

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: June 22, 2016
Subject: Consent Item: Commercial Yellowtail Snapper Gear Draft Rule

Purpose:

Staff will present draft rules that would modify current commercial Gulf of Mexico yellowtail snapper gear requirements to be consistent with recent changes approved for Gulf federal waters.

Summary:

In the Gulf of Mexico, recreational and commercial fishermen that are fishing for reef fish are required to use circle hooks when they are fishing with natural baits. The intent of this requirement is to reduce mortality of reef fish that are released after being caught by reducing the frequency of gut hooking. At the request of the commercial yellowtail snapper industry, the Gulf Council recently removed this requirement for the commercial yellowtail snapper fishery in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico south of 25°09' north latitude (just south of Cape Sable off mainland Monroe County). The Council approved this exception for the commercial yellowtail snapper fishery because of the unique and readily distinguishable practices of this fishery, which operates in the Florida Keys south of Cape Sable. The commercial fishery uses large amounts of chum to bring the yellowtail snapper near the water surface, then they harvest the fish on rods similar to cane poles with small hooks and natural baits. Commercial fishermen indicated to the Council that yellowtail snapper are gut-hooked more often on small circle hooks than on the small J-hooks used in the South Atlantic. (On the Atlantic side, there is no requirement for use of circle hooks when fishing for any reef fish in either state or federal waters south of 28°00' north latitude.) Also, the release tools they use allow for quick release of fish caught on J-hooks, but seem to be less efficient when used to release fish caught on circle hooks. Allowing use of J-hooks in the commercial fishery instead of circle hooks could improve survival rates of released yellowtail snapper and make gear regulations for the commercial harvest consistent across Gulf and Atlantic waters.

This federal consistency action would modify existing reef fish regulations to exempt commercial harvesters in the Gulf of Mexico south of 25°09' north latitude from the requirement to use stainless steel circle hooks when fishing for yellowtail snapper on hook-and-line gear with natural baits.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends approving the proposed rules for publication. If this proposed rule is approved, Commission staff would file the rule as allowed by the noticing requirements of 120.54 (6) Florida Statutes, which provides a process for adoption of federal standards without further hearing. Staff recommends the proposed rules take effect the same date as the rule change for federal waters.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Jessica McCawley, Director, Division of Marine Fisheries Management