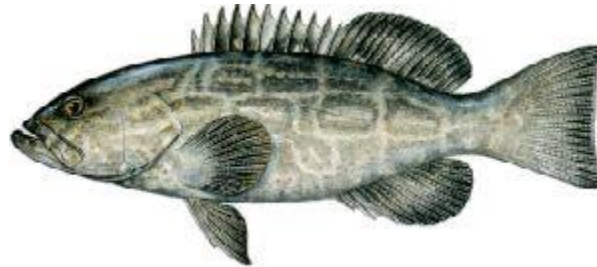


**New Regulations Requiring Circle Hooks, Dehooking
Devices, and Venting Tools for Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish
Effective June 1, 2008
Frequently Asked Questions
March 2008**



New Regulatory Requirements

What are the new reef fish gear regulations?

- The regulations will require the use of venting tools and dehooking devices when fishing for reef fish in the Gulf of Mexico. The rule will also require all persons aboard a vessel harvesting reef fish to possess and use non-stainless steel circle hooks when using natural baits.

Why are these new regulations needed?

- The intent of these new regulations is to reduce bycatch and discard mortality of reef fish that are caught and not kept. If the gear associated with these new regulations is used properly, it will help more reef fish survive when they are released.

When do these new regulations take effect?

- The regulations take effect June 1, 2008; however, many commercial fishers and recreational anglers are already using the gear associated with these new regulations in the Gulf of Mexico.

Who must comply with these regulations?

- These regulations apply to all commercial and recreational fishermen fishing for reef fish in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico.
- However, often states implement compatible regulations. Check with the state fishery management agency whose waters you are fishing in to determine if similar measures apply.

What do bycatch and discard mean?

- Bycatch is defined in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act as “fish which are harvested in a fishery, but which are not sold or kept for personal use, and includes economic discards and regulatory discards. The term does not include fish released alive under a recreational catch and release fishery management program.”
- Economic discards are “fish which are the target of a fishery, but which are not retained because of an undesirable size, sex, or quality, or other economic reason.”

- Regulatory discards are “fish harvested in a fishery which fishermen are required by regulation to discard whenever caught, or are required by regulation to retain but not sell.”

Circle Hooks

What is a circle hook?

- A circle hook is defined as a fishing hook designed and manufactured so that the point is turned perpendicularly back to the shank to form a generally circular, or oval, shape.
- The image to the right shows typical circle hooks.



Do circle hooks reduce discard mortality of reef fish?

- Yes, research has found that circle hooks are more likely to hook fish in the mouth, instead of in the esophagus or stomach. This reduces damage to the fish.
- For more information on circle hooks, see Florida Sea Grant’s Web page at <http://nsgl.gso.uri.edu/flsgp/flsgpg02001.pdf>.

Are offset circle hooks allowed?

Gulf of Mexico federal waters

- Yes, offset circle hooks are allowed in Gulf of Mexico federal waters. The definition of a circle hook indicates the point is turned perpendicularly back to the shank of the hook, but does not preclude an offset angle.
- The offset hook indicates the angle of sideways bending of the end of the hook in relation to the hook shank.
- While offset hooks are allowed in federal waters, some research has indicated the greater the degree of offset, the greater the likelihood of injuring a hooked fish. Therefore, their use is discouraged.

State waters

- Offset circle hooks are allowed in federal waters when fishing for reef fish. On June 1, 2008, [Florida](#) will not allow offset circle hooks to be used when fishing for reef fish in state waters.
- For other states, check with the state fishery management agency whose waters you are fishing in to determine if similar measures apply.

Why are non-stainless steel hooks preferable?

- Non-stainless steel hooks will deteriorate over time, thus reducing the probability of damage to the fish.
- Stainless steel hooks will not deteriorate over time and so have a greater chance of injury or killing fish if they are left in the fish or discarded in the water.

What are considered natural baits?

- Natural baits include any bait derived from a living organism, either dead or alive.
- Artificial baits which include a small amount of embedded fish or shrimp are not considered natural baits.

- Examples of live bait include herring, shrimp, and pinfish.
- Examples of dead bait include cut and frozen fish, shrimp, and squid.

Is it legal to have j-hooks in my tackle box on board a vessel in the Gulf of Mexico when I'm fishing for reef fish?

