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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

50 CFR Part 622

[Docket No. 0907271173-0629-03]

RIN 0648-XG357

**Fisheries of the Caribbean, Gulf of Mexico, and South Atlantic;
2018 Commercial Accountability Measure and Closure for South
Atlantic Snowy Grouper**

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

ACTION: Temporary rule; closure.

SUMMARY: NMFS implements accountability measures (AMs) for commercial snowy grouper in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the South Atlantic. NMFS projects commercial landings for snowy grouper will reach the commercial annual catch limit (ACL) by July 24, 2018. Therefore, NMFS closes the commercial sector for snowy grouper in the South Atlantic EEZ on July 24, 2018, and it will remain closed until the start of the next commercial fishing season on January 1, 2019. This closure is necessary to protect the snowy grouper resource.

DATES: This rule is effective 12:01 a.m., local time, July 24,

2018, until 12:01 a.m., local time, January 1, 2019.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mary Vara, NMFS Southeast Regional Office, telephone: 727-824-5305, email: *mary.vara@noaa.gov*.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The snapper-grouper fishery of the South Atlantic includes snowy grouper and is managed under the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region (FMP). The FMP was prepared by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and is implemented by NMFS under the authority of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) by regulations at 50 CFR part 622.

The commercial ACL (commercial quota) for snowy grouper in the South Atlantic is 144,315 lb (65,460 kg), gutted weight, 170,291 lb (77,243 kg), round weight, for the current fishing year, January 1 through December 31, 2018, as specified in 50 CFR 622.190(a)(1)(iv).

Under 50 CFR 622.193(b)(1), NMFS is required to close the commercial sector for snowy grouper when the commercial quota is reached or projected to be reached, by filing a notification to that effect with the Office of the Federal Register. NMFS projects that commercial landings of South Atlantic snowy

grouper, as estimated by the Science and Research Director, will reach the commercial quota by July 24, 2018. Accordingly, the commercial sector for South Atlantic snowy grouper is closed effective 12:01 a.m., local time, July 24, 2018, until 12:01 a.m., local time, January 1, 2019.

The operator of a vessel with a valid commercial vessel permit for South Atlantic snapper-grouper having snowy grouper on board must have landed and bartered, traded, or sold such snowy grouper prior to 12:01 a.m., local time, July 24, 2018. During the commercial closure, harvest and possession of snowy grouper in or from the South Atlantic EEZ is limited to the bag and possession limits, as specified in § 622.187(b)(2)(ii) and (c)(1). Also during the commercial closure, the sale or purchase of snowy grouper taken from the EEZ is prohibited. The prohibition on sale or purchase does not apply to the sale or purchase of snowy grouper that were harvested, landed ashore, and sold prior to 12:01 a.m., local time, July 24, 2018, and were held in cold storage by a dealer or processor.

For a person on board a vessel for which a Federal commercial or charter vessel/headboat permit for the South Atlantic snapper-grouper fishery has been issued, the bag and possession limits and the sale and purchase provisions of the

commercial closure for snowy grouper would apply regardless of whether the fish are harvested in state or Federal waters, as specified in 50 CFR 622.190 (c) (1) (ii).

Classification

The Regional Administrator, Southeast Region, NMFS, has determined this temporary rule is necessary for the conservation and management of snowy grouper and the South Atlantic snapper-grouper fishery and is consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Act and other applicable laws.

This action is taken under 50 CFR 622.193(b) (1) and is exempt from review under Executive Order 12866.

These measures are exempt from the procedures of the Regulatory Flexibility Act, because the temporary rule is issued without opportunity for prior notice and comment.

This action responds to the best scientific information available. The Assistant Administrator for NOAA Fisheries (AA), finds that the need to immediately implement this action to close the commercial sector for snowy grouper constitutes good cause to waive the requirements to provide prior notice and opportunity for public comment pursuant to the authority set forth in 5 U.S.C. 553(b) (B), as such procedures would be unnecessary and contrary to the public interest. Such

procedures are unnecessary because the implementing final rule for these AMs has already been subject to notice and comment, and all that remains is to notify the public of the closure. Such procedures are contrary to the public interest because of the need to immediately implement this action to protect snowy grouper since the capacity of the fishing fleet allows for rapid harvest of the commercial quota. Prior notice and opportunity for public comment would require time and would potentially result in a harvest well in excess of the established commercial quota.

For the aforementioned reasons, the AA also finds good cause to waive the 30-day delay in the effectiveness of this action under 5 U.S.C. 553(d) (3).

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

Dated: July 18, 2018.

Jennifer M. Wallace,
Acting Director,
Office of Sustainable Fisheries,
National Marine Fisheries Service.

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