

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: June 23, 2016
Subject: Mutton Snapper – Draft Rule

Purpose:

Staff will present a proposed draft rule that would increase the recreational, commercial, and importation and sale minimum size limits; reduce the recreational bag limit; and modify commercial trip limits for mutton snapper.

Summary:

In November 2015, the Commission discussed stakeholder concerns and federal management changes being considered by the South Atlantic and Gulf councils (councils) for the mutton snapper fishery. Mutton snapper is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, but a recent assessment indicates the population is smaller than previously estimated. Due to the lower population estimate, the councils are required to reduce federal quotas. If future landings are similar to those in recent years, harvest reductions will be necessary to prevent quota closures.

Because mutton snapper is harvested primarily in Florida, the Commission has taken the lead on potential management changes in coordination with the councils. In February 2016, FWC and South Atlantic Council staff jointly held public workshops to collect input on possible changes to mutton snapper regulations. During the workshops, a broad group of stakeholders supported reducing the recreational bag limit for mutton snapper, both year-round and during the spawning season. Stakeholders had conflicting opinions about commercial trip limits, especially for long-line vessels that operate in Gulf federal waters, because a trip limit may create regulatory discards. Some recreational and commercial harvesters proposed increasing the minimum size limit. Support for an area closure at Western Dry Rocks, which one of the known spawning aggregation sites, varied by region, with little support by those who commonly fish the area. In general, stakeholders requested proactive management to prevent declines in the population that could lead to stricter harvest limits in the future. Many of these comments echoed statements staff has heard from the public since 2007.

The proposed draft rules are intended to keep harvest below the proposed federal quotas and address stakeholder concerns. Specifically, the proposed changes would:

- 1) Increase the recreational, commercial, and importation and sale minimum size limits from 16 inches to 18 inches;
- 2) Reduce the recreational bag limit from 10 fish per person to three fish per person within the 10-fish snapper aggregate bag limit;
- 3) Replace the May through June commercial harvest limit of 10 fish per person per day in all state waters with a three-fish per person per day limit applicable in Atlantic state waters from April through June; and
- 4) Establish a 300-pound commercial trip limit in Atlantic state waters from July through March.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends approving the proposed draft rules for mutton snapper. If approved and directed, staff will return for a final public hearing at the September Commission meeting.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Jessica McCawley, Director, Division of Marine Fisheries Management