

pups for their traditional potlatch rites. Representatives of the St. Paul Island tribal government have made similar requests. Current regulations at 50 CFR 216.72(c)(3) prohibit the taking of fur seal pups.

The tribal government of St. George Island also requested an increase in the number of allowable haulout areas from which to conduct the annual harvest. At present, regulations at 50 CFR 216.72(d)(2) limit harvestable locations to two haulouts, which can be harvested no more than twice per week. These requests for pups and additional haulouts for harvesting will not be addressed in time for this harvest; they will be considered through a separate co-management process in the future.

Regarding the proposed increase of the lower end estimate range for St. George Island from 281 to 300 seals, the continuing decline of the island's economy has resulted in an increased rate of unemployment and, thus, a greater reliance on subsistence harvesting of food resources by the Aleut residents of St. George Island to meet their needs for the 1997–1999 period. In response to the information provided by the tribal governments of St. Paul and St. George Islands, NMFS proposes that the estimated range on St. Paul Island for each of the years, 1997–1999, remains the same as was established for the years 1994–1996 (1,645 to 2,000), and that the annual range on St. George Island for the years, 1997–1999, be established at 300–500 seals.

As described earlier in this document, if the Aleut residents of either island reach the lower end of this yearly harvest estimate and have unmet subsistence needs and no indication of waste, they may request an additional number of seals up to the upper limit of the respective harvest estimates. The residents of St. George and St. Paul Islands may substantiate any additional need for seals by submitting in writing the information upon which they base their decision that subsistence needs are unfulfilled. The regulations at 50 CFR 216.72(e)(1)(i) require a suspension of the fur seal harvest for up to 48 hours once the lower end of the estimated

harvest levels is reached. The suspension is to last no more than 48 hours, followed either by a finding that the subsistence needs have been met or by a revised estimate of the number of seals necessary to satisfy the Aleuts' subsistence needs.

NMFS emphasizes that it expects the harvest of fur seals to be non-wasteful and in full compliance with the regulations specified at 50 CFR 216.72. The agency will continue to monitor the entire harvest on St. Paul Island and a portion of the harvest on St. George Island during 1997–1999 to ensure this result.

Dated: April 2, 1997.

Rolland A. Schmitten,

*Assistant Administrator for Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.*

[FR Doc. 97–9389 Filed 4–10–97; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510–22–P

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 622

[I.D. 031797A]

RIN 0648–AJ27

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; Public Hearings

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

ACTION: Public hearings; request for comments.

SUMMARY: The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) will convene 12 public hearings on Draft Amendment 15 to the Fishery Management Plan for Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico (FMP) and a related draft environmental assessment (EA).

DATES: Written comments will be accepted until May 2, 1997. The hearings will be held from April 14 to April 24, 1997. See **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** for specific dates and times.

ADDRESSES: Written comments should be sent to and copies of the draft amendment are available from Mr. Wayne E. Swingle, Executive Director, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, 3018 U.S. Highway 301, North, Suite 1000, Tampa, FL 33619.

The hearings will be held in FL, AL, MS, LA, and TX. See **SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION** for locations of the hearings and public accommodations.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Wayne E. Swingle, (813) 228–2815.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The Council will hold public hearings on Draft Amendment 15 to the FMP and its draft EA. The purposes of Amendment 15 include: (1) Establishing a license limitation system for the commercial red snapper fishery; (2) limiting possession of reef fish in excess of the recreational bag limit to fish taken in reef fish traps and stone crab and spiny lobster traps; (3) increasing the commercial fishery size limit for vermilion snapper; (4) removing from management under the FMP all grunts, porgies, and sea bass; (5) prohibiting commercial landings of greater amberjack during the spawning season (i.e., March, April, and May); and (6) specifying that the 20-fish aggregate bag limit includes only those species within the reef fish management unit.

Regarding the license limitation system for the commercial red snapper fishery, the Council is considering 10 alternatives related to establishing initial eligibility to participate in the fishery and initial trip limits. The initially preferred alternative would limit participation to vessels with records of landing in 2 out of 3 years during the period 1990–1992 of at least 2,500 lb (1,134 kg). Under this alternative, eligible participants would be granted one of three classes of licenses based on their level of landings during the 1990–1992 period. The three license classes would correspond to allowable trip limits of 2,000 (907 kg), 1,000 (454 kg), and 500 lb (227 kg) of red snapper. The license classes and criteria under this alternative are shown in the table below.