- Yes, as long as you are not using them with natural bait to harvest Gulf of Mexico reef fish.

Dehooking devices

What is a dehooking device?

- A dehooking device is a tool intended to remove a hook embedded in a fish. It allows a fish to be released with minimum damage.
- The hook removal device must be constructed to allow the hook to be secured and the barb shielded without re-engaging during the removal process.
- The dehooking end must be blunt, and all edges rounded.
- The device must be of a size appropriate to secure the range of hook sizes and styles used in the reef fish fishery.
- At least one dehooking device is required when fishing for reef fish in Gulf of Mexico federal waters and must be used to remove hooks embedded in reef fish with minimum damage.
- However, it may be safer for the fish and the angler to cut the line rather than trying to remove a deeply imbedded hook, which will occur less often with a circle hook.

What are appropriate dehooking devices to comply with the new Gulf of Mexico reef fish regulations?

- Examples of allowable dehooking devices include tools with a long shaft with an inverted-V or other hook capturing device, blunt-nosed pliers, alligator pliers, or dehooking forceps.
- Examples of what not to use include knives, screwdrivers, or sharp-nosed wire cutters or pliers.
- **Note:** While pliers and forceps can be used as a dehooking device, the use of dehooking tools that can grab the fishing line, slide down the line, and remove the hook quickly are encouraged because these tools require minimal handling of the fish and are better able to secure the hook during removal.
- See the adjacent photo of some examples of dehooking devices.



If a fish has swallowed a hook and removing it with a dehooker would do more than minimal damage to the fish, can I just cut the line?

- Yes, it may be safer for the fish to simply cut the line as close to the hook as possible on deeply embedded hooks rather than use the dehooking device.
- A good rule of thumb is to use a dehooker if you can see the hook. If you cannot see the hook, cut the leader as close to the hook as possible without removing the fish from the water.

- **Note:** Some dehookers are designed to remove swallowed hooks (e.g., ARC and Safe Dehooker), so you may want to consider carrying this type of device in addition to other dehooking devices.

Where can I find a dehooking device for sale?

- Dehooking devices can be found in many stores that sell fishing gear and on the Worldwide Web.

Venting tools

What is a venting tool?

- A venting tool is a device to deflate the expanded air from the swimbladder of a fish with minimum damage.
- A venting tool must be a sharpened, hollow instrument, such as a hypodermic syringe with the plunger removed, or a 16-gauge needle fixed to a hollow wooden dowel. Larger needles or other penetrating devices are strongly discouraged.
- At least one venting tool is required and must be used when needed to deflate the swimbladders of Gulf of Mexico reef fish that will be released.
- A tool such as a knife or an ice-pick cannot be used.



Why do some Gulf of Mexico reef fish need to be vented?

- Many marine reef fish have a gas-filled swimbladder that controls buoyancy to allow the fish to maintain a certain depth in the water column.
- When a fish is retrieved from deeper waters, the gas in the swimbladder can over-expand and fill the body cavity with trapped gases when the fish is brought quickly to the surface.
- As a result, the fish can sustain serious injury, and if released in this buoyant condition, float away and die from exposure to the elements or become an easy target for predators.

When should I use a venting tool and how should I use it?

- Venting tools are used to deflate the swimbladder of fish retrieved from depth.
- In general, fish retrieved from depths of greater than 50 feet need to be vented, but some species are more susceptible to swimbladder overexpansion.
- When retrieving a reef fish, carefully assess its condition. If the fish is bloated and floats (is unable to control its buoyancy) or if the fish's stomach is distended from the mouth, the fish requires venting.
- If the fish appears normal, not bloated, and appears like it would be able to swim down to the depth where it lives, venting is not necessary.
- To properly vent a fish, the tool is inserted into the fish at a 45-degree angle approximately 1 to 2 inches (2.54 to 5.08 cm) behind the base of the pectoral fin. The tool should be inserted just deep enough to release the gases to avoid damage to internal organs.
- More information on venting can be found on the Florida Sea Grant Web site at http://www.flseagrant.org/program_areas/fisheries/venting/.

- To view a video on how to vent fish with minimum damage, go to: <http://isurus.mote.org/research/cfe/fish-bio/how-to-vent-a-fish.htm>.