

## IMPORTANT PHONE NUMBERS

NMFS Operations Branch	727-570-5305
NMFS Permits and Regulations Branch (see below for tuna permit applications)	727-570-5326
NMFS Southeast Region toll free public service line	866-570-5301
NMFS nationwide federal fishing violations hotline	800-853-1964
NMFS 24-hour tuna information line (also for tuna permit applications)	888-872-8862 978-281-9260
NMFS Highly Migratory Species Division	301-713-2347
South Atlantic Fishery Mgmt. Council	843-571-4366
Gulf States Marine Fisheries Comm.	228-875-5912
CCA fishing violation hotline	866-WE ENFORCE (933-6367)
U.S. Coast Guard, 7th District (Florida east of St. Marks)	305-415-6778
U.S. Coast Guard, 8th District (St. Marks, Florida to Texas)	504-589-6237
Regional NMFS Office for Law Enforcement	727-570-5344
NMFS Enforcement Field Offices	
Marathon, FL	305-743-3110
Niceville, FL	850-729-8628
Stennis Space Center, MS	228-688-2920
Baton Rouge, LA	225-769-5477
Austin, TX	512-916-5401
Galveston, TX	409-770-0812
Harlingen, TX	956-423-3450
State Agencies:	
Alabama Dept. of Conservation and Marine Resources	
information or to report state fishing	251-861-2882
violations	251-968-7576
24 hr voice mail to report state	251-476-1256
fishing violations	
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission	
information	850-487-0554
to report state fishing violations	850-488-9924
	888-404-FWCC
(3922)	
cellular phone	*FWC
Louisiana Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries	
information	225-765-2800
to report state fishing violations	800-442-2511
Mississippi Department of Marine Resources	
information and to report state	228-374-5000
fishing violations	
Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept.	
information	800-792-1112
to report state fishing violations	512-389-4848 or 281-842-8100 or 800-792-GAME

## ERRATA AND UPDATE SHEET

A supplemental "errata and update sheet" will be periodically published to indicate changes in fishing regulations since this pamphlet was published. Contact the Gulf Council to obtain the most recent supplement.

# RECREATIONAL FISHING REGULATIONS FOR GULF OF MEXICO FEDERAL WATERS

January 2003



Dolphin (*Coryphaena hippurus*)

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Fishery Management Council  
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This leaflet was prepared for general informational purposes in January 2001 and has no legal force or effect. Fishing regulations are subject to change. A separate summary of commercial fishing regulations is available from the Council.

Report federal fishing violations:

24 hour toll-free hotline: 1-800-853-1964

## WHAT IS THE GULF OF MEXICO FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL?

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) is one of eight regional Fishery Management Councils that were established by the Fishery Conservation and Management Act of 1976. The Council prepares fishery plans which are designed to manage fishery resources within the 200-mile limit of the Gulf of Mexico.

The Council consists of 17 voting members who are: the Southeast Regional Administrator of NMFS (or his designee), the directors of the 5 Gulf state marine resource management agencies (or their designees), and 11 members who are nominated by the state governors and appointed by the Secretary of Commerce for three year terms (and can serve for a maximum of three consecutive terms). In addition, there are 4 nonvoting members representing the U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of State, and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission.

The Council meets every two months at various locations around the Gulf coast. Before final action on any proposed rule change is taken, public hearings are held throughout the Gulf as well as at the Council meeting where final action is scheduled. Proposed rule changes are then submitted to NMFS for further review and approval before being implemented.

When reviewing potential rule changes, the Council draws upon the services of knowledgeable people from other state and federal agencies, universities and the public who serve on panels and committees (see below).

Advisory Panels: recreational and commercial fishermen, charterboat operators, buyers, sellers, and consumers who are knowledgeable about a particular fishery.

Scientific and Statistical Committees: economists, biologists, sociologists, and natural resource attorneys who are knowledgeable about the technical aspects of fisheries in the Gulf.

Stock Assessment Panels: biologists who are trained in the specialized field of population dynamics, and who assess the available biological data and advise the Council on the status of stocks and level of allowable biological catch.

Persons interested in joining any of the above panels should contact the Council for information on how to apply.

