

SUMMARY OF FMP AMENDMENT 16 SCOPING COMMENTS

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I. Summary

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (the Council) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) solicited comments on actions to end overfishing of gag grouper and vermilion snapper in the South Atlantic through Amendment 16 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (FMP)/Draft Environmental Impact Statement. A Notice of Intent was published in the Federal Register on 8/15/07 and a revised notice on 8/23/07 to extend the comment period. Six public scoping meetings were held in November 2007; the table below outlines the attendance at each meeting. The Council received 112 written correspondences in the form of letters, faxes, and e-mails. This document presents a general overview of the comments received from commercial and recreation fishermen, state and federal governmental agencies, environmental organizations, fishing organizations, and County Commissioners. It does not intend to provide a detail report of all the comments and viewpoints received.

Date	Location	Attendance
9/4/07	Wilmington, NC	37
9/4/07	Marathon, FL	2
9/5/07	Atlantic Beach, NC	45
9/6/07	Daytona Beach, FL	55
9/10/07	N. Charleston, SC	24
9/17/07	N. Myrtle Beach, SC	97

II. Summary of Comments

The majority of written comments and verbal testimonies received were against the proposed restrictions for gag grouper and vermilion snapper. A significant number of these comments were received from commercial and recreational fishermen; however two comments of this nature came from North Carolina County Commissioners. The arguments against restrictive measures were based upon three principal ideas: (1) the data and method to collect the data (typically referring to the data obtained through the Marine Recreational Fishing Statistical Survey (MRFSS)) is flawed and unreliable for use); (2) fishermen believed that populations of both species are healthy and the current management regulations are appropriate based upon their observations of abundant fish populations and large fish; and (3) the restrictions would result in adverse social and economic impacts to fishermen and fishing communities.

Many fishermen felt that the data used in the stock assessments was flawed, chiefly due to the processes used to collect them. Some individuals believed the MRFSS data collection program is flawed and highlighted the results of the 2005 review by the National Academy of Science to support their claim. Some recommended that action not be taken until improvements are made to the MRFSS program. In addition, several members of the public felt that the recreational release mortality used for gag was too high. For vermilion snapper, some individuals could not understand how the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) could accept the results of the assessment that was related to overfishing while not having confidence in the biomass determinations.

Many people reported that their observations while fishing and diving do not reflect declining and unhealthy fish population. It was a common sentiment that both species are abundant in terms of the overall number of fish and the number of large fish. One person reported large aggregations of gag grouper in numerous dives, including some deeper dives (greater than 200 feet) in the Florida Keys. A headboat operator from North Carolina reported that it is common to catch 20 - 40 gags in three hours. Another fisherman reported seeing a significant increase in the number of vermilion snappers below the 12 inch size.

Some members of the public, in addition to two County Commissioners, were concerned about the degree of economic and social impacts to coastal communities that would result from the proposed restrictions. Of particular concern was the degree of effects of the proposed actions in addition to other effects, including the rising cost of fuel prices. Fishermen reported that these cumulative effects often lead to a decrease in trip frequency and increase in cost per trip. Many members of the public stated that businesses, including hotels, restaurants, retailers, tackle shops, campgrounds, gas stations, and fishing piers, would be negatively affected by the proposed actions.

Despite the overwhelming support for no action to be taken by the Council, recommendations concerning the types of management measures were received from the public. One fisherman recommended raising the gag size limit from 24 to 26 inches while another individual proposed 28 inches. There was a recommendation to raise the vermilion snapper size limit from 12 to 14 inches.

Some people advocated the implementation of management measures to protect these two species when they are most vulnerable such as when they are in spawning condition. One fisherman from Florida recommended the implementation of a commercial bag limit reduction during the period of July 15th to August 15 each year as he reported that large offshore fish in spawning condition migrate inshore due to cold water where these fish are lethargic and susceptible to harvest by divers using powerhead equipment. Another fisherman suggested a seasonal quota or harvest moratorium for the commercial industry when the fish are in spawning condition. One suggestion was for a two month closure for vermilion snapper. The Coastal Conservation Association recommended that if seasonal closures are implemented, that they occur during the species reported spawning season and apply to both commercial and recreational fishermen.

Several members of the public recommended a reduction in the allowable catch. One suggestion was to require the release of all gag grouper caught and decrease the limits of vermilion snapper to five per person and ten per boat. Another individual recommended limiting the harvest of groupers to two per person in addition to five or six per vessel throughout the year with a further reduction of one grouper per person during February and March.

Three organizations (two conservation and one fishing organization) supported Council action to end overfishing within the mandated timeframe. The organizations highlighted that the SSC deemed the assessments to be based on the best available science and that the Council has a legal requirement to end overfishing within one year of notification from NOAA Fisheries Service. One organization reported that gag's life history (spawning aggregations, protogynous hermaphroditism) makes their sustainable harvest susceptible to fishing practices. As a way to support a viable fishery, some of the management measures endorsed by the two conservation organizations include the implementation of: (1) time and area closures, (2) Limited Access Programs, and (3) data collection elements in order to better monitor bycatch and measure effort including observer coverage and in-season monitoring.

The Coastal Conservation Association disagreed with the use of historical landings used as the sole means to determine future allocations and listed five reasons to explain their disparity. They were troubled that allocations would not take into account the economic value of either sector, and that MRFSS was used to determine landings citing that the accuracy of the survey is unknown.