



**Red Grouper Bag Limit
Modification – Gulf of Mexico**
Proposed Adoption of Federal Standards
November 20, 2014
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Marine Fisheries Management



Version 1

This is a summary of a proposed rule that would specify a recreational red grouper bag limit of two-fish per person per day (within the four-grouper aggregate bag limit) in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico, excluding Monroe County. This action would make state recreational grouper regulations in the Gulf of Mexico consistent with federal regulations that were approved at the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) October meeting and are now pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

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Report date: October 27, 2014

Background – Gulf Red Grouper



- 2011: Gulf red grouper bag limit raised from 2 fish to 4 fish in state and federal waters
 - Opportunity to “give back” to anglers and increase harvest of recreational ACL
- 2013: Recreational ACL exceeded
- 2014: in response to 2013 ACL overrun, accountability measures take effect:
 - Bag limit reduced to 3 fish from May 5 – Dec. 31, 2014
 - Oct. 4: annual catch target expected to be met and season closed until 2015



In 2011, the recreational bag limit for red grouper in the Gulf of Mexico was raised from two-fish per person to four-fish per person. At the time, red grouper was not overfished or undergoing overfishing, and the bag limit increase was seen by the Council as a way to “give back” to recreational anglers and allow the recreational sector to catch more of their allocation and the overall recreational annual catch limit (ACL). An increase in the recreational red grouper bag limit was not expected to significantly increase harvest. Later in 2011, the Commission approved the recreational bag limit increase for red grouper harvested in Gulf state waters.

In 2012, the Council added an accountability measure to the recreational red grouper bag limit that would reduce the bag limit from four fish to three fish in the event of the recreational sector exceeding the ACL. In 2014, NOAA Fisheries announced that the recreational sector had exceeded the ACL for 2013 and reduced the red grouper bag limit in federal waters from four fish to three fish for the remainder of 2013. In addition, NOAA Fisheries announced that recreational harvest of red grouper would close in Gulf federal waters beginning October 4, 2014 due to the ACL overage in 2013 and the 2014 annual catch target being reached.

FWC Request and Council Action



- Stakeholders requested FWC and Council reduce red grouper bag limit to 2 fish in response to early season closure
 - Increase number of federal season fishing days
 - Allow for federal season to extend later into the year
 - Strong support from Florida anglers and for-hire captains
- Commission directed FWC representative to the Council to request recreational bag limit of 2 red grouper
- Council final action in October:
 - Set red grouper bag limit in Gulf federal waters at 2 fish
 - Expected to provide more fishing days
 - Effective January 1, 2015 pending approval



After NOAA Fisheries announced the in-season closure of red grouper in Gulf federal waters this year, FWC staff and Commissioners received feedback from anglers and for-hire captains that depend heavily on being able to harvest red grouper when fishing offshore, and how the federal closure would negatively impact their fishing trips. Many anglers and for-hire captains referenced the importance of keeping red grouper open for as long as possible and suggested dropping the red grouper bag limit from four fish to two fish (which could help avoid future closures in the recreational fishery by reducing overall harvest). After hearing from stakeholders on this issue at the June 2014 FWC meeting, the Commission directed staff to request the Council reduce the bag limit from four fish to two fish in an effort to keep future federal recreational red grouper seasons open longer.

After considering the Commission's request and testimony of Gulf grouper anglers and captains, the Council took final action to set the red grouper bag limit in Gulf federal waters at two fish. Additionally, the Council removed the recreational red grouper bag limit accountability measure because it was seen as confusing to anglers and no longer necessary after the Council approved the permanent bag limit reduction. These actions are expected to provide more federal fishing days for red grouper and are widely-supported by grouper anglers and for-hire captains throughout Florida's Gulf Coast. The new red grouper bag limit will take effect January 1, 2015 if approved by the US Secretary of Commerce.

Current State Recreational Red Grouper Regulations – Gulf of Mexico

- Included in 4-fish aggregate bag limit for all groupers in Gulf of Mexico excluding Monroe County
 - Zero-fish bag limit for captain and crew of for-hire vessels
- 20" size limit
- Allowable gear: hook and line, spearing



In state waters of the Gulf of Mexico excluding Monroe County, groupers are managed under an aggregate bag limit of four-fish per person per day. Red grouper is included in this aggregate bag limit. Today, the Commission will consider specifying a recreational Gulf red grouper bag limit of two-fish per person per day within the grouper aggregate bag limit.

Additional rules for recreational red grouper harvest in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico include a zero-fish bag limit for captain and crew of for-hire vessels. Red grouper must also be at least 20 inches total length to be harvested recreationally. Anglers targeting groupers can use hook and line or spearing devices.

The following slides outline changes that could be made to FWC rules to be consistent with changes pending for Gulf federal waters.