**RECREATIONAL REGULATIONS - as of January, 2003**

Species	Minimum Size Limit (Unless otherwise indicated)	Closed Season	Recreational Daily Bag and Possession Limit
<b>SHELLFISH</b>			
Stone Crab	Minimum 2 3/4" claw	5/16 - 10/14	See additional rules on next page
Spiny Lobster	More than 3" carapace. Divers must measure in water.	4/1 - 8/5 There is a special 2 day non-trap recreational season, to be the last consecutive Wednesday and Thursday in July.	6/person, and no transfer at sea between boats (During the 2-day special recreational season, 12/person off Florida except 6/person for Monroe County - Florida Keys).
<b>COASTAL MIGRATORY PELAGICS</b>			
Cobia (ling)	33" fork length	none	2/person
King Mackerel	24" fork length	none <b>Fork length:</b> Tip of snout to fork of tail	2/person including captain and crew of for-hire vessels.
Spanish Mackerel	12" fork length	none	15/person.
<b>REEF FISH</b>			
<u>Snappers</u> Red Snapper	16" total length	Season to open at 12:01 AM April 21, 2003 and close at 12:00 midnight October 31, 2003.	4/person
Vermillion Lane	10" total length 8" total length	none none	Included in 20 reef fish aggregate limit. Included in 20 reef fish aggregate limit.
Gray Mutton Yellowtail Schoolmaster Cubera Dog Mahogany Queen Blackfin Silk Wenchman	12" total length 16" total length 12" total length 12" total length 12" total length 12" total length 12" total length none none none none	none none none none none none none none none none none none	10/person in aggregate bag limit. Includes all snappers except red, vermilion, and lane. <b>Total length:</b> Tip of snout to tip of tail
<u>Groupers</u> Black Gag Red Yellowfin Scamp Yellowmouth Rock Hind Red Hind Yellowedge Misty Snowy Speckled Hind Warsaw	22" total length 22" total length 20" total length 20" total length 16" total length none none none none none none none none none none none none	none none none none none none none none none none none none none none none none none	5/person in aggregate of all groupers except Jewfish and Nassau grouper.  1 per vessel 1 per vessel
<u>Protected Groupers</u> Jewfish Nassau Grouper	Harvest prohibited Harvest prohibited		
Hogfish Gray Triggerfish	12" fork length 12" total length	none none	5/person Included in 20 reef fish aggregate limit.
Greater Amberjack Lesser Amberjack Banded Rudderfish	28" fork length (recreational) 14" to 22" fork length slot limit 14" to 22" fork length slot limit	none none none	1/person 5-fish aggregate limit for lesser amberjack and banded rudderfish, excluded from 20 reef fish aggregate limit
<u>Aggregate Reef Fish Bag Limit Species</u> Vermillion Snapper Lane Snapper Gray Triggerfish	Goldface Tilefish Almaco Jack Anchor Tilefish	Tilefish Blackline Tilefish Blueline Tilefish	20/person of all listed species in aggregate.

- o Reef fish taken under the recreational bag limit may not be sold.
- o Stressed areas for reef fish begin at the shoreward boundary of federal waters and generally follow the 10 fathom contour from the Dry Tortugas to Sanibel Island; the 20 fathom contour to Tarpon Springs; the 10 fathom contour to Cape San Blas; the 25 fathom contour to south of Mobile Bay; the 13 fathom contour to Ship Island, Mississippi; the 10 fathom contour off Louisiana; and the 30 fathom contour off Texas. Use of fish traps, roller trawls, and power heads is prohibited in designated "stressed areas".
- o Reef fish gear is limited to no more than 3 hooks in a special management zone off Alabama. Nonconforming gear is restricted to bag limit or for reef fish without a bag limit to 5 percent by weight of all fish aboard.
- o Circle hooks are encouraged when angling for reef fish because they reduce mortality on released fish.

