



Removal of Venting Tool Requirement Gulf of Mexico

Proposed Adoption of Federal Standards
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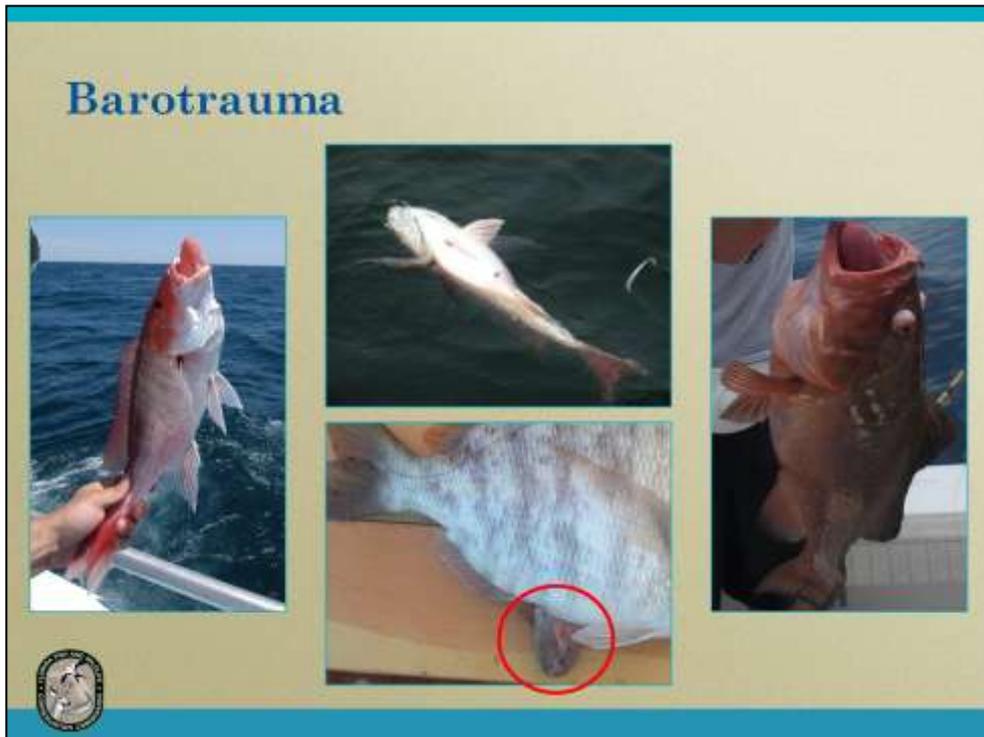
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This is a summary of a proposed rule to adopt federal standards for reef fish gear regulations in the Gulf of Mexico. Reef fish gear regulations are located in Chapter 68B-14, Florida Administrative Code (FAC). This action would make state regulations in the Gulf of Mexico consistent with recent federal action that eliminated the requirement to possess and use venting tools when fishing for reef fish in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

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Barotrauma is damage to internal organs that is caused when fish are quickly brought to the surface from deep water (typically depths greater than 50 feet). The change in pressure from depth to the surface causes gases within the fish's swim bladder to expand. The pressure exerted by these gases can cause the swim bladder to burst, often resulting in the gases forcing the stomach to protrude out of the mouth, the intestines to protrude out of the anus, the eyes to bulge, and/or the belly to appear bloated.

Barotrauma can reduce the likelihood fish survive when returned to the water because of size limits, seasonal restrictions, or other reasons. Increasing the rate of survival of fish affected by barotrauma is important from a fisheries management standpoint and for stock assessments. Generally, the more fish that survive after release, the more fish there are available to reproduce and potentially harvest in the future. Typically, fish suffering from barotrauma must be treated in order to survive. Treatment methods such as venting are used to allow the gases to escape and relieve the pressure on the body cavity, allowing the fish to swim back down to natural depths. Alternatively, newer methods such as the use of descending devices have been developed to quickly lower the fish back down to the water depth where it was captured. Both methods will be discussed in this presentation.

Background – Venting Tools



- Hollow, sharpened objects that can allow gases to escape the body cavity when used properly
- Required in Gulf state and federal waters since 2008
- Intended to increase survival of released fish in the red snapper fishery
 - Applied to all Gulf reef fish
- Available scientific information suggested venting reduced discard mortality
- Intended to conserve fishery resources by minimizing release mortality



Venting tools are hollow, sharpened objects (such as a syringe without the plunger) that can allow gases to escape from a fish's body cavity when used properly. Anyone fishing for reef fish in the Gulf of Mexico has been required to possess and use venting tools in state and federal waters since 2008. This requirement was intended to increase the survival rates of released red snapper, but applied to all species of Gulf reef fish. Venting tools are not required in Atlantic state or federal waters.

