservation community, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) voted to implement a permit system in the shrimp fishery. This permit system will help fishery managers by collecting better data on the number of shrimp boats currently fishing in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

The current estimate of shrimp vessels fishing in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico is between 3,000 and 7,000 vessels. This uncertainty makes it extremely difficult for managers to assess the amount of trawling occurring in the Gulf and the amount of non-target species such as red snapper that are taken in the nets of shrimp trawls each year. This has significant implications for fisheries management in the Gulf. For exam-

ple, red snapper is subject to a new rebuilding plan which relies on reducing both the taking of red snapper by fishermen as well as by the nets of



shrimp trawls (*see the red snapper story on page 1*).

The establishment of this permit system is, therefore, a critical first step in adequately assessing the amount of fishing effort exerted by the shrimp fishery in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The permit system

provides the vehicle for the Gulf Council and the individual states to utilize other management tools such as observers, vessel monitoring systems, etc. to help improve data collection. This will in turn provide managers with better information to manage fisheries such as red snapper and protect fishery habitat in the Gulf region.

The permit system will also aid enforcement efforts in the Gulf of Mexico by giving law enforcement officials the ability to revoke permits from bad actors in the fishery. Hopefully, this will encourage better compliance with fishery regulations in the future.

The GRN thanks our members and friends that provided comments, making this important victory possible.

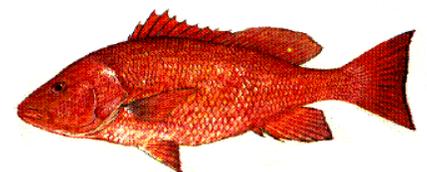
Red Snapper....

(Continued from page 1)
2001 until 2004 will be the current catch allowance of 9.12 million pounds, a value higher than scientists have recommended for years. In addition, the plan does not detail exactly how the Gulf Council expects to achieve its rebuilding goals after allowing the overinflated 9.12 million pound catch level until 2004. Will drastic cuts be on tap in 2005? If not, when will the Council take corrective action to end overfishing? It certainly appears that for now the Gulf Council has chosen the classic

“fish now, pay later” approach, with no identified date of payment.

The rebuilding plan will now be edited by Council staff and then submitted to the NMFS for approval and implementation. Once submitted to the NMFS the public will have an opportunity to provide comments on the plan before final approval. The GRN and our member groups working on this issue in the Gulf will analyze the proposed plan and provide comments ensuring consistency with the science and the law.

This issue is critical as it lays the foundation for how we will rebuild our region’s most important reef fish fishery. Please help us ensure it is a plan that gets the job done by staying tuned for action alerts detailing how you can help.



Red Snapper. Courtesy of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

Fishing Gear Impacts Under the Spotlight

Recent activities are placing fishing gear impacts on habitat in the Gulf of Mexico under increasing public scrutiny. The controversy centers around the effects certain fishing gears have on the marine and estuarine habitats of the Gulf. These habitats, ranging from seagrasses, mud bottoms, and coral reefs, are responsible for the high level of fishery productivity in the Gulf. Scientists are concerned that damage from fishing gear and other activities such as coastal development and water pollution threaten our regions extremely valuable fisheries.

Enter the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996

In response to these concerns, Congress passed the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996, requiring the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) to identify habitats essential to our fisheries, minimize, to the extent practicable, any adverse effects that fishing gear has on the habitats essential to our fisheries, and identify conservation actions to address non-fishing impacts that threaten our fisheries. To comply with the fishing gear mandate, the Gulf Council reviewed the impacts fishing gear utilized in the Gulf of Mexico has on fishery habitat. A rather abbreviated analysis of these impacts led to a finding by the Gulf Council that no additional actions were warranted at this time since little information existed as to the adverse effects current fishing gear is having on habitat.

This decision sparked two separate

actions. First, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the agency which approves and implements fishery regulations proposed by the Gulf Council, disapproved the analysis of the Gulf Council for most gear types in the Gulf of Mexico. For those gear types where an analysis was completed and no action was taken (trawls, recreational fishing gear, and traps/pots), a group of conservation organizations in the Gulf region sued to challenge the findings of the Gulf Council and the NMFS.

