

Summary of Comments on Amendment 16 SDEIS

To supplement to the DEIS for Amendment 16 was published on August 1, 2008, with a comment period that ended on September 15, 2008. The SDEIS provides three additional alternatives for gag and one for the vermilion snapper.

Fifty-five comment letters were submitted during the comment period on the SDEIS for Amendment 16. Of these, five individuals did not specifically address alternatives in the SDEIS but just indicated support or opposition for Amendment 16.

Of the 55 comments, 43 were identical form letters with differing introductory text. All 43 letters made the following comments:

- *Support Alternative 1 with modifications that ban all longline fishing, eliminate all destructive fishing practices, and eliminate all fishing methods that produce bycatch.*
- *Opposed Alternative 2A and 2B, which would establish a commercial and recreational shallow water grouper closure as there is no reliable data to support them. Not consistent with National Standards 1,2,8, or 9.*
- *Support new Alternative 3a, which would establish a 1,000 pound commercial trip limit for gag and May 1 fishing year start. Also closes shallow water grouper species when gag quota is met.*
- *Support new Alternative 3b, which would establish a 1,000 pounds commercial trip limit for gag and start date of January 1. Also closes shallow water grouper species when gag quota is met.*
- *Support Alternative 4, which implements a gag quota and closes shallow water grouper species in commercial fishery when gag quota is met.*
- *Support Alternative 5, which divides the commercial quota into two regions.*
- *Opposed new Alternative 6, which would close gag all year and shallow water grouper species during June – Dec for the commercial and recreational sectors.*
- *Opposed Alternative 7a which would reduce the bag limits of gag and shallow water grouper species as well as 7b, which would reduce the bag limit and close the month of December in addition to the Jan-Apr closure. Only Alternatives 3a, 3b, and 6 were contained in the SDEIS.*

Personalized comments on the form letters cited inadequate data on recreational landings to support any action in the recreational sector. In addition, a reduction in fishing effort due to gas prices, habitat destruction caused by commercial sector, overexploitation by recreational sector, unfair regulation on the recreational sector, negative economic impacts on recreational sector, and rebounding fish populations were additional justification for their comments.

One set of personalized comments that prefaced the form letter was very detailed. Instead of imposing any new recreational measures, the individual suggested that all longlining should be eliminated, dehooking devices and venting tools should be required, and spearfishing should not be allowed during upwelling events. This individual further stated the gag stock assessment was too conservative, a 4 month spawning season closure was too long because gag might not spawn for four months, a two month closure for the

commercial sector has been effective and should be retained but a closure for the recreational sector is not needed, recreational fishing pressure is not that great because it mostly occurs on weekends, fishing pressure is down because of gas prices, and MRFSS data are not good.

Three comments stated that Monroe County does not catch many gag, and the regulations contained in new Alternative 6 would not help the status of the population but would have negative economic effects on the local community. Two comments offered new alternatives for consideration, one of which is included in an appendix to Amendment 16. This proposed alternative would close gag all year in Monroe County, allow fishing for other shallow water groupers, and reduce the bag limit for other shallow water grouper. Another commenter also suggested gag could be closed in Monroe County and shallow water grouper open, but cited many problems with grouper fisheries in Monroe County particularly with overexploitation during the spawning season. This individual also felt there should be a limit on the commercial quota for divers particularly during cold water upwelling.

EPA indicated it continues to support Amendment 16, but feels the FEIS should discuss when the pending SEDAR data can be expected for the vermilion snapper and the rationale for the current issuance of the EIS with interim vermilion snapper data before the collection and compilation of the updated data.

One comment was made in support of Alternative 4 or 5 for gag, whichever was the most cost effective to enforce. However, these alternatives were not the focus of the SDEIS. The individual was opposed to any vermilion snapper regulations until the new SEDAR assessment is completed.

One comment was in support of the use of dehooking tools and venting techniques provided that they remained consistent with the specifications and requirements described in other FMPs. This action was not addressed in the SDEIS.

Another commenter did not identify any alternatives from Amendment 16 SDEIS but suggested that there should be more artificial reefs, trips limits should be imposed to keep the fishery open all year, and recreational fishermen should not be allowed to sell their catch.

One commenter indicated he did not support any changes to snapper grouper regulations and another individual indicated they supported the proposed alternatives in Amendment 16. Neither individual but did not cited any specific alternatives from the SDEIS.

Summary from individual comments:

EPA – Supports actions in Amendment 16 and SDEIS but questions the need for SDEIS and feels the DEIS could have been delayed to incorporate new alternatives and results from the SEDAR assessment for vermilion snapper.

Kathleen Chase – Supports all actions proposed in Amendment 16.

Chris McCaffity – opposed.

