

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management

Date: February 10, 2016

Subject: Gulf Gag and Black Grouper Federal Consistency

Purpose:

Request approval to advertise proposed rule changes for recreational harvest of Gulf gag and black grouper consistent with Gulf federal rules recently approved by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) and pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

Summary:

In 2014, a new gag grouper stock assessment was released, and indicated that the stock was not overfished or undergoing overfishing. However, stakeholder concerns about the health of the stock and updated catch-per-unit-effort data indicate the stock assessment may have been overly optimistic. Based on this information, the Council is taking a conservative approach to gag grouper management and recently approved changes to recreational grouper regulations that are expected to take effect in 2016.

The Council established a new expanded recreational season in federal waters for gag, which will run June 1 through Dec. 31, instead of the previous season of July 1 through Dec 3. This new season was selected as a way to help eliminate discards of gag grouper taking place during the red snapper season in June, while also providing additional fishing opportunities for southwest Florida anglers during December. Southwest Florida anglers and for-hire businesses have emphasized that being able to harvest gag grouper in late December is important for their region. In addition, the Council approved recreational size limit increases for both gag and black groupers from 22 inches up to 24 inches total length. The recreational size limits for both gag and black grouper were modified because anglers commonly confuse these two species.

The April 1 – June 30 season in state waters off Franklin, Wakulla, Taylor, and Jefferson counties would not be changed to continue to allow for harvest of gag grouper in Big Bend state waters when gag grouper are available.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends approving the proposed rule amendments via federal consistency action to set a 24 inch total length minimum size limit for the recreational harvest of gag and black groupers in Gulf state waters (excluding Monroe County) and a June 1 through Dec. 31 recreational season for gag grouper in all state waters of the Gulf (excluding Franklin, Wakulla, Taylor, Jefferson, and Monroe counties).

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Martha Bademan, Division of Marine Fisheries Management