

RECREATIONAL FISHERY MANAGEMENT PROPOSAL for GULF of MEXICO REEF FISH

Presented by

A COALITION of FOR-HIRE and PRIVATE RECREATIONAL ANGLERS FISHING the GULF of MEXICO

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This proposal is an extensive plan that provides new management alternatives for the federal recreational (for-hire “FH” and private recreational “PR”) reef fish fishery in the Gulf of Mexico (GOM). It was developed with input from many individuals (private and professional) to provide a plan that will encompass the total federal recreational reef fish fishery while dramatically improving current fishery data collection. This plan is multi faceted which will require several stages of implementation that will ultimately provide real time data for all reef fish targeted by recreational anglers in the GOM. The plan should be adapted to the data needs of the National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS) to be able to better manage the reef fish fishery, to control overfishing based on improved real time data, to provide realistic fishery effort and catch data to provide the NMFS the proper tools to address accountability measures, useable catch limits, and improved stock assessments.

This proposal is not intended to be all inclusive and should be implemented with the ability to modify the plan to fit current and future regulatory, legal, data needs, and stock assessment requirements. It is specifically intended to provide new, forward thinking ideas to bring fishery data, fishery management, stock assessments, angling ethics, and all recreational anglers into the 21st century. The goal of this proposal is to begin the process of implementation upon immediate receipt of and discussion by the Gulf Of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) so that some aspects of the proposal will be effective during the 2009 season. We realize that the management process takes time and has legal requirements but we also feel that the current process will allow for immediate implementation of some of our suggestions.

THE PROPOSAL

This proposal establishes a new Gulf of Mexico Angling Reporting System (GOMARS¹) that will initially require reporting information on red snapper with a web based and/or telephone reporting system. Subsequently, a logbook reporting and if demonstrated the need exists a simple electronic (AIS, mobile phone, web based, or other simple and unobtrusive reporting device) system to report departing and returning to port could be implemented. The GOMARS will allow

¹ Implementation of the GOMARS will require immediate action by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) and/or the NMFS to implement a plan amendment to the current reef fish management plan to establish this angler reporting system with all the legal requirements to ensure the regulation is required. The NMFS will have to also fast track this amendment for implementation. In order to expedite the reporting system we suggest utilizing the interim rule process. We recommend that all states be encouraged to require this system within their state waters for anglers wishing to target reef fish.

for easy expansion to other reef fish species as well as other targeted species. It will also be simple to use on vessels of all sizes and capacities. The proposal also suggests and encourages coordination between the federal government and the states in identifying users and collecting data, suggests angler and/or vessel aggregate harvest limits to reduce unnecessary discards thus increasing stock biomass, should reduce interaction with other species such as marine mammals, provides for real time regulatory accountability of harvest, and other improvements to the current system.

- Immediately establish the Gulf of Mexico Angling Reporting System (GOMARS) as an endorsement to the Gulf of Mexico Federal Charter/Headboat Reef Fish Permit and require every For-Hire vessel (FH) landing red snapper to have a GOMARS onboard.
- Immediately begin the regulatory process to require a GOMARS permit for private recreational anglers or for each private recreational vessel (PR angler or PRV) who wishes to catch a red snapper.
- Immediately create and implement an automatic telephone reporting system (similar to the current HMS recreational billfish telephone reporting system) and a web based reporting system (similar to the state of VA Recreational Assessment Program reporting system)
- The GOMARS will have an identifying number linked to a vessel (For-Hire, PRV and/or PR angler) and will require the vessel owner's and/or angler's name, address, phone number (land and/or cell). Optional owner information will be an email address for contact. The GOMARS will provide the web link and 800 phone number for reporting.
- A condition of the GOMARS will be to require the endorsement/permit to be onboard any vessel with recreational red snapper on board. The reporting of the catching and landing of red snapper will be required when returning to a shore side facility either by telephone call in or web based. (The report will provide the GOMARS number, the number of anglers fishing for red snapper and where that fishing occurred - state or federal waters, how many hours – to the nearest ½ hour- fished for red snapper in – state or federal waters, how many red snapper were harvested for each angler and location - state or federal waters, how many red snapper were discarded and location - state or federal waters, type of gear used (rod and reel, spear, electric or manual reel, and a confirmation number verifying the report will be provided to the person making the report.)
- The fee for the GOMARS endorsement/permit will be the same as an additional permit for the FH vessel owner and shall be consistent with the HMS permit fee (\$16.00) for PR anglers or PRVs.
- The For-Hire Survey and MRFSS will continue to collect data until they are no longer necessary.
- The current dockside interview system should be enhanced and expanded to obtain landings data such as size and composition of landings.
- Once the GOMARS endorsement/permit is implemented and required for vessels and anglers recreational fishing in the EEZ, the NMFS should request all Gulf states to implement the GOMARS (or compatible state system easily coordinated with the Fed data collection system for total coverage of federally managed species) in state waters. There should also be the ability for the GOMARS endorsement/permit to be purchased when purchasing a state saltwater fishing license as well as the federal web based system.
- While the GOMARS and it's requirements are being implemented, the council should begin the process of requiring electronic logbooks for all FH vessels and a similar reporting system for PR anglers or PRVs. (divers possess a dive log which is water proof, paper log, web based accessed by laptop or mobile device)

- As the logbook programs are being developed, the GOMARS should be expanded to cover other reef fish species as the logbooks will provide the ability to collect critical data for all species such as disposition of discards, total number of discards, time spent fishing for each species, fishing in state or federal waters, depth of water fished, number of hooks per line, and other data that becomes necessary for stock assessments.
- A pilot program should be immediately designed to study using aggregate bag limits that will eliminate discards. The program should investigate the possibility of increasing stock biomass by reducing discards and discard mortality. This type of management will also help to reverse the current trained behavior of marine mammals which now target anglers for food. The program should include information to study the current behavior of marine mammals and the impact it has on the animals and humans.
- We see no need to require VMSs on FH vessels or for PR anglers or PRVs as a VMS will not report when a vessel is fishing, how many anglers are fishing, how many fish are caught. This proposal provides mechanisms that accomplish everything necessary to determine the number of anglers wishing to fish, the date fished, the number actually fishing and for how long, the species and numbers caught, the species and numbers discarded and if fishing in state or federal waters, and more. Until a VMS is demonstrated to provide scientifically sound information necessary for enhanced stock assessments, it should not be required.
- The NMFS should coordinate with DHS and USCG regarding any electronic tracking systems.
- Enforcement should be enhanced as vessels harvesting red snapper must have a GOMARS endorsement/permit on board.
- Last, but most definitely not the least important is outreach and education to publicize the need for all recreational anglers to participate in providing good fishing data.

CONCLUSION

While this proposal does not provide 100% of the recreational data needs, it is a very positive first step that will provide much needed data from all recreational anglers. Implementing this plan as proposed will provide the data necessary to identify the effort, the number of fish harvested, and number of fish discarded almost immediately. It also provides for full accountability for all recreational anglers. Technology advances almost daily and any program adopted must be able to be flexible enough to adapt with ever increasing data needs and technology. With the current and past requirements of fishery law, we are dependent on accurate and timely data. This proposal begins that process and we suggest that if all components of this plan are adopted that the information necessary to properly comply with the law will ensure that the anglers and communities suffer less harm and confusion. We suggest that the simplest components of this plan be adopted first while effort continues on the implementation of the more time consuming proposals.