

**Special Accommodations**

Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Anne Alford at the Council (see ADDRESSES) by June 14, 1999.

Dated: May 27, 1999.

**Bruce C. Morehead,**

*Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.*  
[FR Doc. 99-14073 Filed 6-2-99; 8:45 am]

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**DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE****National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

[I.D. 052699E]

**Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; Public Meeting**

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Notice of public meeting.

**SUMMARY:** The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council will convene a public meeting to receive public input on possible changes to its proposed "Regulatory Amendment to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan to Set 1999 Gag/Black Grouper Management Measures."

**DATES:** This meeting will begin at 8:30 a.m. on Wednesday, June 23, 1999 and continue into the afternoon as necessary.

**ADDRESSES:** The meeting will be held at the Oakland Terrace Clubhouse, 1900 West 11<sup>th</sup> Street, Panama City, FL.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:** Steven Atran, Population Dynamics Statistician, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, 3018 U.S. Highway 301 North, Suite 1000, Tampa, FL 33619; telephone: 813-228-2815.

**SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:** In March 1999, the Council voted to submit the regulatory amendment to NMFS with a proposal to create a 423 nautical square mile area off the Gulf coast of Florida that would be closed year-round to all reef fish fishing. The purpose of this proposal was to protect spawning aggregations of gag and to protect a portion of the male gag population, which stays offshore year-round and has declined in proportion to the female gag population in recent years. The regulatory amendment also proposed to provide increased protection for juvenile gag by raising the minimum size limit for gag and black grouper from

the current 20 inches total length (TL) to 24 inches TL, which is the size at 50 percent female maturity for gag. The new minimum size limit for the commercial fishery would take effect immediately upon implementation, while the minimum size limit for the recreational fishery would be increased to 22 inches TL initially, followed by a 1-inch per year increase until the minimum size limit reached 24 inches TL. True black grouper, which mature at an even larger size (33 inches TL), were included in the proposal to avoid confusion that could occur due to the name "black grouper" being used for both species. These proposals received strong criticism from commercial and charterboat fishermen, who were concerned that the measures would severely and unnecessarily restrict their access to the gag and black grouper resource. In addition, a minority report submitted to NMFS by the five Council members who voted against the proposed regulatory amendment expressed the opinion that the amendment violated several of the National Standards in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act as well as the Regulatory Flexibility Act. As a result of the public reaction and the minority report, the Council voted at its May 10-13, 1999 meeting to reconsider the regulatory amendment during its next meeting in Key West on July 12-15, 1999, and to hold a public workshop prior to the July Council meeting in Panama City to consider management alternatives. All management alternatives in the regulatory amendment will be reconsidered, including those for which the Council originally proposed status quo. Those alternatives include not only the closed area and size limit proposals, but also the total allowable catch (TAC), closed seasons, recreational bag limits, and commercial trip limits.

NMFS, in its "October 1998 Report to Congress on the Status of Fisheries of the United States," identified gag in the Gulf of Mexico as a stock that, while not currently overfished, is approaching an overfished condition. Under the provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Council is required to take action to prevent overfishing from occurring for stocks identified by NMFS as approaching an overfished condition. The most recent gag stock assessment concluded that gag are being fished at a rate corresponding to between 18 and 23 percent static spawning potential ratio (SPR), or about at the existing overfishing criteria of 20 percent SPR.

However, while this level of SPR is sufficient to maintain the stock, the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 requires that overfishing criteria be set at a level that allows a fishery the capacity to produce the maximum sustainable yield on a continuing basis. Consequently, the Council has proposed a new overfishing criteria of 30 percent static SPR for gag to comply with this requirement. While this new SPR level will eventually produce higher yields, it requires an initial reduction in gag harvest in 1999 to between 1.33 and 2.49 million pounds. This requires a reduction of 32 to 39 percent from the average gag harvest levels from 1990-98, which have ranged from 3.29 to 5.56 million pounds per year.

Copies of the "Regulatory Amendment to The Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan to Set 1999 Gag/Black Grouper Management Measures" and the minority report can be obtained by calling 813-228-2815. They can also be downloaded in Adobe Acrobat format from the Council's web site: <http://www.gulfcouncil.org>.

Although other issues not on the agenda may come before the workshop for discussion, in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, those issues may not be the subject of formal action during this meeting. Action will be restricted to those issues specifically identified by this notice.

**Special Accommodations**

This meeting is physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Anne Alford at the Council (see ADDRESSES) by June 16, 1999.

Dated: May 27, 1999.

**Bruce C. Morehead,**

*Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.*  
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**DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE****National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

[I.D. 052599D]

**Endangered Species; Permits**

**AGENCY:** National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

**ACTION:** Receipt of an application for a scientific research permit (1219); receipt of an application to modify a permit