UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL OCEAN SERVICE
Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary
10 Ocean Science Circle
Savannah, Georgia 31411

MEMORANDUM FOR: Roy E. Crabtree
Regional Administrator
Southeast Regional Office
NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service

FROM: George R. Sedberry
Superintendent
Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary
NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries

SUBJECT: Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Amendment 17A

DATE: April 27, 2010

We have reviewed the National Marine Fisheries Services' (NMFS) draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for Amendment 17A to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region. We applaud the efforts of NMFS to continue actions to restore overfished stocks and end overfishing of snapper-grouper species. However, we are concerned about the decision to pursue Alternative 3C as the preferred closure alternative, because it could have unintended consequences on the resources of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary ("GRNMS" or "sanctuary") by increasing the fishing pressure on snapper-grouper and potential substitution fish species (e.g., coastal pelagic) within its boundaries. GRNMS is located on an area of the continental shelf west of the preferred 3C management alternative closure boundary in Amendment 17A. GRNMS is also west of alternative 4 and *inside* the boundaries of alternatives 5 and 6.

Though the DEIS for Amendment 17A discusses the potential for displacement from the closed areas to other areas and different fisheries-- notably to nearshore and shallow water habitats-- this finding is not thoroughly analyzed to determine the extent and impacts of such displacement on surrounding areas. In particular, there is no specific mention of displacement to GRNMS and the potential burden on sanctuary resources. We believe that more importance should be afforded to the potential impact of fishing pressure displacement on the nationally significant resources of GRNMS. Unlike the artificial reefs along the coastline between South Carolina and Florida, Gray's Reef NMS is a special place, protecting a live-bottom habitat and associated species of national significance. It is currently the only natural protected reef area off the Georgia coast and one of only a few natural marine protected areas between Cape Hatteras, NC and Cape Canaveral, FL. Therefore, we think GRNMS should be afforded more protection within the scope of this closure, and we request that the preferred alternative be amended to include the entire sanctuary.

As you are aware, GRNMS is in the process of designating a protected research area in the sanctuary. The DEIS and proposed rule for the research area are currently in clearance, and we expect it to be released before summer 2010. Our proposed boundary for the research area would protect the lower third of the sanctuary (approximately 8.27 square miles), prohibiting fishing, diving, and stopping of vessels while transiting (recall that our taking this action was approved by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council in April 2009). The purpose of the research area is to establish a region specifically designed for conducting controlled scientific studies in the absence of certain human activities. The information gathered is likely to improve understanding of resources and environmental processes in the area, which would, in turn, support NOAA's management decisions. A related unintended consequence of the 3C management alternative closure could also be increased burden on compliance and enforcement of the research area, and/or skewed research results in the comparison area of the sanctuary where bottom fishing would still be allowed.

The current research area proposal was developed prior to the proposed closure described in the DEIS for Amendment 17A, and we think the potential for increased fishing pressure for snapper-grouper and the associated direct and indirect impacts of a red snapper fishery closure warrants additional measures to avoid unintended impacts to the resources of the sanctuary. Therefore, we appreciate your consideration of our request to include GRNMS in the proposed closure area. While research objectives for the proposed research area would need to be significantly altered for the elimination of a comparison within the sanctuary, full closure for snapper-grouper fishing with designation of part of the sanctuary as no fishing, could provide opportunity for joint research and monitoring, as well as support the rebuilding of the snapper-grouper fishery.

We look forward to working with you to develop a mutually-beneficial solution. Please do not hesitate to contact me to discuss; I can be reached at 912-598-2439.