

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: September 8, 2016
Subject: Mutton Snapper – Final Public Hearing

Purpose:

Staff will present proposed final rules for mutton snapper, public feedback on the proposed rules, and an update on possible changes to federal mutton snapper regulations. These rules were initially presented in June, 2016, at the Eastpoint Commission meeting.

Summary:

The Fish and Wildlife Research Institute's mutton snapper stock assessment found the stock is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, but it is smaller than indicated by previous assessments. Due to the lower population estimate, the Gulf and South Atlantic councils are required to reduce federal quotas. If future landings are similar to those in recent years, harvest reductions will be necessary to prevent a quota closure of the Atlantic recreational mutton snapper fishery.

In February 2016, FWC and the South Atlantic Council jointly held public workshops to collect input on possible changes to mutton snapper regulations. In general, stakeholders requested proactive management to prevent declines in the population that could lead to stricter harvest limits in the future. There was broad stakeholder support for reducing the recreational mutton snapper bag limit, 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. Several anglers and commercial harvesters proposed a minimum size limit increase. Support for an area closure at the Western Dry Rocks spawning aggregation site varied by region, with little support from those who commonly fish the area. Many of these comments echoed statements staff has heard from the public since 2007. At the direction of the Commission, staff is holding additional public workshops in August in Key West, Duck Key, Key Largo, Dania Beach, Stuart, and St. Petersburg. This memo will be updated to include feedback from these workshops.

Because mutton snapper is harvested primarily in Florida, the Commission has taken the lead on potential management changes in coordination with the councils. The following recommendations for final rules reflect Commission direction from the June 2016 meeting in Eastpoint. Both councils are considering regulations that could be consistent with the proposed changes for state regulations.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends adopting the proposed final rules as follows:

- 1) Increase recreational, commercial, importation, and sale minimum size limits from 16 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 500-pound commercial trip limit in Atlantic state waters from July through March.

Staff recommends these rules take effect January 1, 2017.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

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