UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
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George R. Sedberry, Ph.D.
Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary
NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries
10 Ocean Circle
Savannah, GA 31411

Dear ~~Dr. Sedberry~~ George:

Thank you for your April 27, 2010, memorandum regarding potential adverse impacts that the proposed area closure included in Amendment 17A to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region (Amendment 17A) may have on snapper-grouper species within the Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary (GRNMS). The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) requires the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) and NOAA Fisheries Service end overfishing of red snapper while minimizing, to the extent practicable, adverse socioeconomic impacts. Therefore, the Council chose the closure outlined below as their preferred alternative based on model estimates, which indicate it would significantly reduce harvest levels of red snapper, while effectuating the least amount of negative economic disruption to the fishing community.

The current preferred closure alternative encompasses an area that includes commercial logbook grids 2880, 2980, 3080, and 3180 off Georgia and North Florida from 98 feet (16 fathoms; 30 m) to 240 feet (40 fathoms; 73 m). Within this area, fishing for species in the snapper-grouper fishery management unit, except red snapper, would be limited to the use of spearguns. The GRNMS, which is located 17.5 miles offshore of Sapelo Island, Georgia, while not included within the proposed closure, could be affected by increased fishing pressure for snapper-grouper species in GRNMS as fishing in deeper offshore areas would be prohibited.

Biological analysis of potential impacts on the GRNMS has been added to the final environmental impact statement for each of the closure alternatives. The magnitude of possible effort shifts is unknown at this time; however, Amendment 17A includes an action to develop a monitoring plan that would track fishing effort and population abundance of snapper-grouper species inside and outside the proposed closed area. Effort shifts into the GRNMS resulting from the proposed management measures in Amendment 17A would be greatest in the short-term.

As the red snapper stock rebuilds over time, it is anticipated the proposed closed area would be reduced in size until it is no longer a necessary component for rebuilding the red snapper population. Therefore, negative impacts to the GRNMS and the resources required to maintain it are likely to be somewhat short-lived, and unlikely to cause long-term adverse biological impacts.

NOAA Fisheries Service will continue to work in cooperation with the NOAA Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and GRNMS personnel to meet the objectives of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. If you wish to discuss the issue further or have questions related to Amendment 17A please feel free to contact Dr. John McGovern of the Office of Sustainable Fisheries at (727) 824-5305, or at John.McGovern@noaa.gov.

Sincerely,

Roy E. Crabtree, Ph.D.
Regional Administrator