Species	Minimum Size Limit (unless otherwise indicated)	Closed Season	Recreational Daily Bag and Possession Limit
<b>OTHER SPECIES</b>			
Red Drum	Illegal to harvest or possess in federal waters.		
<b>HIGHLY MIGRATORY SPECIES</b>			
<u>Tuna</u> Bluefin	<u>Size Categories</u> school - 27" to < 47" CFL large school - 47" to < 59" CFL small medium - 59" to < 73" CFL large medium - 73" to < 81" CFL giant - 81"+ CFL	Bag limits are subject to sub-quotas by size and permit categories, change seasonally, and are reduced to zero when sub-quotas are filled. Telephone the NMFS Highly Migratory Species Management Division's toll-free 24 hour information line for updates on bag limits and quotas: 888- 872-8862 or call 978-281-9260.  <b>CFL - Curved fork length:</b> Tip of the upper jaw to fork of tail measured along the contour of the middle of the body.	
Bigeye Yellowfin Albacore Skipjack Blackfin Atlantic Bonito	27" CFL 27" CFL none none none none	none none none none none none	none 3/person none none none none
<u>Billfish</u> Blue Marlin White Marlin Sailfish Longbill spearfish	Minimum size lower jaw to tail fork 99" 66" 63" harvest prohibited	none none none	none none none
Swordfish	29" carcass length or 33 lbs. dressed weight*. Carcass length is a curved measure from posterior edge of gill opening to anterior portion of caudal keel.	none*	none*  *Changes to swordfish regulations are underway. Call 301-713-2347 for updates.
<u>SHARKS</u> Atlantic sharpnose other sharks	none** 54" fork length**	none** none**	1/person** 1/vessel in aggregate**
<u>Prohibited Sharks-Recreational Harvest</u> Atlantic angel Basking Bigeye sand tiger Caribbean reef Caribbean sharpnose Bigeye sixgill Bigeye thresher Bignose Dusky Galapagos Longfin mako Narrowtooth Night Sand tiger Sevengill Sixgill Smalltail Whale White			Harvest prohibited for these species. **Changes to shark regulations are underway. Call 301-713-2347 for updates.
<b>CORAL AND CORAL REEFS</b>			
Allowable Octocorals	Attached substrate within 1 inch of octocoral is allowed.	Fishery season regulated by state of Florida rules	6 colonies per day
Live Rock	Harvest and possession of live rock is prohibited (except for permitted aquaculture operations).		
Other Marine Life Organisms	Marine life organisms from the EEZ harvested or possessed by Florida residents or landed in Florida are subject to Florida's Marine Life Rule. Contact the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission for more information (850-487-3122).		

<b>ADDITIONAL RULES</b>	
Charter vessels/Headboat 2-day bag limit allowance	Persons on qualified charter vessels or headboats with two captains for trips in excess of 24 hours may possess 2 days' bag limits of reef fish species, king mackerel and Spanish mackerel. 1-day bag limits apply on all other species and trips regardless of length.
Stone Crab	Claws may not be removed from egg-bearing females. Illegal to land whole crab. Florida daily limit of claws is 1gallon/person, 2gallons/vessel.
Spiny Lobster	Removal of tail prohibited at sea. See commercial regulations for trap use. No spears, hooks, or piercing devices. No taking of spiny or slipper lobsters that are berried (egg-bearing).
Cobia (ling)	The 2 day bag limit allowance for charter vessels and headboats <u>does not</u> apply to cobia.
Red snapper	Exact dates of the red snapper season opening and closing dependant on the NMFS projections. Contact the NMFS Fishery Operations Branch at 727-570-5305 for further details.
Allowable Octocorals	Allowable octocoral means an erect, nonencrusting species of the subclass Octocorallia, except the seafans Gorgonia flabellum and G. ventalina, plus the attached substrate within 1 inch of an allowable octocoral. Note: An octocoral with attached substrate exceeding 1 inch is considered to be live rock and not allowable octocoral.
Tuna	Tuna permit holders are required to report by telephone all recreationally caught bluefin tuna. Call 888-872-8862 and select the catch reporting option. For information about fishing under the NMFS tag and release program when bag limits are closed, call 1-800-437-3936. All tunas must be landed in round or eviscerated form with one pectoral fin intact. Head removal allowed. Caudal fin must be intact on bluefin. For further information, call 978-281-9260.
Billfish	No retention unless taken by rod and reel. Sale prohibited. Head, fins, and bill must be intact through landing. Those people conducting a tournament involving score keeping or awards for Atlantic highly migratory species (whether or not retained), must register their tournament with the Fisheries Service's Southeast Fisheries Science Center: attn: "Tournament Registration", 75 Virginia Beach Drive, Miami, FL 33149. The registration must be in writing, at least four weeks prior to commencement of tournament fishing. A tournament registration form is available upon request from the above address or can be requested by FAX (305-361-4219).
Swordfish	Swordfish may be gutted and head removed, but the remaining carcass cannot be cut into pieces while on board the vessel.
Sharks	Sharks must be landed with head, fins, and tail attached. Gutting and bleeding is allowed if caudal fin remains attached to the carcass.