- Artificial reefs
- Trips limits to ensure fisheries don't close
- Prohibit sale of recreational catch

William Welder-opposed

- Monroe county is being singled out.
- No data to support closure.
- Doesn't understand how a 7 month closure for shallow water grouper would protect gag grouper.

Robert Harris-opposed

- Monroe County depends on locals, tourists, and visiting charter boat clients for a strong economy. A closure of gag in this county would be devastating.
- This area does not historically catch or target gag and a closure here would not make a difference in the health of the gag population.
- Public hearings and Council meetings are scheduled at times and locations (Cape Canaveral, Key Largo, Charleston, SC) to make it difficult for those in the affected county to have a voice.

Lee Ward- Support Alternative 4 or 5

- Opposed to Vermillion Snapper actions
- Support alternative 4 or 5 whichever is most cost effective to enforce.
- Does not support vermilion snapper regulations as the stock appear healthy and the agency has stated that the data is invalid.

LeeRoy Weggenman-Opposed

- Fish stocks are healthy.

Lee Starling-

- Monroe County does not account for much of the gag landings.
- Suggests a complete ban on gags but allow for harvest of reds and black grouper.
- Suggest new research to identify spawning periods in the Florida Keys which are different than elsewhere.
- Need better enforcement as many people are coming in as “shooters” and targeting grouper while spawning.
- Poaching and backdoor restaurant sales are a big problem.
- VMS is a useful enforcement tool.

- Ban charter boats from selling snapper/grouper.

Ron Rincones-opposed

- Suggest a new (Alternative 5) for consideration:

Alternative 5-“A commercial trip limit of 1,000 pounds for gag with a fishing year start date of May 1. In addition, during Feb, March and April, fishing for and possession of the following species would be limited to one per angler, for each of the following: gag, black grouper, red grouper, scamp, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, tiger grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney. In addition to the above limits, there will be a vessel limit of no more than two of each of the above species. Head/party boats, possessing the proper permits, will be allowed four of gag or black grouper in aggregate, and four each of the remaining grouper species listed, unless otherwise restricted. No sale of grouper species will be allowed during the months of Feb, March and April.”

- Suggest commercial trip limit of 200 lbs. during the month of July to prevent gags from being targeted by divers while resting nearshore.

ARC-Supports

- Supports preferred Alternative 3 because the requirement to use dehooking devices are a less stringent management tool and are consistent with other FMPs.
- Recommends that fishers be allowed to use J-style hooks until studies of the use of circle hooks in this fishery can be conducted.
- Recommends that language encouraging the use of circle hooks be included in the amendment.
- Recommends that the dehooking and venting tools meet the minimal design specifications consistent with other FMPs requiring dehooking devices and venting tools in other fisheries.
- Recommends that Amendment 16 encourage voluntary compliance of education/outreach initiatives and workshops.

Andy Griffiths-Opposed

- Could accept a reduced bag limit but a closure is unacceptable.
- Closure for gag grouper is OK, but the fishing for the other grouper species is essential to the survival of these fishermen.
- These proposals are based on flawed data collection and biomass goals that were impossible.

Richard Tucker: Opposed

- Data collection is faulty—plenty of grouper. Do not try to regulate something that is not broken.

Ocean Entertainment - Opposed

- Because of high cost of diesel fuel there are few boats fishing.

Islamorada Charter Boat Association: Opposed

- Seasonal closures of shallow water grouper, other than gag, will cause irreparable financial harm to the recreation, for-hire, commercial fisheries in that area.
 - Suggest proposals that will prevent closures on grouper fishing, other than gag, south of the Miami-Dade County Line. Proposals include:
 - Reduce recreational bag limit from 3 to 2 grouper per day south of Miami-Dade/Monroe County line; reduce for hire vessels grouper bag limits from 3 to 2; impose one year closure on gag; allow shallow-water grouper, other than gag, to remain open year round South of Miami-Dade/Monroe County.
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The following form letter was received from 43 people via email with the following identical comments:

- Support Alternative 1 with modifications that ban all longline fishing, eliminate all destructive fishing practices, and eliminate all fishing methods that produce bycatch.
- Opposed Alternative 2A and 2B as there is no reliable data to support them. Not consistent with National Standards 1,2,8, or 9.
- Support Alternative 3.
- Support Alternative 4
- Support Alternative 5
- Opposed Alternative 6.
- Opposed Alternative 7 due to the fact that there is no reliable data on recreational landings to support the action.

41 of the form letters were prefaced with personal comments. A brief summary of those comments is below:

Ron Teke: Few gag are seen in the Middle Keys to Dry Tortuga area, reds and blacks are more common.

Walter Eisman---Red snapper population is very healthy due to the 20” snapper regulation.

Charles Mann: Personal experience flies in the face of the conclusions reached by SAFMC.

