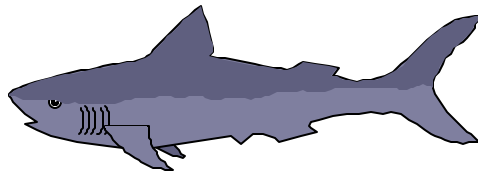


# FISH



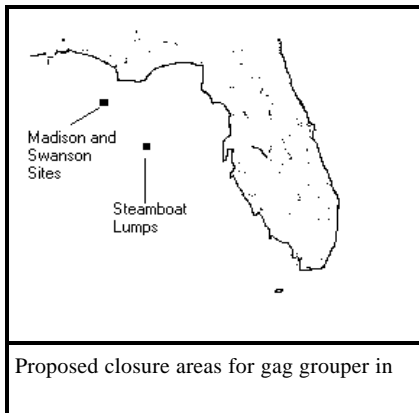
# TALES

## Gulf Council Revises Management Measures For Gag Grouper

At its July 1999 meeting in Key West, FL, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) voted to revise management measures aimed at protecting the gag grouper population in the Gulf of Mexico. Unfortunately, upon reconsideration, the GMFMC cut the size of the originally proposed closed area in half.

Council deliberations involving gag grouper began when this fish was formally identified by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) as

a species “approaching an overfished condition”. This



Proposed closure areas for gag grouper in

finding, made when a fishery will become overfished

within two years if no management measures are taken to reduce the catch, requires that the GMFMC implement management measures to reduce catch within one year. The NMFS indicated that catch levels would need to be reduced by around thirteen percent to meet the present requirements of the law.

In addition to this determination, the GMFMC was presented with scientific information indicating that  
*(Continued on page 4)*

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Special points of interest:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gulf Council votes to close two areas in the Gulf to protect and study gag grouper; approves a one month seasonal closure and increased size limits to cut catch levels</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The NMFS meets with federal agencies around the Gulf of Mexico to implement the new habitat requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gulf Council votes to maintain the 10.6 million pound catch level for king mackerel</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The NMFS implements an emergency rule raising the minimum size limit of red snapper to extend the recreational fishing season until August 29, 1999</li> </ul>	

## NMFS Working With Federal Agencies to Protect Gulf Habitat

Pursuant to the requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 (SFA), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is meeting with federal agencies throughout the Gulf of Mexico to ensure that they are in compliance with new laws protecting fisheries habitat in the Gulf of Mexico.

Recognizing the value of fisheries habitat and the nu-

merous threats to it, Congress added specific provisions (known as the SFA) to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to protect habitat that is essential to the continued productivity of our nations fisheries. Congress specifically required that the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) describe and identify essential fish habitat

(EFH) for each fishery, minimize to the extent practicable adverse effects on habitat by fishing gear, and identify other actions to encourage conservation and enhancement of fisheries habitat.

As a result, in September 1998, the GMFMC identified the entire Gulf of Mexico, including its associated bays and estuaries, as habitat that  
*(Continued on page 3)*

## Gulf Council To Hold Marine Reserve Meetings Around the Gulf

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) will hold a series of public hearings across the Gulf to introduce the concept of marine reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. Members of the public will be allowed to provide their opinions on whether or not marine reserves are a good idea in the Gulf.

Earlier this year, the GMFMC produced a scoping document which explains what marine reserves are and the potential these areas have for better managing our fisheries in the Gulf. This document defines marine reserves as geographically defined spaces in the marine environment where special restrictions are ap-

plied to protect some aspect of the marine ecosystem. Some potential benefits of marine reserves included in the document include the enhancement of commercial and recreational fisheries, the preservation of biodiversity, the reduction of direct and indirect fishing mortality, the creation of wilderness areas for viewing natural ecosystems, and educational and scientific research opportunities. Some of the costs include the limitation of fishing activity in some areas, the inability to predict or guarantee conservation benefits, and increased enforcement complications. A copy of this document can be obtained by contacting the GMFMC at (888) 833-1844 or by

downloading the document from their website found at [www.gulfcouncil.org](http://www.gulfcouncil.org).

The GRN urges its members to review this document and attend hearings in August at the locations listed on the insert found in this newsletter. Marine reserves provide an exciting new management tool which should receive full consideration in the Gulf of Mexico. Public support from conservationists and fishermen around the Gulf will be critical in making sure this happens. As always, please contact the GRN if you have any questions.

