

CCA Fact Sheet

South Atlantic Snapper/Grouper

There are several issues that anglers should be informed about involving gag, black and red grouper as well as red and vermilion snapper that are moving forward at the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). These are complex fisheries with a long history of mismanagement and neglect. Managers have been unable or unwilling to rein in overfishing for decades, whether to appease commercial fishers or out of blind hope that a miracle would happen and the stocks would recover on their own.

That miracle never happened.

However, the fundamentals of how we manage our marine resources changed dramatically with passage of the most recent version of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act in 2006. To fully understand what we are facing regarding these particular fish stocks we need some background information:

- Congress recently enacted legislation that requires the SAFMC and NMFS to put in place a fishery management plan that ends overfishing and rebuilds overfished stocks by a date certain.
- Congress also mandated the managers institute more conservative harvest limits by instituting Annual Catch Limits (which end overfishing) with Accountability Measures to assure they reduce harvest sufficiently.

The result of those two points means that managers have less discretion to lessen reductions. **The law says they must end overfishing.**

GROUPERS

- The SAFMC has determined that all three species (gag, black and red grouper) are undergoing overfishing, which means that fishing pressure is removing them at an unsustainable rate.
- The SAFMC has been managing these species for 20 years and yet we still find ourselves facing restrictions.
- The Council adopted these Rules in **AMENDMENT 16** for Gag, Black and Red Grouper:
 - Extend current two-month spawning season closure (Feb. – March) to four months (Jan. – April).
 - Commercial gag quota of 352,940 pounds gutted weight; when that is met all fishing for and sale of shallow water groupers will close.
 - Recreational bag reduced from five grouper to three grouper/day, with only one gag or black, and excluding the captain and crew on for-hire vessels from possessing a bag limit for groupers.
- Since it often takes a year to put regulations in place after the SAFMC passes them, they put in place an Interim Rule effective January 1, 2009 to ensure the conservation regulations take effect next fishing season.

SNAPPERS

VERMILION SNAPPER

- There was a problem found with the vermilion snapper stock assessment and a new one is being run that uses otoliths to age the fish. We will have the results in December.
- The new assessment's preliminary information indicates the vermilion snapper stock is in better shape than the previous assessment indicated and thus regulations may not be as severe as once anticipated.

RED SNAPPER

- The stock assessment found that red snapper are undergoing severe overfishing and are overfished (the spawning stock is estimated at about 3% of an unfished stock).
- Red snapper live more than 50 years, yet most fish that have been aged are 5 years old or less, with none over 10.
- Ending the direct harvest will not end overfishing by itself, a significant source of mortality is from the fish recreational and commercial fishermen release back into the water that die.
- Thus, to end overfishing will require closing other fisheries to reduce the discard mortality.
- About two-thirds of the mortality is from the recreational catch and discard mortality, one-third from the commercial sector.
- Most of the harvest occurs off the northeast coast of Florida.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Amendment 17 will address the snapper issue, and the SAFMC will take up Amendment 17 at its December meeting and select regulatory options that will go out for public comment early next year. They may also put in place an interim rule on red snapper (similar to gag above) that would take effect in mid-2009. They are legally required to have in place a plan to end overfishing and begin to rebuild red snapper by next summer.