License class	1990–92 landings in 2 out of 3 years	Initial trip limit
1	More than 10,000 lb (4,536 kg)	2,000 lb (907 kg).
2	5,000 lb (2,268 kg) (but less than 10,000 lb (4,536 kg)	1,000 lb (454 kg).
3	2,500 lb (1,134 kg) but less than 5,000 lb (2,268 kg)	500 lb (227 kg).

The Council is considering other license limitation system alternatives or variations including: (1) Issuing licenses

to vessels rather than persons; (2) in instances where the landings records of a vessel upon which a historical captain

served are used to qualify for a license, issuing separate class (1) or class (2) licenses to the historical captain and the

vessel owner depending on the vessel's level of landings as shown by the records; (3) transferring licenses without restrictions; (4) placing no limitations on the ownership of licenses by one entity; (5) not allowing the transfer of landing records for a vessel for the 1990–92 period unless there is an agreement for transfer of the records between entities ownership vessel buyer and seller, the vessel's permit is transferred to an additional vessel by the same owner, or the vessel's landings records for 1990–92 were in a corporate name of a current owner; (6) establishing specific annual fishing season opening dates (the Council has not identified a preferred alternative at this time) and providing that after the season opening, the commercial red snapper fishery will be opened at noon on the first day of each month and closed at noon on the fifteenth day of each month until the commercial quota is reached and the season closed; (7) extending the term of the red snapper licensing indefinitely or until replaced by an alternate license management system; (8) establishing an appeals board consisting of designees of the directors of the state agencies with marine fisheries management authority to review disputes over landings records serving as a basis for license eligibility; and (9) allowing no allocation of the commercial red snapper quota for bycatch during the closed season.

In addition to the red snapper license limitation system, Amendment 15 would contain measures to: (1) Prevent possession of reef fish in excess of the recreational bag limit for a vessel that has on board or is tending any traps other than permitted reef fish traps or stone crab or spiny lobster traps; (2)

increase the size limit for vermilion snapper from 8 to 10 inches total length (3.9 cm); remove sea bass, porgies, and grunts from management under the FMP and allow the states to manage these species; (3) close the commercial fishery for greater amberjack in the exclusive economic zone off west Florida during the spawning season (i.e., March through May); and (4) amend the recently implemented 20-fish aggregate bag limit measure, which applies to those species without specific individual bag limits under the FMP, so that it applies only to certain species (i.e., vermilion snapper, lane snapper, banded rudderfish, lesser amberjack, Almaco jack, gray triggerfish, and tilefish).

The public will be asked to comment on a scoping document for greater amberjack, lesser amberjack, Almaco jack, and banded rudder fish. Persons will be asked to provide their observations on the status of these stocks, localized abundance, changes in size or abundance over the past 10 years, whether additional regulation is needed, whether current rules should be modified, and the dependence of fishing sectors on these stocks. This information will be used to draft an options paper for a subsequent FMP amendment.

The hearings are scheduled from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. as follows:

1. Monday, April 14, 1997—Holiday Inn Beachside, 3841 North Roosevelt Boulevard, Key West, FL 33040.

2. Tuesday, April 15, 1997—Golden Gate Community Center, 4701 Golden Gate Parkway, Naples, FL 33999.

3. Wednesday, April 16, 1997—City Hall Auditorium, 300 Municipal Drive, Madeira Beach, FL 33708.

4. Thursday, April 17, 1997—County Commission Office, 200 East Green Street, Perry, FL 32348.

5. Monday, April 21, 1997—Larose Regional Park, 2001 East 5th Street, Larose, LA 70373.

6. Monday, April 21, 1997—Police Jury Annex, Courthouse Square, P.O. Box 366, Cameron, LA 70631.

7. Tuesday, April 22, 1997—J. L. Scott Marine Education Center, 115 East Beach Boulevard, US Highway 90, Biloxi, MS 39530.

8. Tuesday, April 22, 1997—Texas A&M Auditorium, 200 Seawolf Parkway, Galveston, TX 77553.

9. Wednesday, April 23, 1997—Holiday Inn on the Beach, 365 East Beach Boulevard, Gulf Shores, AL 36547.

10. Wednesday, April 23, 1997—Port Aransas Civic Center Auditorium, 710 West Avenue A, Port Aransas, TX 78373.

11. Thursday, April 24, 1997—National Marine Fisheries Service, Panama City Laboratory, 3500 Delwood Beach Road, Panama City, FL 32408.

12. Thursday, April 24, 1997—Port Isabel Community Center, 122 Fernandez, Laguna Vista, TX 78578.

These hearings 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**).

Authority: 16 U.S.C. 1801 *et seq.*

Dated: April 8, 1997.

Bruce Morehead,

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

[FR Doc. 97-9434 Filed 4-10-97; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3510-22-P