

NOAA03-R149

Contact: Ben Sherman, NOAA Ocean Service FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

(301) 713-3066, ext. 178

Nov. 3, 2003

Chris Smith, NOAA Fisheries

(727) 570-5301

**NOAA ISSUES FLORIDA FISHERIES PATHOLOGY REPORT;
NO HUMAN HEALTH THREAT IDENTIFIED**

Officials from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) and the National Ocean Service (NOS) Center for Coastal Fisheries and Habitat Research (CCFHR) have received the pathology and microbiology reports on two frozen snowy groupers with unidentified lesions that fishermen from Port Orange, Fla., thought may be the possible source of a staph infection that has affected several fishermen in that community. The report showed no health threat to humans. NOAA is part of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

While the pathology study was unable to be as complete as normally desired due to the fact that the sampled fish had been frozen, Dr. Craig Harms of North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine reported that the fish he examined showed no presence of staphylococci or fungi, and showed signs only of bacteria such as that normally found on marine organisms.

Harms stated that it was his opinion that the lesions, found on the fish presented, were unlikely to be the source of the infections on the Port Orange, Fla. fishing crew. Harms completed his studies last week, and forwarded them to the Beaufort, N.C. Laboratory. Harms was asked by NOAA to conduct the pathology study.

Open wound infections, like those reported to have been suffered by fishers, have also occurred among surfers and swimmers in Volusia County. Florida State and Volusia County officials have initiated an investigation into the source of the infections which have been identified by medical authorities as MRSA – methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus.

Fishing officials also noted that similar skin infections of fishers have been reported by fishing crews throughout the South Atlantic region and the Gulf of Mexico.

Snowy grouper is a fish found in deep water on the coast along the eastern United States and the Gulf of Mexico. Scientists have stated that red tide or other harmful algal blooms (HABS) would most likely not be the source of the lesions, as HABS are generally found within 75-miles of the coastline.

NOAA officials said they would continue to monitor the situation. Similar skin ulcers to those reported on the grouper have been reported on some marine life, including sea turtles, found closer to shore.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources and their habitat through scientific research, management and enforcement. NOAA Fisheries provides effective stewardship of these resources for the benefit of the nation, supporting coastal communities that depend upon them, and helping to provide safe and healthy seafood to consumers and recreational opportunities for the American public.

NOAA's National Ocean Service manages the CCFHR and is dedicated to exploring, understanding, conserving and restoring the nation's coasts and oceans. The National Ocean Service balances environmental protection with economic prosperity in fulfilling its mission of promoting safe navigation, supporting coastal communities, sustaining coastal habitats and mitigating coastal hazards.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.