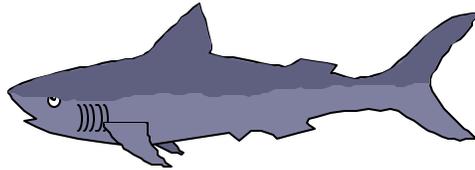


FISH



TALES

Gulf Council Adopts Proposal to Return Red Grouper to a Healthy Level

The long awaited plan to rebuild depleted red grouper populations in the Gulf of Mexico has taken shape after a final plan was completed at the July 2002 meeting of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council), the federal body responsible for jointly managing federal fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico. While the plan may have been completed, “in the water” protections are at least six months away as

the plan is now subject to additional public comment before ultimate approval and implementation by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Accordingly, it is imperative that the NMFS begin the public review process immediately to ensure this species is protected from heavy fishing pressure.

Red grouper was formally identified as depleted in October of 2000, trigger-

ing a legal requirement that the Gulf Council craft and present a plan to rebuild the population for approval and implementation by the NMFS. This one year deadline was

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Red Grouper. Courtesy of Kathy Scanlon of the U.S. Geological Survey.

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Plan to Rebuild Red Snapper Sent Back to Gulf Council

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council’s (Gulf Council) controversial plan to rebuild red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico has been disapproved by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The plan, aimed at rebuilding red snapper by 2032, essentially proposed the “status quo” for the first five years of the plan until the next assessment of the health of the species is conducted in

2005. The primary cause of concern from the NMFS over the plan is the lack of compliance with the National Environ-



Red Snapper. Courtesy of the FWCC.

mental Policy Act (NEPA). As a result, the

Gulf Council will engage in an environmental impact statement (EIS) for the plan starting with a scoping of issues in late August through October.

Background

Identified as “overfished” in 1988, red snapper has been the subject of rebuilding attempts by federal managers for over ten years. Despite over a decade of management and

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- Special points of interest:
- Red Grouper Rebuilding Plan Passed by NMFS/Gulf Council
 - Its Back: Red Snapper Rebuilding Plan Disapproved by NMFS; Public Meetings on the Plan Coming to your Neighborhood
 - Proposal in Congress Threatens Gulf Fish and Fishermen
 - National Research Council Recommends Options to Help Minimize Impacts of Bottom Fishing Gears on Gulf Habitats

Red Snapper Rebuilding Plan....

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some gains made in the size of the population, red snapper remains in a severely depressed state in the Gulf of Mexico according to an assessment of the health of this species done by the NMFS.

With the passage of the Sustainable Fisheries Act in 1996, the Gulf Council and NMFS were mandated to revise the red snapper rebuilding plan to ensure it prevented overexploitation and rebuild the species to a healthy level within at least thirty-two years.

After an initial rebuilding plan submitted by the Gulf Council to the NMFS was rejected in 1999, a revised plan was submitted in May 2001. This plan has been again disapproved by the NMFS based on concerns over NEPA compliance.

Plan Inconsistent With NEPA

NEPA requires that any action taken, authorized or funded by the federal government that significantly affects the quality of the human environment prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) to explore the environmental consequences of that action and propose alternatives to that action that may be less environmentally destructive. NEPA does not force a federal agency to adopt a specific action. It does however, force the agency to carefully explore the environmental effects (direct, indirect and cumulative) of its proposed actions and explain why it decided on a particular action.

The current plan is deemed inconsistent with NEPA for a number of reasons. First, it does not present a reasonable range of alternatives for rebuilding plan actions. It also does not adequately describe the direct,

indirect and cumulative impacts of proposed rebuilding options. Finally, the rationale for proposed rebuilding actions are lacking in many instances. Sadly, the NMFS felt little is wrong with the proposed catch levels that are well above what scientists recommend to prevent overexploitation and rebuild the population.

How You Can Help

Based on this latest rejection, the Gulf Council is now in the process of holding "scoping meetings" around the Gulf to determine what issues should be part of the EIS. It is critical that we ensure the Gulf Council and the NMFS are on notice that we want the plan done right this time! Enclosed you will find a list of these scoping meetings around the Gulf and sample comments that you can submit to the Gulf Council at the meeting.

U.S. Congressional Committee Proposal Threatens Gulf Fisheries



A recent proposal in Congress threatens to roll back many of the badly needed measures in current fish management laws. The proposal, drafted by the U.S. House of Representatives Resources Committee, puts short term economic gains over long term sustainability of our oceans and those that depend on them.

After disastrous collapses of important fish stocks in New England such as cod, Congress acted to ensure that important fish habitat was protected, that species in poor health are properly managed and that wasteful bycatch, marine life caught and oftentimes killed or injured in the process of

catching a target species, be reduced by amending fish management laws. While many of the goals of these amendments have yet to be realized around the country, the blueprints for better management are there. Rather than ensuring continued progress, the House Resources Committee chose to rollback existing measures, opting for a return to the old days. How quickly we forget.

The proposal does this in three major ways. First, the proposal will change the legal definition of when a fish population is considered unhealthy, making it more difficult to identify and rebuild depleted fish species. Secondly, the proposal will weaken exist-

ing requirements to inventory bycatch occurring in our nations fisheries so that this waste can be minimized. Finally, the proposal will eliminate the requirement that adverse impacts caused by fishing gears on the marine environment be minimized to the extent possible.

