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Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Recovering

Science-based management has helped end overfishing for iconic fish

A recent scientific update on Gulf of Mexico red snapper shows that fishermen may be able to catch more fish next year. This news shows that when fishermen follow management measures based on science, they lead to rebuilding of fish populations and increased opportunities to fish.

“The update showed harvest levels were still a bit too high in 2008; however, scientific projections are promising for 2009, indicating that the stock may improve enough to support higher harvest levels,” said Dr. Bonnie Ponwith, Southeast Fisheries Science Center director for NOAA’s Fisheries Service. “This is very exciting news and is evidence of how science and management can work together to protect our natural resources.”

Historical records indicate fishermen have targeted red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico since the late 1800s as a subsistence fishery. However, fishing pressure became too great throughout the mid-1900s as coastal populations increased and saltwater sport fishing became more popular. Heavy fishing since then brought this population to a level that could not be sustained or reproduce as much as it could.

In response to the poor condition of this once prolific population, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council began to address the issues in the mid-1980s. The actions taken by the council have ranged in variety and degree, from adjusting recreational size limits to implementing a catch share program for commercial fishermen in 2007.

“This has been our most challenging fishery issue in the Gulf of Mexico to date,” said Dr. Roy Crabtree, southeast regional administrator for NOAA’s Fisheries Service. “The Gulf Council deserves a lot of credit for making some very difficult decisions and commercial and recreational fishermen deserve equal credit for complying with the regulations to help this species recover.”

The red snapper population is still a long way from making a full recovery, but reducing fishing pressure has expedited the recovery process and continues to provide long-term benefits to the fish, as well as to those dependent upon it for business and recreation. As the species’ condition continues to improve, fishermen are reporting red snapper in areas where they haven’t been seen in many years, such as off of Tampa Bay, Fla., and southward.

The scientific update was completed by a panel of experts selected by the Gulf Council and comprised of academic, state, and federal scientists. This panel presented their results to the Gulf Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee in early December.

The Gulf Council may review this information at their next meeting in February in Mobile, Ala., and make a recommendation to NOAA’s Fisheries Service to increase the current red snapper catch levels. The update suggests the current catch level can be increased from five million pounds to slightly more than 6.9 million pounds.

While this is good news, an increase to the total allowable catches may not support an increase to the length of the recreational fishing season. Preliminary data indicate the recreational fishery exceeded its annual quota by more than one million pounds in 2009. Any decision regarding the length of the 2010 recreational fishing season will need to take into

account final information on the extent of that overage. NOAA's Fisheries Service will determine the length of the recreational season early next year; however, the season will begin on June 1.

NOAA is committed to responding as quickly as possible to any Gulf Council proposals to reward fishermen for their sacrifice while ensuring continued success in rebuilding this population.

It is important to note that red snapper are managed separately in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic (North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida's east coast). Earlier this month, NOAA's Fisheries Service announced a temporary rule to protect red snapper in the South Atlantic as its population is in poor condition, much like the Gulf of Mexico population once was. The temporary measures for the South Atlantic become effective on Jan. 4, 2010, and will not apply in Gulf of Mexico waters.

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