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Shrimp Industry Meets Bycatch Reduction Goals Two Years Early

Tarpon Springs, FL—Scientists announced at the National Oceans and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)'s Southeast Bycatch Workshop that reductions in the U.S. shrimp industry bycatch mortality rate have surpassed the ambitious goals set in the most recent Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) red snapper stock assessment. The SEDAR report, which sets forth proposals to manage the overfished red snapper stock, called for a 50% reduction of juvenile red snapper bycatch mortality by 2007. By 2005, the shrimp industry's bycatch mortality was reduced by 58% due to substantial reductions in the amount of time the shrimp industry spent harvesting wild-caught shrimp.

The study comes before the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) considers management measures to rebuild the red snapper stock on June 5-8 in Tampa, Florida. The Gulf Council is required under U.S. law to develop a plan to stop the overfishing of red snapper and to allow the red snapper stock recover by 2032. Several proposals before the Gulf Council promote a dramatic restructuring of the U.S. shrimp industry to meet the shrimp bycatch mortality reduction targets of the 2004 SEDAR report. The proposals include quotas, time-area closures for the shrimp fishery, and a moratorium on shrimp fishing permits. The National Marine Fisheries Service imposed a permit moratorium in 2005 on shrimp fishing permits that caps the number of vessels at about 2,600, a total fleet size much than has been historically engaged in the shrimp fishery, that will prevent the shrimp industry from returning to its heyday.

"The SEDAR report acknowledges that at the time these aggressive proposals were drafted, it was not known whether or not the shrimp industry had actually reached the target bycatch mortality reductions. Yet, today we know that the shrimp industry has met those goals," stated John Williams, Executive Director of the Southern Shrimp Alliance. "The U.S. shrimp industry is concerned that our significant reductions of juvenile red snapper bycatch will not end the overfishing of red snapper. We strongly support proposals to decrease the directed fisheries total allowable catch of adult red snapper and to remove size limits that have increased red snapper bycatch."

The last Gulf Council management plan failed to end the overfishing of red snapper, despite the shrimp industry meeting the bycatch mortality reductions required under the old SEDAR models. The current SEDAR report recognizes that the juvenile red snapper affected by shrimp nets have an 80% natural mortality rate and are not as valuable as the sexually mature red snapper targeted by the directed fishery. Yet, the Gulf Council has maintained the directed fishery's total allowable catch at 9.12 million for over a decade.

"U.S. fishermen harvest shrimp from sustainable stocks and have made sacrifices to limit our impact on marine ecosystems. We want our fellow fishermen to have the benefit of fishing red snapper in the future, but it will require their significant sacrifices as well. The shrimp industry's bycatch mortality reductions do not protect the valuable adult red snapper," concluded Williams.

For more information on the Southern Shrimp Alliance, which represents shrimp fishermen and processors from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas, please visit www.shrimpalliance.com.