



South Atlantic Council Issues

Review and Discussion

April 13, 2016

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 2

This is a review and discussion of actions from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) March 7-11 meeting in Jekyll Island, GA.

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Photo Credit: South Atlantic Council staff

Final Action – Warsaw Hole



- Establishment of a Spawning Special Management Zone (SMZ) for snapper-grouper species
 - 3.6-square-mile area
 - 10-year sunset provision
 - Prohibits bottom fishing and anchoring within area



The Council took final action to approve the creation of five Spawning Special Management Zones (SMZs) in Atlantic federal waters, all of which have a 10-year sunset provision. The SMZ that was approved off Florida is located 35 miles offshore of Key West at a site known as Warsaw Hole. The seafloor feature within this 3.6-square-mile SMZ, a combination of rocky ridge and relatively steep terrace drop off, is similar to features at other known snapper-grouper spawning sites, such as Madison-Swanson in the Gulf.

The SMZs are designed to protect spawning snapper-grouper species and their spawning habitat by prohibiting bottom fishing and anchoring within these zones. Greater amberjack spawn at Warsaw Hole and anecdotal evidence suggests Warsaw grouper have spawned there as well. Along with establishing the SMZs, the Council adopted a System Management Plan to guide how these areas are managed, researched, and enforced. Research at these sites will be a priority because if scientific research cannot document spawning fish at an SMZ within 10 years, the SMZ designation for that area and related prohibitions will expire.

This action will be forwarded to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce for review and approval.

Hogfish – Proposed Rule Changes



- Proposed regulations for the Florida Keys/East Florida stock:
 - 16-inch minimum size limit, commercial and recreational
 - 25-lb. commercial trip limit
 - 1 fish/person recreational bag limit
 - Recreational season open July – Oct.
- Final action in Sept. 2016



Photo courtesy: National Marine Fisheries Service



The Council reviewed proposed rule changes and public hearing comments for hogfish management. One of the most significant changes proposed is defining two distinct stocks of hogfish in the Atlantic, which were identified in the most recent FWRI stock assessment: Florida Keys/East Florida and Georgia – North Carolina. This stock assessment showed that the Florida Keys/East Florida stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing.

The Council is required to rebuild and end overfishing of the Florida Keys/East Florida stock. To this end, the Council is considering a 10-year rebuilding timeline that would set the quota for 2017 at 36,449 pounds and increase it incrementally each year until the rebuilding target is met. The quota will be split 90.37% recreational and 9.63% commercial. They have also proposed changing commercial and recreational regulations to constrain harvest to the new quota. These modifications include: (1) raising the minimum size limit from 12 to 16 inches for both sectors; (2) implementing a commercial trip limit of 25 pounds; (3) reducing the recreational bag limit from five to one fish per person; and (4) establishing a recreational season from July 1 through Oct. 31.

Council and NOAA Fisheries staff have developed a decision tool to predict how these changes will effect how much hogfish is harvested; however, that decision tool is still under review by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee. A preview of the decision tool shows that by implementing the size limit increase and bag limit decrease, the recreational fishery should be able to remain open through the entire July – October fishing season. This creates a social benefit by allowing the public to plan recreational fishing trips around a known season. The recreational fishery would be closed during the November – April hogfish spawning season, which is important because hogfish have unique spawning behavior.

The Council is expected to take final action in September.

Other Items



- Citizen Science Program under development
- Sector reallocation discussions for dolphin and yellowtail snapper will continue in June
- Red snapper stock assessment will be reviewed by the Council in June
- Limited entry program under consideration for all South Atlantic for-hire permits:
 - Snapper-grouper
 - Coastal migratory pelagic
 - Dolphin-wahoo



Photo credit: Don DeMott



In 2016, the Council launched development of a Citizen Science Program to address outstanding data needs and incorporate stakeholders in collaborative science. The first stage of development was a workshop to judge interest and obtain feedback from researchers and stakeholders. In March, the Council reviewed a blueprint for implementation of the program, including goals and objectives, and they will continue to refine the blueprint as the initiative moves forward. Stakeholders and NOAA Fisheries have indicated high levels of support for the Citizen Science Program.

The Council reviewed possible alternatives for adjusting the commercial and recreational sector allocations for dolphin and yellowtail snapper, including temporary reallocation and quota sharing. This discussion was initiated after early closures of the commercial sector for both fisheries in 2015 due to commercial quotas being met. Commercial fishermen from both fisheries would like more flexibility in quota management or reallocation to the commercial sector because the recreational sector has not met their quota in recent years.

In advance of the 2016 red snapper stock assessment, the Council discussed the future of the Atlantic red snapper fishery. The Council will review the assessment in June and may consider significant management changes for red snapper at that time. The red snapper fishery has been closed or extremely limited in the Atlantic since 2012.

Some members of the Council have indicated that they would like to explore limited entry for the South Atlantic federally-permitted for-hire fleet. This includes the snapper-grouper, coastal migratory pelagics (mackerel and cobia), and dolphin-wahoo fisheries. Although support for limited entry is minimal, the Council will discuss this topic in June.

No Direction Requested



- Input on Council items is welcome
- Next Council meeting is June 13-17 in Cocoa Beach, FL



Staff is not seeking direction on specific Council items at this time; however, input on Council items is always welcome.

The South Atlantic Council will next meet June 13-17 in Cocoa Beach, FL.

The following slides are considered backup material and are not anticipated to be part of the actual presentation to the Commission



Hogfish Biology and Behavior



- All hogfish are born female and transition to male
 - Function of size and age or social structure
- Form spawning harems from November to April
 - Composed of a single male and 5-15 females
- Florida Keys/East Florida hogfish are transitioning at a smaller size and younger age than hogfish on the West Florida shelf



The Council has considered the unique biology and behavior of hogfish while evaluating management changes. Hogfish are protogynous hermaphrodites, meaning all hogfish are born female and transition to male. Transition can occur as a function of size and age or be socially mediated.

The spawning season for hogfish in South Florida and the Keys is prolonged, lasting from November through April. During this time, hogfish form harems composed of a single male and five to 15 females, and the members of a harem are capable of spawning daily. If the male is removed from the harem, socially mediated transition occurs, where, over the course of several months, a female changes sex to replace him. Thus, removal of the male can significantly affect harem stability and decrease reproduction.

Though Florida Keys/East Florida hogfish can sexually transition as small as 7.75 inches, size at 50% transition to male is over 16 inches. Research from the West Florida Shelf shows that hogfish transition to males at smaller sizes and younger ages in shallow water (13.5 inches and 4.9 years) versus deeper water (25 inches and 9.8 years).

Together, all of this information indicates that size limits and fishing seasons can be used to minimize disruption of spawning harems and preserve reproductive potential, which can help rebuild the stock.