The intent of the venting tool requirement was to conserve fishery resources by minimizing discard mortality of reef fish caught in deep water that are not harvested due to regulations or other reasons.

Federal Action



- Eliminated requirement to possess and use venting tools for Gulf reef fish in federal waters effective Sept. 3, 2013
- Reasons why Council eliminated the rule
 - Fish do not always need to be vented
 - New alternatives such as descending devices have been developed



At the February 2013 Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting, the Council took final action to remove the requirement to possess and use venting tools when fishing for reef fish in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. This action was approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce in August 2013 and became effective Sept. 3, 2013. The Council removed the venting tool requirement for several reasons. While venting can be useful, fish do not always need to be vented, and in these cases, venting can cause unnecessary harm to the fish. Improper venting techniques can pierce vital organs and lead to internal bleeding. Venting fish also requires additional handling time and can result in physical injury or physiological stress for the fish, which could decrease the chances that the fish will survive after release. Also, new alternatives such as descending devices have been developed to reduce release mortality.

By removing this rule, fishing regulations in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico now provide fishermen the freedom to determine how to best release reef fish using release devices they feel are appropriate, depending on the circumstances. The following slide highlights a few of the newer tools being used to release fish when fishing in deeper water.



New approaches have been developed to recompress internal gases in fish as opposed to venting, which releases the built-up gases. In fish suffering from barotrauma, recompressing entails lowering the fish to certain depths and pressures, which causes the built-up gases in a fish's body cavity to recompress and allows the fish to swim away. In certain fisheries like the Pacific coast rockfish fishery, this method to release fish has been highly successful at reducing the rate of release mortality.

There are several different methods and devices to recompress fish. Some are as simple as an upside down milk crate that is lowered into the water with the fish inside. Other devices are more sophisticated, such as gripping devices that are attached to a fishing rod's line and can release fish at pre-programmed depths of 50, 100, or 150 feet.

The goal of all of these devices is to reduce the mortality of fish brought up from depth that are released. Florida Sea Grant is currently conducting trials to test the utility and practicality of these devices with the goal of giving anglers options when releasing fish.

Current State Regulations - Gulf

Gear Required When Fishing for Reef Fish - Recreational and Commercial Harvest

- Non-stainless steel, non-offset circle hooks
- Dehooking devices
- **Venting tools**
- Requirement to use circle hooks and dehooking devices would remain in place



Current state recreational regulations for Gulf of Mexico reef fish gear include the use of non-stainless steel non-offset circle hooks, dehooking devices, and venting tools for both the recreational and commercial sectors. Today, the Commission will consider removing the requirement to possess and use venting tools in state waters of the Gulf.

The requirement to use non-stainless steel non-offset circle hooks and dehooking devices in state waters of the Gulf would remain in place. These tools minimize handling times for reef fish, which aids in survival of the fish upon release.

Proposed Rule

68B-14.005 Regulation and Prohibition of Certain Harvesting Gear: Allowable Gear, Incidental Bycatch, Violation

- *Eliminate the requirement to possess and use venting tools when fishing for reef fish in the Gulf of Mexico*

This change would make state rules consistent with federal rules



Chapter 68B-14.005, FAC, (Regulation and Prohibition of Certain Harvesting Gear: Allowable Gear, Incidental Bycatch, Violation) would be modified to eliminate the requirement to possess and use venting tools when fishing for reef fish in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico. This requirement currently applies to both recreational and commercial harvesters.

Removing this requirement would be beneficial to anglers and commercial fishermen because it gives them the freedom to use whichever release methods and tools that are appropriate for their situation and work best for them.

If this proposed rule amendment is approved, this decision would be final and the rule will be filed without further hearing.

Staff Recommendation



- Approve the proposed rule amendment for Gulf of Mexico reef fish gear regulations
 - Eliminate the requirement to possess and use venting tools when fishing for reef fish in the Gulf of Mexico

- Outreach staff will continue to demonstrate the benefits of venting and descending devices when used properly

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 adopting consistent state regulations for Gulf reef fish gear regulations and using the process of adopting federal standards under Chapter 120.54(6), Florida Statutes. Division of Marine Fisheries Management Outreach and Education staff will inform the public of the regulation changes and continue to demonstrate the benefits of venting and descending devices when used properly. If the Commission approves the proposed rule amendment, it would be advertised and then filed without further public hearing and become effective as soon as possible.

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