

Snapper regulations could be loosened; did 'overfishing' end with oil spill?

Published: Monday, March 21, 2011, 6:11 AM Updated: Monday, March 21, 2011, 6:46 AM



By [Ben Raines, Press-Register](#)

Follow

[Share58](#)

8



Share [close](#)

[Google Buzz](#) [Digg](#) [Stumble Upon](#) [Fark](#)

[Share Email](#) [Print](#)



[View full size](#) Mississippi-

Alabama Sea Grant Director LaDon Swann holds 1 of his 2 fish red snapper daily limit caught while fishing with other federal, state and local dignitaries on a trip Oct. 1, 2010 to promote the return of Alabama's fishing industry. Officials say that in part due to the Gulf oil spill, snapper fishing was well below the quota and that it may be time to loosen snapper fishing regulations to allow higher limits. (Press-Register/Jeff Dute)

GULF OF MEXICO -- Thanks in large part to an oil spill-shortened season, recreational anglers caught a lot fewer red snapper than they were allowed to in 2010.

After estimating the catch during a makeup season held in the fall, Roy Crabtree, the National Marine Fisheries Service official in charge of Gulf fisheries, said the 2010 recreational harvest was about a million pounds below the 3.4 million-pound quota.

Last year — for the first time since the fisheries service enacted strict catch limits to protect the snapper stock from collapse — officials stated that “overfishing” of red

snapper had finally stopped. As a result, some regulators said the time has come to begin talking about making some changes in how the fishery is managed.

Chief among the possible changes would be the way the Gulf's red snapper harvest is split between commercial and recreational fishermen. For more than 20 years, commercial fishermen have been allowed to catch 51 percent of the annual harvest, with the recreational side catching 49 percent.

The so-called "snapper allocation" will be up for discussion at the April meeting of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council.

Federal fisheries law dictates that harvests should be allocated in part based on the largest socioeconomic benefit. And that, say recreational fishing groups, means that sport fishermen should be allowed to catch a larger portion of the Gulf's red snapper harvest.

That is already the case with some species, such as amberjack, with recreational anglers allowed to keep more than 70 percent of the annual harvest, while the commercial side takes a much smaller portion.

"Those allocations are 20 years old. It is something we've needed to look at for a long time but we've been so preoccupied with the overfishing problem," said Bob Shipp, longtime member of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and head of the University of South Alabama's marine sciences department. It will be up to the Gulf Council to decide whether to change the way the snapper harvest is split between the fishing groups.

"We can start to look at socioeconomic factors. If the council looks at the socioeconomic impacts, then they can change the allocations," Shipp said.

Several studies funded by recreational fishing groups purport to show that species such as grouper or snapper are worth three to four times as much to the national economy when caught by recreational fishermen versus commercial fishermen. The difference comes from the amount recreational anglers spend buying boats, tackle, gasoline, bait and hotel rooms.

But there is more to the equation than just dollars and cents, said Crabtree, whose agency must approve any allocation changes made by the Gulf Council.

"You can't make decisions based solely on economics. It goes more to what would produce the most benefit for the nation. There is value in people getting enjoyment out of going fishing," Crabtree said. "The allocations have to be fair and equitable. They have to promote conservation. ... It's a tricky thing. I suspect there will be a lot of intense discussions."

Crabtree said that an equitable split does not necessarily mean an equal split. He also speculated that the annual snapper quota will continue to increase year after year, meaning there would be a bigger and bigger catch to split between the two groups.

Among possible options, he said, would be to hold the commercial fishing harvest at its present level of about 3.5 million pounds a year, and let the recreational quota slowly increase as the size of the harvest goes up.

Crabtree said that both commercial and recreational harvest limits should increase by about 125,000 pounds this year. Commercial boats will be allowed to catch 3.6 million pounds of snapper this year, while recreational anglers will be allowed 3.5 million pounds.