We need your help to ensure that this bad proposal is voted down by the full U.S. House of Representatives this fall. Please fill out the attached postcard and send it to your representative in Congress. Don't know your representative? Check out www.conservefish.org. to get the information you need. Lets make sure this proposal doesn't stand a chance of be-

National Research Council Issues Report on the Impacts of Bottom Trawling Fishing Gear on Gulf Environments

The National Research Council (NRC), a nonpartisan organization in Washington, D.C. that advises the federal government on scientific issues, recently completed a report on the effects of trawling and dredging on seafloor habitat which provides a number of important findings and recommendations for managing the negative impacts of trawling gear used in the Gulf of Mexico. The report, done at the request of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), looks at the following issues: (1) existing knowledge on the effects of bottom trawling on the structure of seafloor habitats and on marine life; (2) knowledge about changes in seafloor habitats associated with trawling and with the cessation of trawling; (3) research done on the indirect effects of bottom trawling on non-seafloor space; (4) recommending how existing information could be used more effectively in managing trawl fisheries; and (5) recommending research to improve understanding of the effects of bottom trawling on seafloor habitats. The results of this report will be used by government agencies to better manage our fisheries within an ecosystem context.

Trawling in the Gulf of Mexico

In the Gulf region, the primary fishing gears which affect the seafloor are shrimp trawls and oyster and calico scallop dredges with shrimp trawls being the predominant gear that disturbs the ocean floor. The shrimp trawl is a net with accompanying "doors" which are used on the majority of shrimp fishing vessels in this area. The NMFS currently estimates that 3,000 to 7,000 shrimp trawlers operate in the federal waters

(from 3 to 9 miles from shore out to 200 miles) of the Gulf of Mexico. These vessels commonly deploy up to four trawl nets and collectively fish a large portion of the Gulf's ocean bottom. Thanks to many of you, the NMFS just implemented a permit system for the shrimp fishery to get a better idea of how many vessels operate in federal waters in order to determine the magnitude of this problem.



Shrimp boats in Galveston Bay, TX.

The report found that the Gulf of Mexico is the most heavily trawled region in the country, followed by New England. Accordingly, it is an issue that must be explored to further determine impacts and ensure the Gulf ecosystem is adequately protected.

Potential Impacts of Trawling

The impacts of trawling gear center around disturbance of the seafloor, either by directly destroying or redistributing bottom habitats or by killing or injuring marine life which lives on the bottom. The NRC Report breaks impacts down into two categories. The first is direct, which includes the catching and killing of target species such as shrimp and other species caught with shrimp (bycatch) or by making bottom dwelling species more vulnerable to predators as their homes are disturbed or destroyed. It also includes the direct disturbance or destruction

of seafloor habitat.

The second type of effects are indirect. These include reductions in the number of marine animals in the Gulf ecosystem which is likely to affect predator and prey species interactions and the reduction in habitat complexity, reducing suitable habitats for certain species.

Recommendations

The Report contains two key recommendations for management. The first is managing the effects of trawls and dredges based on the known habitat types using a balanced combination of the following tools: (1) Reducing the amount of trawling effort that currently exists; (2) Modification of gear types to those that are less environmentally destructive; and (3) Establishment of areas that are closed to fishing. The second recommendation is using comparative risk assessment to identify and evaluate risks to seafloor habitats and to rank management actions within the context of current laws.

Next Steps

The release of this report could not have come at a better time in our region. The Gulf Council and the NMFS are currently assessing the impacts of fishing gears on Gulf habitats and analyzing alternatives to reduce any adverse impacts. Please see the story on page 3 of *GRN NEWS* for more information on this process and ways to get involved. Furthermore, the NMFS is convening a meeting in Tampa, FL in mid-November to discuss the impacts of bottom fishing on the seafloor. Check the calendar of events section of *GRN News* for the particulars.



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Red Grouper Rebuilding Plan...

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missed, placing responsibility for production of this plan with the NMFS. Rather than produce a plan by themselves, the NMFS decided to have the Gulf Council continue work on their plan and complete it by the legal deadline.

The Plan

After a day and a half of public comment, the Gulf Council voted 13-3 to adopt the following provisions to help rebuild red grouper:

1. Implement mostly precautionary measures to assess the health of the population and define rebuilding goals;
2. Increase the legal size limit of a landed fish from a 20 inch keeper to a 22 inch keeper for both the commercial and recreational fishery;
3. Reduce the limit of groupers which can be kept by recreational fishermen to two fish per day;

4. Prohibit the use of bottom longline gear to catch all fish within the 50 fathom contour line in the Gulf (roughly 100 miles out from St. Petersburg, FL);
5. Reduce the shallow water grouper catch quota from 9.35 million pounds to 7.08 million pounds;
6. Establish a quota of .44 million pounds for tilefish; and
7. Reduce the deepwater grouper catch quota from 1.6 million pounds to 1.02 million pounds



Longline boats in Madeira Beach, FL.

The GRN is pleased that the Gulf Council chose to reduce the catch limit for both shallow and deepwater groupers. Our major concern with previous iterations of this plan was that proposed measures may not adequately

reduce red grouper landings and that the prohibition of longline gear within 50 fathoms in the Gulf may jeopardize deepwater grouper and tilefish species which are unable to handle heavy fishing pressure. Thanks to everyone who submitted comments to help make this possible!

Next Steps

Now that the plan is complete, the NMFS must allow additional time (up to 150 days) for public comment. Considering the fact that this plan has been almost three years in the making and that recent catch levels of red grouper have greatly exceeded levels recommended by scientists to protect the species, it is critical that actions are taken now by the NMFS to ensure that in the water protections are established by early next year at the latest.

Stay tuned for how you can help if the NMFS delays initiation of the public comment period.