

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 622

[I.D. 013098C]

RIN 0648-AK31

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; Public Hearings

AGENCY: National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Commerce.

ACTION: Notice of public hearings; request for comments.

SUMMARY: The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) will convene public hearings on Draft Amendment 9 to the Fishery Management Plan for Coastal Migratory Pelagics Resources of the Gulf of Mexico (Draft Mackerel Amendment 9) and its draft environmental assessment (EA) and on Draft Amendment 16 to the Fishery Management Plan for Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico (Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16) and its draft EA. Some of the hearings in the Gulf region will be joint hearings to receive comments on both Draft Mackerel Amendment 9 and Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16. In addition, one hearing in Key West, Florida, will be a joint hearing of the Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Council on Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

DATES: Written comments on Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16 and on Draft Mackerel Amendment 9 will be accepted by the Gulf Council until March 5, 1998. The public hearings will be held in February. See **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** for specific dates and times of the public hearings.

ADDRESSES: Written comments should be sent to, and copies of the draft amendment are available from, the Gulf Council. See **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** for locations of the hearings.

Council address: Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, 3018 U.S. Highway 301, North, Suite 1000, Tampa, FL 33619.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Wayne E. Swingle, Executive Director, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; telephone: (813) 228-2815.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Council will hold public hearings on Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16. The draft amendment contains alternatives that may: (1) Shorten the phase-out of the use of fish traps to 2 years after

implementation of this amendment; (2) restrict the commercial harvest of reef fish by boats and vessels tending spiny lobster and stone crab traps; (3) require a remote vessel monitoring system for fish trap vessels; (4) establish additional reporting requirements for fish trap vessels; (5) establish minimum and maximum size limits for banded rudderfish and lesser amberjack; (6) prohibit the sale of minor amberjack species that are smaller than the commercial size limit for greater amberjack, currently 36 inches (91 cm) fork length; (7) establish a five-fish bag limit for the recreational fishery for lesser amberjack and banded rudderfish; (8) remove from the FMP or reclassify sand perch, dwarf sand perch, queen triggerfish, and hogfish; (9) establish minimum size limits of 20 inches (51 cm) for scamp and yellowmouth grouper; 16 inches (41 cm) for mutton snapper; and 12 inches (30 cm) for blackfin snapper, cubera snapper, dog snapper, mahogany snapper, schoolmaster, silk snapper, mutton snapper, queen snapper, scamp, yellowmouth grouper, gray triggerfish, and hogfish to be more consistent with size regulations in State waters of Florida; (10) include the five-fish red snapper bag limit as part of the 10-snapper aggregate snapper limit; (11) establish a five-fish bag limit for hogfish; (12) allow two fish per vessel of cubera snapper over 30 inches (76 cm) total length in addition to the 10-snapper aggregate limit; and (13) establish a one-fish bag limit and commercial quotas for speckled hind and Warsaw grouper, or a prohibition on harvest of these species, in response to those species having been added to the candidate list of species for possible listing as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

A total of 12 public hearings, including 3 joint public hearings on both amendments, will be held to obtain public comments on this plan amendment. The public comment period for this amendment ends on March 5, 1998.

Draft Mackerel Amendment 9 includes proposals for Federal rules for king and Spanish mackerel fisheries applicable only to the Gulf Council's area of jurisdiction that may: (1) Change the fishing year for Gulf group king mackerel, currently July 1; (2) prohibit the sale of mackerel caught under the recreational allocation; (3) reallocate total allowable catch (TAC) for the commercial fishery for Gulf group king mackerel in the Eastern Zone (Florida east coast and Florida west coast) to 45 percent for the east coast and 55 percent for the west coast, currently a 50/50