RECREATIONAL PERMIT REQUIREMENTS:	
Permit	Required For:
Charter vessel/headboat coastal pelagics permit	Charter vessels and headboats fishing for mackerels, cobia, little tunny, cero, dolphin, bluefish. Note: Issuance of new permits is under a moratorium effective June 16, 2003
Charter vessel/headboat reef fish permit	Charter vessels and headboats fishing for snappers, groupers, amberjack, tilefish, hogfish, and gray triggerfish.
Allowable octocoral permit	Harvest or possession of allowable octocoral, other than allowable octocoral that is landed in Florida. Appropriate Florida state permits are required to land allowable octocoral in Florida.
Highly migratory species (HMS) Charter/headboat permit	HMS Charter/headboat permit is required for all charter or headboats that fish for or possess an HMS. Call 888-872-8862 for this permit. Atlantic tunas angling category permit is required for private vessel owners who fish for bluefin tunas in school, large school, small medium size classes, and other tunas such as bigeye, albacore, yellowfin, and skipjack tuna. No permit is needed for bonito or Atlantic blackfin tuna. Call 888-872-8872 for this permit. Rule making for the HMS-angling permit is underway that would require all anglers who fish for or possess HMS to obtain an angling permit. Call 978-281-9260 for updates

Applications for permits may be obtained from National Marine Fisheries Service, Southeast Regional Office, Koger Building, 9721 Executive Center Drive, St. Petersburg, Florida 33702 (telephone 727-570-5326), except for tuna permits, which may be obtained by telephoning 888-872-8862 or 978-281-9260.

## OTHER REQUIREMENTS

o A state may regulate vessels that are registered in that state and are fishing in federal waters for species for which there are no federal fishery management plans or applicable federal regulations, or for which the appropriate fishery management plan has delegated management to the state and the state rules are consistent with federal regulations.

o All fish except for bait and oceanic migratory species taken from federal waters must have heads and fins intact through landing. Up to 1½ pounds of off-fish per person is exempt from the head and fins intact rule for personal consumption provided the vessel is equipped to cook such finfish.

o Area closures: The following locations off the west-central and south coast of Florida are closed to all fishing. Anchoring of fishing vessels is also not allowed in the Tortugas sites. The boundaries of the areas are as follows:

### Madison and Swanson Sites

NW corner 29°17' N. lat., 85°50' W. long.  
 NE corner 29°17' N. lat., 85°38' W. long.  
 SW corner 29°06' N. lat., 85°50' W. long.  
 SE corner 29°06' N. lat., 85°38' W. long.

### Steamboat Lumps

NW corner 28°14' N. lat., 84°48' W. long.  
 NE corner 28°14' N. lat., 84°37' W. long.  
 SW corner 28°03' N. lat., 84°48' W. long.  
 SE corner 28°03' N. lat., 84°37' W. long.

### EEZ portion of Tortugas North

NW corner 24°40' N. lat., 83°06' W. long.  
 NE corner 24°46' N. lat. 83°06' W. long.  
 SW corner 24°46' N. lat., 83°00' W. long.  
 thence along the seaward limit of Florida's waters to  
 24°40' N. lat., 83°06' W. long.

### Tortugas South

NW corner 24°33' N. lat., 83°09' W. long.  
 NE corner 24°33' N. lat., 83°05' W. long.  
 SW corner 24°18' N. lat., 83°05' W. long.  
 SE corner 24°18' N. lat., 83°09' W. long.

## HOW ARE RECREATIONAL STATISTICS COMPILED?

It is impossible to count every fish caught by each recreational fisherman in the Gulf of Mexico. Recreational catch statistics are derived from surveys that are designed to sample a statistically representative cross section of the recreational sector. Monitoring of the recreational fishery is accomplished primarily through a combination of three surveys:

**Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey (MRFSS):** This survey covers all Gulf states except Texas, and consists of an intercept survey (where catches are examined by surveyors at the docks and fishing piers to characterize species, size and catch-per-unit-effort), and a telephone survey (to estimate total angler effort and proportion of the public that fishes). Multiplying the observed catch data from the intercept survey by the total effort data from the telephone survey provides estimates of total recreational catch. Estimates are further divided into private/rental boats, charter vessels/headboats, and shore mode.

**NMFS Headboat Survey:** Intercept surveys conducted dockside and occasionally at sea provide estimates of species, sizes of fish caught, and other biological materials. Logbooks kept by vessel crews provide catch by species, number of anglers, fishing location, etc. This survey provides estimates of landings by party boats.

**Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's Coastal Sport Fishing Survey:** Texas does not participate in the MRFSS, but it conducts its own survey which provides similar data.

Other surveys which may be used include the Atlantic bluefin tuna recreational survey, the southeast charterboat survey, and recreational billfish tournament and non-tournament sampling programs.

Because of the time needed to compile the recreational data and generate landings estimates, recreational catch estimates do not become available for several weeks or even months. Consequently, the Council generally does not know until the following year whether its recreational management measures have been effective.

## ERRATA AND UPDATE SHEET

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