



Gulf Gag and Black Grouper

Proposed Adoption of Federal Standards
February 10, 2016

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This is a summary of proposed rules to adopt federal standards for Gulf of Mexico gag and black grouper. These proposed rules are consistent with pending federal action that is expected to establish a 24-inch total length recreational minimum size limit for gag and black groupers and a June 1 through Dec. 31 recreational season for gag grouper in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

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Background and Final Council Action



- 2014 Gulf gag grouper stock assessment
 - No longer overfished or undergoing overfishing
 - Updated data indicate stock assessment was overly optimistic
 - Some fishermen have concerns about stock health
- Council-approved changes pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce
 - Lengthened recreational season to June 1 through Dec. 31
 - Helps minimize discards during red snapper season
 - Additional fishing opportunities for southwest Florida
 - Increased recreational minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches for gag and black groupers



In 2014, a new Gulf gag grouper stock assessment was released and indicated that the stock was neither overfished nor undergoing overfishing. However, updated catch-per-unit-effort data indicate this stock assessment may have been overly optimistic. In addition, many stakeholders voiced concerns about the health of the stock, and felt that the stock was not in as good of shape as the assessment indicated.

Based on updated information and stakeholder concerns, the Council approved new management measures for the gag grouper fishery, which are now pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. The Council lengthened the recreational season to June 1 through Dec. 31 (the current federal season is July 1 through Dec. 2). This season was selected as a way to help eliminate discards of gag grouper 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. In addition, the Council approved a recreational size limit increase for gag and black groupers from 22 to 24 inches total length. The recreational size limit for both gag and black groupers was modified because anglers commonly confuse these two species. Based on Commission direction, staff supported these changes for federal waters, which are expected to take effect before the 2016 gag grouper season opens.

Proposed Rules

68B-14.0035 Size Limits: Amberjack, Black Sea Bass, Gray Triggerfish, Grouper, Hogfish, Red Porgy, Snapper

- Increase the minimum size limit for gag and black grouper recreationally harvested in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico (excluding Monroe County) from 22 to 24 inches total length

68B-14.0039 Recreational Grouper Seasons

- Extend the recreational harvest season for gag grouper in all state waters of the Gulf of Mexico, except in state waters of Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, Taylor, and Monroe counties, to be June 1 through Dec. 31 each year

These changes are consistent with pending federal rules



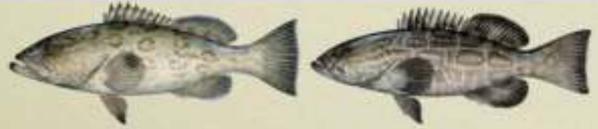
Chapter 68B-14.0035, FAC, (Size Limits: Amberjack, Black Sea Bass, Gray Triggerfish, Grouper, Hogfish, Red Porgy, Snapper) would be modified to increase the minimum size limit for gag and black grouper recreationally harvested in the Gulf of Mexico (excluding Monroe County) from 22 to 24 inches total length. Anglers harvesting grouper in state waters off Monroe County follow Atlantic regulations for grouper.

Chapter 68B-14.0039, FAC, (Recreational Grouper Seasons) would be modified to extend the recreational season for gag grouper in Gulf state waters excluding state waters of Franklin, Wakulla, Taylor, Jefferson, and Monroe counties to be June 1 through Dec. 31 each year.

These changes are consistent with Gulf federal rules recently approved by the Council and pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

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 in this area.

Staff Recommendation



Approve the proposed rules to:

- Set a 24-inch total length minimum size limit for recreational harvest of gag and black grouper in Gulf state waters (excluding Monroe County)
- Set 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

If approved by the Commission, the rule will be noticed and filed without further hearing as allowed under the adopting federal standards provision



Staff recommends approving the proposed rules setting 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 using the process of adopting federal standards under Chapter 120.54(6), Florida Statutes. The proposed rules would only be filed for state waters if the 24-inch total length minimum size limit for gag and black grouper and the June 1 through Dec. 31 recreational season for gag grouper in Gulf federal waters off Florida is approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and implemented by NOAA Fisheries.

If the Commission approves the proposed rule amendment, the decision would be final and the rule will be filed without further hearing.

Staff have evaluated the rules under the standards of 68-1.004, FAC, and found them to be in compliance.