



Gulf Gag Grouper
Final Public Hearing and Proposed Adoption of Federal Standards
July 11, 2017
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

This presentation will review the proposed final rule for the recreational gag grouper season in the Big Bend (Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties) region. Additionally, staff will present a rule to adopt federal standards for the commercial minimum size limit of gag grouper in the Gulf of Mexico.

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Unless otherwise noted, images throughout the presentation are by FWC.

Background

Draft rule approved by FWC

- Modify the recreational season in the Big Bend (Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties)
 - Continue April 1 – June 30 season
 - Add fall open season Sept. 1 – Dec. 31

Council final action

- Increased the commercial minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches total length for Gulf federal waters



The Commission will consider final action on these items for state waters

At their April 2017 meeting, the Commission approved a draft rule to modify the recreational gag grouper season in the Big Bend (Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson and Taylor counties) by maintaining the current April 1 – June 30 season and adding a fall open season of Sept. 1 – Dec. 31. The season in the rest of the Gulf of Mexico (excluding Monroe County) in both state and federal waters is June 1 – Dec. 31.

At the April 2017 Gulf Council meeting, the Council took final action to increase the commercial gag grouper minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches total length. The Commission may implement a similar change through federal consistency action.

The Commission will consider final action on these items for state waters.

Recreational Season



Proposed change

- Modify Big Bend season by adding Sept. 1 – Dec. 31 open season to the current April 1 – June 30 season

Considerations

- Would make Big Bend season length same as elsewhere in Gulf
- Big Bend stakeholders largely support fall opening
- Weather and fish availability during spring season can be variable, but the early season provides fishing and economic opportunities
- Federal quota not being met despite longer seasons and quota increases
- Federally-permitted for-hire must follow federal season in state waters



FWC staff received a variety of stakeholder requests for changes to the Big Bend season. There is support to open the Big Bend region during the fall including September, October, November and/or December. There is support to keep the season open continuously or potentially weekends only in the fall. Many recreational anglers support keeping the current spring season of April 1 - June 30, and keeping harvest closed from January through March as a spawning season closure. Some anglers requested making the season consistent with the June 1 - Dec. 31 season elsewhere in the Gulf. Others urged caution in extending the season because of concerns about the status of the gag grouper stock.

The proposed final rule would modify the Big Bend season by maintaining the current April 1 to June 30 season and adding an open season of Sept. 1 to Dec. 31. Big Bend stakeholders largely support a fall opening. This fall addition would make the Big Bend season length same as elsewhere in the Gulf. Many stakeholders stated that the weather and fish availability during the spring season can be variable, but supported keeping the April – June season because it provides valuable fishing and economic opportunities. Additionally, the federal gag grouper recreational quota is not being met despite longer seasons and quota increases. This suggests that lengthening the Big Bend recreational season likely would not cause a federal quota overrun if current harvest trends continue. However, not meeting the quota could also indicate that the 2017 stock assessment update maybe overly optimistic about the status of gag grouper.

Federally-permitted for-hire vessels may only fish in state waters if state and federal waters are both open, which means these vessels would not be able to take advantage of the April – May portion of the state season. Since federal waters are open June 1 – Dec. 31, federally permitted for-hire vessels would be able to fish in state waters of this area during June and from September through December.

Commercial Size Limit

Proposed changes

- Increase the commercial minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches total length

Considerations

- Would make commercial and recreational size limits the same
- Will make Gulf regulations consistent with Atlantic regulations



At its April meeting, the Council took final action to increase the commercial minimum size limit for gag grouper from 22 to 24 inches total length. This federal change is now pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. This change was requested by Florida commercial grouper fishermen, and will make Gulf regulations consistent with Atlantic regulations and will create less of a compliance burden for fishermen in the south Florida area. Additionally, this would make the commercial size limit the same as the current recreational size limit.

Proposed Final Rules



68B-14.0039 Recreational Grouper Seasons

- Modify season for Big Bend (Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties)
 - Continue April 1 – June 30 season
 - Add fall open season Sept. 1 – Dec. 31

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

- Increase minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches total length

68B-14.00355 Size Limits for Importation and Sale

- Increase minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches total length



The proposed final rule for the recreational gag grouper season in the Big Bend would modify 68B-14.0039 by adding a fall open season of Sept. 1 – Dec. 31, in addition to the current April 1 – June 30 season. The proposed final rules for the commercial gag grouper size limit would modify 68B-14.0035 and 68B-14.00355 by increasing the minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches total length for commercial harvest, importation, and sale.

Staff Recommendation



Approve the proposed final rules

- Modify season for Big Bend (Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties)
 - Continue April 1 – June 30 season
 - Add fall open season Sept. 1 – Dec. 31
- Increase minimum size limits for Gulf commercial harvest and statewide importation and sale from 22 to 24 inches total length

If approved by the Commission, the minimum size limit changes will be noticed and filed without further hearing as allowed under the adopting federal standards provision of section 120.54(6), Florida Statutes



Staff recommends approving the proposed final rule for the state waters recreational season for Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties. The proposed rule would modify the season for this region by adding a fall season from Sept. 1 through Dec. 31 in addition to the current April 1 - June 30 season. This change would be effective by Sept. 1, 2017.

Additionally, staff recommends increasing the commercial gag grouper minimum size limit for state waters of the Gulf of Mexico and statewide importation and sale to 24-inches total length using the process of adopting federal standards under Chapter 120.54(6), Florida Statutes. The proposed rule would only be filed for state waters if the 24-inch total length minimum size limit for commercially harvested gag grouper in federal waters is approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and implemented by NOAA Fisheries.

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