On September 14, 2000, a federal court found that all of the environmental assessments completed by the NMFS violated the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA requires federal agencies to analyze the impacts of their activities on the environment and adequately consider alternatives to their proposed action. The court found that the NEPA analysis conducted by the NMFS did not discuss how fishing gear may damage fish habitat or provide possible alternatives which may reduce potential impact on the environment.

The NMFS is now working to improve its analysis of the potential impacts of fishing gear on fisheries habitat in accordance with the court order.

Recent Activities Bring Information to Light

The NMFS, based on efforts of the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, recently produced a Technical Memorandum reviewing fishing gear utilized in the Southeast region

and its potential impacts on essential fish habitat. This study is an attempt to provide fishery managers with the best possible information source on the issue of fishing gear impacts in the Gulf. The efforts of these two agencies have produced and analyzed approximately 650 studies from around the world on this issue.

The National Research Council Begins Assessing the Effects of Bottom Trawling on Seafloor Habitats

Finally, the National Research Council (NRC), an arm of the National Academy of Sciences, launched an 18 month study to evaluate data related to the physical and biological effects of trawling on marine habitats and ecosystems. The NRC panel recently met in Galveston, TX to discuss this issue in the Gulf region, focusing primarily on the shrimp fishery. The panel heard from a number of people, including the GRN, offering recommendations for addressing the impacts of shrimp trawls on the bottom habitats of the Gulf of Mexico. Once the panel's regional hearings are completed, a final report will be published.

For further information on the impacts of fishing gear on habitats in the Gulf, including a copy of the NMFS memo, please contact the GRN at (504) 525-1528. Copies of the NMFS memo can be obtained at <http://caldera.sero.nmfs.gov/fishery/sfreport/report01.htm>. In addition, further information on the NAS study can be found at www.nationalacademies.org



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“Working to Protect and Preserve the Gulf of Mexico”

Status Report...

(Continued from page 1)

the stocks we have information on, a little over half are either undergoing overfishing, are overfished, or are “approaching an overfished condition”.

The Status Report contained few surprises in the Gulf region, with one additional fish, red grouper, joining the list of overfished species. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council has 57 fish stocks under its direct jurisdiction. Of these 57 stocks, one half of the species we have scientific information for (five out of ten) are “overfished” or below a level scientists consider healthy. These species include red snapper, red grouper, red drum, Nassau grouper, and Jewfish. One species, gag grouper, is “approaching an overfished condition”, meaning that it will become overfished within two years if no corrective action is

taken. Finally, four out of eighteen species we have information for are considered to be undergoing overfishing. These include red grouper, red snapper, gag grouper, and vermilion snapper. Sadly, the majority of Gulf species are considered to be of “unknown” status.

The Gulf Council also manages ten species jointly with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. Of these ten, King mackerel is considered “overfished” with the status of four stocks “unknown”.

Finally, the NMFS directly manages a number of fish species in the Gulf including sharks, tuna and billfish. Of these species, all of the billfish for which we have information are overfished. These include blue marlin, white marlin and sailfish. Three out of four tuna species for which we have information are overfished. These include bigeye tuna, albacore and bluefin

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.

tuna. Finally, 16 of the 22 species of sharks for which we have scientific information are overfished. These include sandbar, blacktip, dusky, spinner, silky, bull, Caribbean reef, tiger, lemon, sand tiger, bigeye sand tiger, nurse, scalloped hammerhead, great hammerhead, whale, and white sharks.

Shortly after the Status Report was released, greater amberjack was officially declared “overfished” by the NMFS, adding yet another overfished species in the Gulf.

The production of the latest Status Report, together with the American Fisheries Society’s review of marine fish species at risk of extinction, paints a bleak picture for many of our fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico. We therefore urge all of our members and friends to become more engaged in the management process to ensure healthy fisheries in the Gulf.