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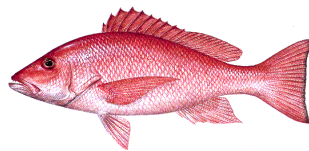
## NMFS Approves Measures to Extend the Recreational Red Snapper Fishing Season

At the request of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) approved an emergency rule which increases the size limit of red snapper from 15 to 18 inches for the recreational red snapper fishery. This measure, which took effect on June 4, 1999, is expected to extend the length of the recreational fishing season by approximately three weeks. Without this action, the recreational sector would have reached its 1999 quota of 4.47 million pounds on August 5, 1999, the earliest closure in the history of the recreational fishery.

Under the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (FCMA), the GMFMC manages the red snapper fishery in the Gulf of Mexico under a quota system. Under this system, the GMFMC votes to set a total allowable catch or "TAC" for the fishery on an annual basis. The 1999 TAC is set at 9.12 million pounds which is split into a commercial and recreational component. The commercial fishery receives 4.65 million pounds while the rec-

reational sector, which includes head boats, charter boats, and private vessels, receives 4.47 million pounds.

Historically, only the commercial fishery was closed when the quota was reached. However, pursuant to the requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA) of



Red Snapper, *Lutjanus campechanus*

1996, which amended the FCMA, the recreational fishery must also be closed when it is projected that the quota will be reached. The projections for 1999 showed that, under a 15 inch size limit and a four fish bag limit, the recreational season would end on August 4, 1999.

Citing detrimental economic impacts on the recreational fishing industry, the GMFMC in May of 1999 requested that the NMFS implement an emergency rule to raise the minimum size limit of red

snapper to 18 inches in order to extend the season until August 29. The NMFS approved this emergency rule stating that the increased size limit will provide benefits to the recreational fishermen and for hire businesses in the region without affecting the rebuilding schedule for red snapper. The NMFS and the GMFMC hope that by raising the size limit of the fish, the number landed will decrease allowing the season to be extended.

The GRN is concerned that while the increase in size limit will decrease the landings of fish, the number of fish actually killed will still be high due to regulatory discards (those fish that are caught and thrown back because they are below the size limit). This will compromise the federally mandated rebuilding schedule in effect for red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. The GRN is currently reviewing the potential effects of this emergency rule in order to provide guidance to the GMFMC when it sets catch levels for red snapper this November.

For further information contact the NMFS at (727) 570-5300.

## Gulf Council Maintains the Status Quo on King Mackerel Catch Levels

At its May 1999 meeting in Austin, TX, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (“GMFMC”) voted to maintain the status quo on the catch rate of 10.6 million pounds for king mackerel in the Gulf of Mexico for the 1999/2000 fishing season.

King mackerel is considered by the National Marine Fisheries Service to be an “overfished” species. The latest assessment of the stock by the GMFMC’s mackerel stock assessment panel also concluded that king mackerel are overfished with current catch rates inconsistent with rebuilding this fishery to healthy levels. While measures taken by the GMFMC appear to be improving the

condition of the fishery, the panel noted that if current fishing levels continue, the fishery will never be able to recover to a level scientists consider healthy. The stock assessment panel concluded that a catch level of 10.1 million pounds for the 1999/2000 fishing year would have about a 50 percent chance of ensuring that catch rates would be low enough to end overfishing. Finally, the panel noted that there is a strong correlation between recruitment of young fish into the population and overall population size. This is key because the recruitment of young fish into the population has declined since 1995/1996.

The Gulf Restoration Network asked the

GMFMC to set catch levels for 1999/2000 between 9 and 10 million pounds in order to end overfishing, continue the rebuilding of the population, and take into account declining recruitment while still allowing a viable fishery. This small cut in catch would also serve to begin a phase in of cuts necessary under the ten year rebuilding plan proposed by the Gulf Council pursuant to the requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996.



King mackerel. From the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council webpage.

## NMFS Working With Federal Agencies....

*(Continued from page 1)*

is essential to Gulf fish populations. The GMFMC also identified non-fishing activities which impact fisheries habitat and provided recommendations for minimizing these impacts. Finally, the Council assessed the impacts of three fishing gears on fisheries habitat, falling short of what the new law requires. As a result, the GMFMC must analyze the remaining gear types as soon as information becomes available.