Proposed Rule

68B-14.0036 Recreational Bag Limits: Snapper, Grouper, Hogfish, Black Sea Bass, Red Porgy, Amberjacks, Tilefish, Exception, Wholesale/Retail Purchase Exemption

- *Set recreational red grouper bag limit of two-fish per person within the grouper aggregate in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico excluding Monroe County*
- Likely will result in a longer federal season, benefiting private anglers and for-hire captains who fish for red grouper in federal waters



Chapter 68B-14.0036, FAC, (Recreational Bag Limits: Snapper, Grouper, Hogfish, Black Sea Bass, Red Porgy, Amberjacks, Tilefish, Exception, Wholesale/Retail Purchase Exemption) would be amended to specify a recreational red grouper bag limit of two-fish per person per day (within the 4-grouper aggregate bag limit) in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico excluding Monroe County. Anglers harvesting grouper in state waters off Monroe County follow Atlantic limits for grouper.

Specifying a recreational red grouper bag limit of two-fish per person would likely result in a longer federal season because it would take longer to reach the recreational ACL with the reduced bag limit. This would benefit federally-permitted for-hire vessels that are required to follow federal rules for red grouper, even when fishing in state waters, and would also benefit private recreational anglers that fish for red grouper in federal waters.

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

Staff Recommendation



- Approve the proposed rule specifying a recreational red grouper bag limit of two-fish per person in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico excluding Monroe County

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

- Set bag limit by Jan. 1, 2015 via Executive Order if necessary



Staff recommends approving the proposed rule specifying a recreational red grouper bag limit of two-fish per person per day (within the four-grouper aggregate) in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico excluding Monroe County using the process of adopting federal standards under Chapter 120.54(6), Florida Statutes. This proposed rule would only be filed for state waters if the two-fish recreational bag limit for Gulf red grouper is approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and implemented in federal waters by NOAA Fisheries. If the Commission approves the proposed rule, this rule would be filed without further public hearing. Staff recommends making this rule effective on January 1, 2015 to match when the federal bag limit change is expected to occur. Because this rule would not be filed until after the federal rule is implemented, staff also recommends using an Executive Order, if necessary, to ensure that this rule is effective by January 1, 2015.

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

The following slides are considered back up material and are not anticipated to be part of the Commission meeting presentation

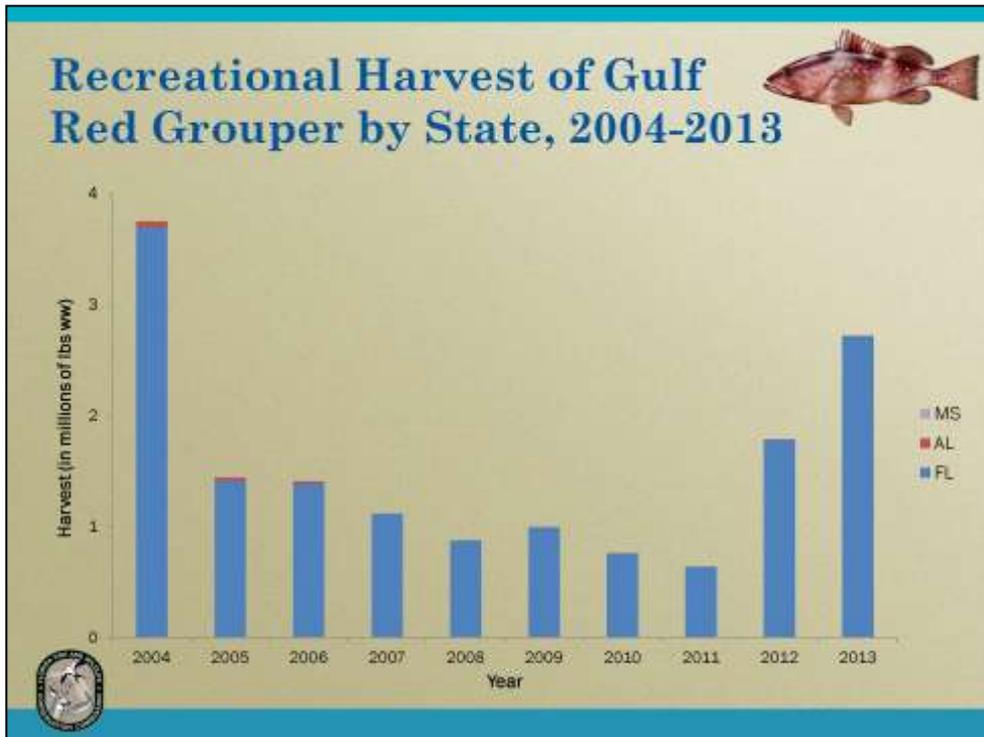


Recreational Red Grouper Landings by Year, 2010-2013

Year	Annual Catch Limit (ACL) in mp	Recreational Harvest (mp)	Percentage of ACL Harvested
2010	1,850,000	635,680	34%
2011	1,510,000	643,745	43%
2012	1,900,000	1,752,930	92%
2013	1,900,000	2,377,111	125%

