

New Reef Gear Regulations as of June 1, 2008

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Beginning June 1, 2008 anglers will be required to possess and use certain reef fishing gear while fishing in state and federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

The regulations come as result of the **Joint Reef Amendment 27/14** enacted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), which is geared towards reducing the overfishing of red snapper. This will implement long-term measures to reduce over-fishing in the Gulf's and reduce the release mortality rate in reef fish.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) have also approved these measures to maintain consistency with the federal management plan and protect the red snapper fishery.

In addition to other rules which will reduce the red snapper total allowable catch for both commercial and recreation sectors, the commercial size limit, and the recreational bag limit and fishing season, the amendment will require all vessels targeting Gulf reef fish to have on board non-stainless circle hooks, dehooking devices, and venting tools.



Non-stainless circle hooks will be required for harvest of all reef fish when using natural baits. Due to their design, circle hooks tend to hook a fish in the corner of the mouth and reduce gut hooking, facilitating higher post-release survival rates. Anglers accustomed to fishing with J-style hooks will need to slightly modify their technique when using circle hooks. When a fish eats the bait, it is necessary to allow time for the fish to completely swallow the hook before steadily reeling in the line. Do not attempt to set the hook by sharply jerking the rod as this will pull the hook out of the fish's mouth.



At least one dehooking device will be required on each vessel to remove hooks embedded in reef fish. Dehooking devices allow for quicker and safer hook removal and reduces the risk of a hook re-engaging during the removal process.

They also minimize injuries to both the fish and angler by reducing the need to handle the fish. According to a spokeswoman with FWC, the dehooking device must be constructed to allow the hook to be secured and the barb shielded without re-engaging during the removal process. It must be blunt and all edges rounded, and it must be of a size appropriate to secure the range of hook sizes and styles used in the Gulf reef fish fishery.



Finally, Gulf anglers will be required to use venting tools to minimize impacts on reef fish with ruptured swim bladders. A reef fish's swim bladder can over expand and rupture when brought from depth using hook and line. Releasing a fish in this

condition prevents it from returning to depth and exposes it to predators and the elements.

A venting tool, which is a hollow, sharpened instrument such as a hypodermic syringe with the plunger removed allows the trapped gases to be released. Ice picks and knives should not be used because simply puncturing the fish is undesirable and can result in a further injury. The venting tool should be inserted 1 to 2 inches behind the pectoral fin at a 45 degree angle. It should only be inserted deep enough to help deflate the fish.

With more stringent state and federal reef fishing regulations on the way, the need for responsible individual actions is more important than ever. Although catch and release angling has proven to be a valuable conservation tool, the effectiveness of fisheries management is diminished if fish do not survive after being released.



If anglers are not already familiar with the use of circle hooks, dehooking devices, and venting tools, take the time to learn how to use them and why they are important to the health of our fisheries. Check with local tackle shops for advice on the appropriate equipment to use. To learn more about these conservation tools and other sustainable angling practices contact the Collier County Sea Grant Extension Agent at (239) 417-6310 extension 225 or visit <http://collier.ifas.ufl.edu/SeaGrant/Anglers.shtml>.

To learn more about Reef Amendment 27/14, visit the NOAA Fisheries Service website at http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sf/RedSnapper/Amendment_27_14.htm.