John Brink-Does not trust the data used to make regulations.

David Hawkins-Urges a no vote on snapper grouper regulations.

Gene Finch: Commercial fishers are responsible for killing fishery.

David Heil: Longliners and rock shrimpers are part of the problem, grouper is healthy, number of active vessels has decreased.

Mark Galloway: Need increased enforcement

Charles Gaines: New regulations will only hurt recreational fishermen. Populations are strong.

Mike Cochran: Grouper and Red Snapper stocks are healthy around Sebastian Inlet and Port Canaveral. Fully supports commercial trip limit of 200 lbs during July.

Randall Lang (Rec fisher/scuba diver-Sebastian Inlet): This year was good for Red Snapper. With size limits, the fishery is regulated. Four month closure will cause economic hardship.

Chad Macuszonek (rec fisher, Port Canaveral): Taking out grouper would kill me!

George Taylor (rec fisher, Port Canaveral, Key West, Sebastian Inlet): Grouper populations are holding steady or increasing. Commercial fishers are the problem.

Michael Travis (rec fisher, Port Canaveral): Does not feel that any new recreational closure or regulation should be implemented. Current regulations are effective and should not be changed.

Patrick Magrady (rec fisher, Port Canaveral and Ponce Inlet): Weather and fuel prices are keeping fishermen from going out.

Clark Lachik (Port Canaveral): Fishing pressure is down. Red Snapper and Grouper populations are great.

James McGuire (St. Augustine): Recreational fishers are not the problem. Longliners do more damage. Need to create more artificial habitat.

John Mitchell (rec fisher, Port Canaveral): Due to fuel prices fishermen are not fishing as much, therefore there is no need for changes to the recreational fishing regulations at this time.

Brian Blackwelder (rec fisher, East Coast of Florida): Need to have better enforcement of current regulations. Commercial fleet (longliners) should have regulations that effect them equally with the recreational fishery.

Randy Beardsly (rec fisher, Ponce Inlet) Red Snapper and Grouper populations are doing fine. Fuel prices are reducing effort.

Stephan H. Wolfe Jr. (rec fisher): Plenty of fish, not as many people fishing as before. Regulate commercial fishers.

Terry Winn (rec fisher): Populations of red snapper and grouper are healthy. If regulations are needed, apply them to the commercial fishermen instead of destroying the recreational community.

Chad Starling: Fishing is as good now as ever; more research needs to happen before making these rash decisions that affect many people.

Dr. Tod Howard: Goliath populations have increased. Reduce pressure from shrimp trawlers; circle hooks might work; fishing pressure has been reduced due to increase in fuel prices.

Bruce Babcock: Gag grouper regulations should not be changed for the recreational fishery. The shrimp fishery is a major problem.

Chris Costello (rec fisher, Breward County): New regulations are draconian and unsupported by facts.

John M. McCarny (rec fisher, Port Canaveral): Recreational fishers are not out there slaying the fish as effort is down; data is useless and unbelievable.

John Fatava III: A complete closure of the grouper fishery will have negative economic consequences for the area; reconsider these measures.

Tim Totaro: Fish stocks are rebounding; loosen restrictions don't tighten them; less fishing pressure.

Karon Ivey: These regulations penalize the responsible recreational angler with these regulations.

Ray Hutchinson: Current regulations work; fishing pressure is reduced due to fuel and weather.

Jeffrey Page: Data is flawed—it is old and does not take into account the reduced fishing pressure caused by fuel prices. These regulations will have huge economic impacts; need to slow down and really look at the situation before we make decisions.

Gary Lombard: Have not noticed a reduction in snapper and grouper populations; suggests that no action be taken.

Capt Bob: Snapper and grouper populations have increased; no scientific basis for this amendment and should be dropped.

Brian Clancy: Fishing pressure is reduced due to fuel prices.

Wayne Sommers: Grouper populations are fine; suggests the NO ACTION alternative.

James Savage: Grouper populations are suffering from commercial fishery rather than recreational.

Daryll J. Braun: Urge Council to consider commercial fishery limits to improve stock populations.

Chris Cass: If closures are necessary, close down the commercial sector rather than recreational.

Sam Monroe: More fish now than ever before; SAFMC should not even consider these proposals.

John Barber (rec fisher, between Daytona and Fort Pierce): Opposed to 4 month closure as grouper do not spawn for 4 months and the closure will not get the target decreases to where the SAMFC wants them.

- Strongly encourages Council to consider measures to eliminate habitat destruction such as longlining and trawling for rock shrimp. With good habitat, there will be proper habitat for growing fish populations.

- Strongly encourages the requirements for hook removal devices and venting tools on all commercial votes, party boats, charter boats and recreational boats in the snapper grouper fisheries. Encourages education to fishing clubs and public on the proper use of these tools.