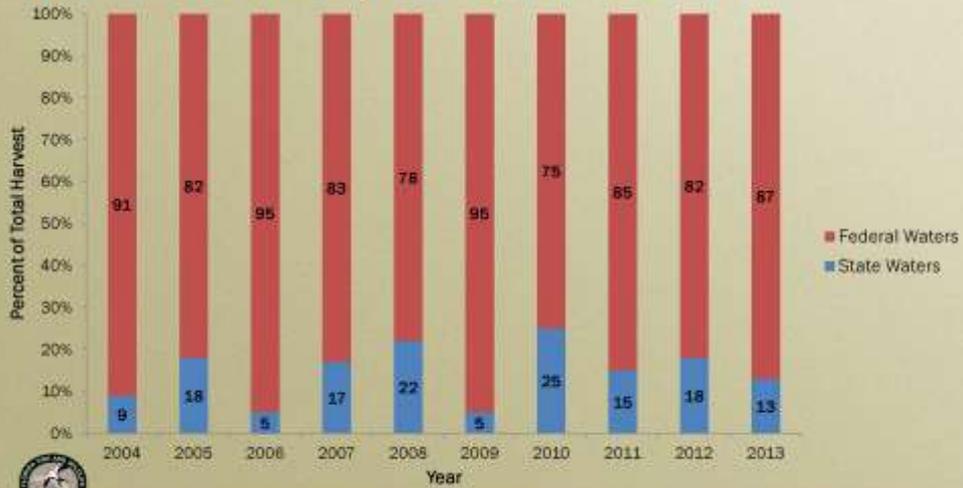


The recreational ACL for Gulf red grouper had not been met in recent years leading up to 2011, when the recreational bag limit for red grouper was raised from two-fish per person per day to four-fish per person per day. In 2013, the recreational ACL was exceeded for the first time in recent history, prompting requests from anglers to reduce the bag limit back to two fish per person per day in an effort to keep the recreational season open for a longer time period.

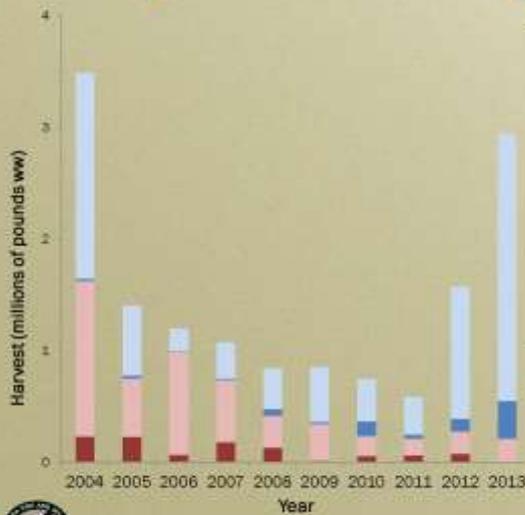


The above graph shows harvest of Gulf red grouper by state (both state and federal waters included) from 2004 to 2013. Texas was not included in the data set. Out of the Gulf states included in the data set (Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana), only Florida reported landings in every year from 2004 through 2013. Louisiana reported no landings during this period. Mississippi reported landings in 2004 only.

Percentage of Red Grouper Harvested Recreationally Off West Florida by Area, 2004-2013



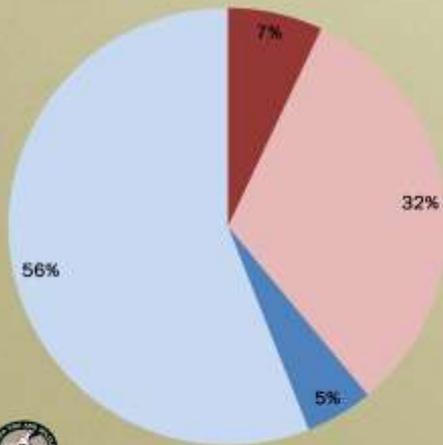
Recreational Harvest of Red Grouper in the Gulf by Region



- W. Central FL Federal Waters
- W. Central FL State Waters
- Panhandle Federal Waters
- Panhandle State Waters



Recreational Harvest of Red Grouper in the Gulf by Region, 2004-2013



- Panhandle State Waters
- Panhandle Federal Waters
- W. Central FL State Waters
- W. Central FL Federal Waters