While the GMFMC did identify measures to minimize the impacts of non-fishing activities on EFH, these only serve as recommendations. Persons carrying out activities which adversely affect fisheries habitat are not required to follow the GMFMC’s recommendations. However, any federal agency which authorizes, funds, or undertakes an action which affects fisheries habitat must consult with the NMFS to assess the impacts its activities will have on essential fish habitat. This assessment includes a description of the proposed action; an analysis

of the effects, including cumulative effects, of the proposed action on essential fish habitat; effects on fishery species; and proposed mitigation if applicable.

The NMFS is currently meeting with federal agencies around the Gulf to explain the new requirements of the law and discuss how federal agencies will meet these requirements. The NMFS will meet with: the Corps of Engineers (which issues permits for the development of wetlands, builds flood control structures and carries out maintenance operations on navigation channels), the Minerals Management Service (which regulates oil and gas development in federal waters), the Federal Highway Administration, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency (which regulates air, water, and solid waste pollution), the Federal Energy Regulatory Council, and the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Once consultation is completed, the agencies must assess the impacts of their activities on fisheries habitat. This assessment

will be forwarded to the NMFS for review. If there is any disagreement between the federal agency and the NMFS over the assessment, the federal agency must support its findings. However, as previously noted, the agency is not required to follow the recommendations of the NMFS.

With the entire Gulf of Mexico identified as essential fish habitat, all federal agency activities which affect fisheries habitat must be assessed to determine if adverse effects will occur. While this is a great first step in protecting fishery habitat, it is very important that residents of the Gulf of Mexico ensure that agencies are doing an adequate job of assessing impacts and that the NMFS scrutinizes the findings of federal agencies. The GRN is currently seeking groups and individuals around the Gulf to monitor these activities to ensure the requirements of the SFA are satisfied.



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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, the Trull Foundation, and the Margaret Cullinan Wray Lead Annuity Trust for making our work possible.*

## Council Revises Gag Management...

the population of male gag grouper in the Gulf of Mexico has declined to levels which could result in inbreeding in the species.

Gag are protogynous hermaphrodites, which means that all fish start their lives as females with the larger fish becoming males over time. Gag also form spawning aggregations where large numbers of gag “group” together at specific sites in the Gulf in order to spawn. Scientists believe that fishing on spawning aggregations takes the larger more aggressive fish which are typically males. This has most likely led to the precipitous drop in the number of male gag groupers in the population. While males have historically comprised about 17 percent of the gag population, the current level is believed to be around 2 percent.

Scientists urged the GMFMC to close areas of the Gulf in order to provide protection for male gag grouper, spawning aggregations, and for scientific studies to gather more information on the reproductive biology of gag.

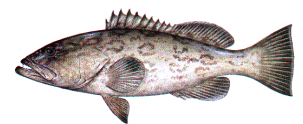
Based on this information and extensive public comment from December of 1998 through March of 1999, the GMFMC approved management measures in March of 1999, which included a 432 square mile closed area and size limit increases imposed on the commercial and recreational fisheries. However, a strong reaction by affected fishermen bolstered by a minority letter filed by five GMFMC members opposing the closure led to the GMFMC voting in May of 1999 to reconsider this issue at the July meeting.

After hearing testimony from fishermen, scientists, and conservation groups, the GMFMC decided to scale back the closed area from 432 square miles to approximately 220 square miles split into two sections. These areas, known as the Madison and Swanson sites and Steamboat Lumps, will be closed on a year round basis to all reef fish fishing for four years. Scientists plan to use these two areas to study gag grouper reproductive biology in greater detail and study the impacts a closed area will have on gag populations.

The GMFMC also imposed a February 15 to March 15 closure on commercial catch and sale of gag, red, and black grouper in all federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico in order to provide protection for spawning aggregations. The GMFMC hopes that by prohibiting the take of all three species, gag will not be captured as bycatch in the red or black grouper fishery.

Finally, the GMFMC voted to retain an increase in size limits from 20 to 24 inches under a different schedule for the recreational and commercial sector of the fishery.

While the GRN hoped the GMFMC would keep the original management measures, we are pleased that



Gag, *Mycteroperca microlepis*

they retained closed areas to protect gag grouper and allow for scientific research. Public input from GRN members was critical in ensuring that these closed areas were implemented. Thanks to everyone