split; (4) reallocate TAC for Gulf group king mackerel between the recreational and commercial sectors to 70 percent recreational and 30 percent commercial, currently 68 percent and 32 percent, respectively; (5) establish two subdivisions of TAC for the commercial, hook-and-line allocation of Gulf group king mackerel by area for the Florida west coast and base allocations on historical catches from the 1992-93 fishing year through the 1996-97 fishing year, excepting the 1994-95 fishing year; (6) subdivide TAC for Gulf group king mackerel in the Western Zone (Alabama through Texas) by area, season, or a combination of area and season; (7) establish trip limits for vessels fishing Gulf group king mackerel in the Western Zone; (8) restrict the use of net gear to harvest Gulf group king mackerel off the Florida west coast, including a phase-out, a moratorium on additional net endorsements with requirements for continuing existing net endorsements, restrictions on the transferability of net endorsements, and restriction of the use of nets to primarily the waters off Monroe and Collier Counties; (9) increase the minimum size limit for Gulf group king mackerel to 24 or 26 inches (61 or 66 cm) fork length, currently 20 inches (51 cm) fork length; (10) re-establish an annual allocation or a TAC percentage of Gulf group Spanish mackerel for the purse seine fishery with consideration of trip limits and area restrictions; (11) modify regulations on retention and sale of cut-off (damaged) legal-sized king and Spanish mackerel within established trip limits.

Public hearings will be held from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. at all of the following locations, except Gulf Shores, AL, where the hearing for Draft Mackerel Amendment 9 will be from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., and the hearing on Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16 will be from 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

1. Monday, February 9, 1998—Holiday Inn Beachside, 3841 North Roosevelt Boulevard, Key West, FL 33040 - Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16.

2. Tuesday, February 10, 1998—Hampton Inn, 13000 North Cleveland, North Fort Myers, FL 33903 - Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16.

3. Wednesday, February 11, 1998—Radisson Bay Harbor Inn, 7700 Courtney Campbell Causeway, Tampa, FL 33607 - Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16.

4. Thursday, February 12, 1998—Plantation Inn and Golf Resort, 9301 West Fort Island Trail, Crystal River, FL 34429 - Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16.

5. Tuesday, February 17, 1998—Holiday Inn Beachside, 3841 North Roosevelt Boulevard, Key West, FL

33040 - Draft Mackerel Amendment 9 - Draft Mackerel Amendment 9 (Joint meeting with South Atlantic Fishery Management Council).

6. Wednesday, February 18, 1998—Hampton Inn, 13000 North Cleveland, North Fort Myers, FL 33903 - Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

7. Thursday, February 19, 1998—Radisson Bay Harbor Inn, 7700 Courtney Campbell Causeway, Tampa, FL 33607 - Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

8. Thursday, February 19, 1998—Old Post Office Building, 102 East Green Street, Perry, FL 32347 - Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16.

9. Monday, February 23, 1998—National Marine Fisheries Service Panama City Laboratory, 3500 Delwood Beach Road, Panama City, FL 32408 - Joint Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16 and Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

10. Tuesday, February 24, 1998—Holiday Inn on the Beach, 265 East

Beach Boulevard, Gulf Shores, AL 36547 - Joint Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16 and Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

11. Wednesday, February 25, 1998—J. L. Scott Marine Education Center & Aquarium, 115 East Beach Boulevard, U.S. Highway 90, Biloxi, MS 39530 - Joint Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16 and Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

12. Wednesday, February 25, 1998—Texas A&M Auditorium, 200 Seawolf Parkway, Galveston, TX 77553 - Joint Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16 and Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

13. Thursday, February 26, 1998—Larose Regional Park, 2001 East 5th Street, Larose, LA 70373 - Joint Draft Reef Fish Amendment 16 and Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

14. Thursday, February 26, 1998—Port Arkansas Library, 700 West Avenue A, Port Arkansas, TX 78373 - Joint Draft

Reef Fish Amendment 16 and Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

15. Thursday, February 26, 1998—West Palm Beach Fishing Club, 201 5th Street, West Palm Beach, FL 33401 - Draft Mackerel Amendment 9.

Copies of the amendments can be obtained by calling 813-228-2815.

Special Accommodations

These meetings are physically accessible to people with disabilities. Requests for sign language interpretation or other auxiliary aids should be directed to Anne Alford at the Council (see ADDRESSES) by February 6, 1998.

Dated: February 2, 1998.

Gary C. Matlock,

Office Director, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service.

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