

...The History of Recreational Red Snapper Management

Prior to 1997 the recreational red snapper season was open year round. Catch levels were

controlled through minimum size limits and bag limits. The Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 required the establishment of quotas for recreational red snapper fishing and commercial fishing that, when reached prohibits the retention of fish for the remainder of the fishing year.

In 1997, the recreational red snapper fishery closed on November 27.

In 1998, the recreational red snapper fishery closed on October 1.



Photo: Scott Hickman

In 1999, the recreational red snapper fishery closed on August 29. An emergency rule temporarily raised the recreational red snapper minimum size limit from 15 to 18 inches total length during June 4 to August 29 to slow down the retained harvest rate. Without this emergency rule, the season would have closed on August 5. However, the rule created a large increase in dead discards, and the size limit was allowed to revert back to 15 inches the following year.

A February 2000 regulatory amendment (GMFMC 2000) replaced the system of in-season monitoring and closure projections with a fixed season based on a preseason projection of when the recreational quota would be reached. The season for 2000 and beyond was initially set at April 21 through October 31, with a 16 inch minimum size limit, a 4-fish bag limit. This recreational fishing season remained in effect through 2007.

In 2008, Amendment 27 (GMFMC 2007) revised the rebuilding plan. For the recreational fishery, it implemented a June 1 through September 30 fishing season in conjunction with a 2.45 mp recreational quota, 16 inch minimum size limit, 2-fish bag limit, and zero bag limit for captain and crew or for-hire vessels.

The Sustainable Fisheries Act requires that the Regional Administrator close the recreational fishery when the quota is projected to be met (Section 407(d) Magnuson-Steven Act). When Amendment 27 was submitted to NMFS, the Council requested that the five Gulf states adopt compatible regulations in state waters. Florida adopted a compatible 2-fish bag limit, but it maintained its state red snapper fishing season of April 15 through October 31, 78 days longer than the federal fishing season. Texas also maintained its 4-fish bag limit and year round fishing season in its state waters. Prior to the start of the 2008 season, NMFS recalculated its projections for recreational red snapper catches in light of the state regulations, and projected that there would be a 75 percent probability that the recreational quota would not be exceeded if the season closed on August 5. As a result, NMFS took action to set the 2008 season to be June 1 to August 5.

In 2009, NMFS again recalculated its projections for the season length prior to the start of the recreational season, and announced that the recreational season would be June 1 to August 15.



Photo: Mike Jennings

A February 2010 regulatory amendment (GMFMC 2010) increased the total allowable catch from 5.0 mp to 6.945 mp, which increased the recreational quota from 2.45 mp to 3.403 mp. However, NMFS estimated that in 2009, the recreational sector overharvested its quota by approximately 75 percent. In recalculating the number of days needed to fill the recreational quota, even with the quota increase, NMFS projected that the 2010 season would need to be shortened to June 1 to July 24.

In April 2010, the Deepwater Horizon MC252 deep-sea drilling rig exploded and sank off the coast of Louisiana. Because of the resulting oil spill, approximately one-third of the Gulf of Mexico was closed to fishing for much of the summer months. The direct loss of fishing opportunities due to the closure, plus the reduction in tourism throughout the Gulf coast, resulted in a much lower catch than had been projected. After the recreational season closed on July 24, NMFS estimated that 2.3 million pounds of the 3.4 million pound recreational quota remained unharvested (NMFS 2010a). The Council requested an emergency rule to provide the Regional Administrator with the authority to reopen the recreational red snapper season for eight consecutive weekends (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) From October 1 through November 21 (24 fishing days).

In January 2011, the Council submitted a regulatory amendment (GMFMC 2011a) to NMFS to increase the red snapper total allowable catch to 7.185 million pounds, with a 3.521 million pound recreational quota. A final rule to implement the increase was published in the Federal Register on April 29, 2011, and a 48 day recreational red snapper season was announced, running June 1 to 12:01 am on July 19.



Photo: Mike Jennings

On August 12, 2011, NMFS published an emergency rule in the Federal Register (FR 76 50143) that increased the recreational red snapper quota by 345,000 pounds for the 2011 fishing year and provided the agency with the authority to re-open the recreational red snapper season later in the year, if the recreational quota had not been filled by the July 19 closing date. However, in August of that year, based on headboat data plus charterboat and private recreational landings through June, NMFS calculated that 80 percent of the

recreational quota had been caught. With the addition of July landings data plus Texas survey data, NMFS estimated that 4.4 to 4.8 million pounds will have been caught, well above the 3.865 million pound quota. Thus, no unused quota was available to reopen the recreational fishing season.

In January of 2012 the Council voted to increase the Red Snapper Annual Catch Limit from 7,185,000 pounds to 8,080,000 pounds for the 2012 fishing year. Additionally, if the 2012 Annual Catch Limit is not exceeded it will increase again to 8,690,000 pounds in 2013. The Council also voted to extend the current September 30th recreational red snapper season closure, which will make it easier for the Council to open a supplemental fall season if quota remains after the regular season. *These most recent Council recommendations are still waiting final approval and implementation from NOAA Fisheries Service.

at [February 16, 2012](#)