



Mutton Snapper

Review and Discussion

November 18, 2015

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Division of Marine Fisheries Management

This is a review and discussion of current mutton snapper regulations, public concerns about the regulations, and a request for direction on holding public workshops to collect input on potential changes to mutton snapper management.

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Report date: October 21, 2015

Background and Outline

- Since 2007, stakeholders have regularly expressed concerns about mutton snapper recreational bag limits and commercial trip limits, and the amount of harvest during the spawning season (May – June)
- Stock assessment positive, but fishery declining and need to reduce overall quota
- Gulf and South Atlantic Councils considering quota decrease and management measures to respond to these concerns
- FWC has opportunity to take the lead in the management changes for this fishery

Today:

- Review stock status, stakeholder concerns, and suggested management measures



Staff is bringing mutton snapper before the Commission for review and discussion because, since 2007, staff has regularly heard concerns about mutton snapper recreational bag limits and commercial trip limits, and received requests to reduce those limits. Stakeholders are particularly concerned about how many mutton snapper are harvested during the spawning season.

A recent stock assessment conducted by FWRI was positive, but indicates a reduction in the federal quota is needed. The Gulf and South Atlantic Councils are considering a decrease in quota along with other management measures to try and address stakeholder concerns.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has the opportunity to take the lead on management changes for this important Florida fishery.

Today, staff will review the status of the stock, the management framework for mutton snapper, and mutton snapper spawning and spawning area protections. Staff will also review stakeholder requests for rule changes and seek guidance from Commissioners on gathering public input on these possible management changes through public workshops.

Mutton Snapper Status and Management

- 2015 stock assessment
 - Stock is not overfished, overfishing not occurring
 - Estimates a smaller adult population than previous assessment
 - Recommends a reduction in quota
- Mutton snapper management framework
 - Managed in state waters by FWC
 - Managed in federal waters by Gulf and South Atlantic Councils



All mutton snapper in U.S. waters comes from a single stock. The most recent stock assessment for mutton snapper was completed in 2015 by FWRI. The assessment found that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. The previous stock assessment, completed in 2008, had the same findings. However, the 2015 assessment estimated a smaller adult population compared to the 2008 assessment. Because of this finding, the assessment recommends a lower quota to maintain sustainable harvest.

FWC manages mutton snapper in state waters. The species is managed by the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils in federal waters. Although there is only one stock of mutton snapper, each Council independently manages mutton snapper within their respective jurisdiction with separate quotas. The Councils will consider federal rule-making to reduce the quota because of the findings of the 2015 stock assessment. While the assessment does not indicate that management changes beyond a quota reduction are needed at this time, the Councils will also be considering changing recreational and commercial mutton snapper regulations.

Mutton Snapper Spawning Aggregations

- Solitary, non-schooling fish that forms large spawning aggregations around the full moon from April – August
 - Peak spawning occurs May – July
 - Individual fish spawn multiple times per season
- Closed area to protect spawning aggregations at Riley's Hump
 - Known spawning locations in the Tortugas
 - Known migration corridor between the Keys and the Tortugas



Adult mutton snapper are normally solitary; however, from April to August, they form large spawning aggregations timed with the full moon. Spawning peaks from May through early July. These aggregations are highly predictable and they occur at the same locations throughout the spawning season and from year to year. Individual fish may spawn multiple times during the spawning season, and they transit between spawning and non-spawning locations between spawns. Models indicate that currents transport larvae produced by these spawning aggregations in the Keys north to waters off mainland Florida.

There are several known spawning locations for mutton snapper near the Tortugas. The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS) established a closed area to protect spawning mutton snapper at one of these sites, known as Riley's Hump. Since its closure in 2001, researchers have documented a 400% increase in the number of spawning fish at Riley's Hump. FWRI researchers have also documented migration corridors through which mutton snapper transit from the Keys to the Tortugas in order to spawn.

Stakeholder Concerns and Requests

- Mutton snapper are easy to target during the spawn and too many are harvested, so during peak spawning season:
 - Reduce commercial and recreational per person limits
 - Establish commercial and recreational vessel limits
 - Prohibit harvest of mutton snapper
- The year-round recreational bag limit is too high and should be reduced
- There should be a trip limit for the commercial fishery throughout the year
- Regulations should be uniform across all management boundaries



Stakeholders have persistently expressed concern about mutton snapper recreational bag and commercial trip limits at FWC workshops, and South Atlantic and Gulf Council public hearings. Members of the public has been most vocal about this at meetings in south Florida. Stakeholders have requested regulatory changes to address their concerns. Staff heard these comments most recently at the 2015 Division of Marine Fisheries Management statewide workshops.

Concerned stakeholders believe that harvest pressure is too intense during the spawning season when the normally solitary fish aggregates and becomes an easy target for both recreational and commercial harvesters. Stakeholders requesting changes see intense fishing pressure on spawning aggregations as a precursor to overexploitation. Many suggest reducing recreational and commercial harvest during the peak spawning season through reduced bag and trip limits and implementation of a vessel limit. Establishing a vessel limit could address concerns that even at a reduced per-person limit, too many fish could be harvested. A less commonly heard request is to ban harvest during the peak spawning season.

Many of these same stakeholders also believe that a reduction in recreational bag and commercial trip limits throughout the year is warranted. They would like to lower the number of mutton snapper that can be harvested within the recreational 10-fish snapper aggregate bag limit. This would still allow anglers to harvest 10 individual snapper a day, but they could not all be mutton snapper.

While there are seasonal trip limits for some commercial harvesters, the only year-round constraint on the amount of mutton snapper commercially-harvested is the federal quota. Some stakeholders believe a year-round trip limit for commercial harvesters is appropriate.

Lastly, those who fish in south Florida have asked for uniform regulations across all management boundaries, especially in the Florida Keys, where fishermen can fish in several jurisdictions on a single fishing trip.

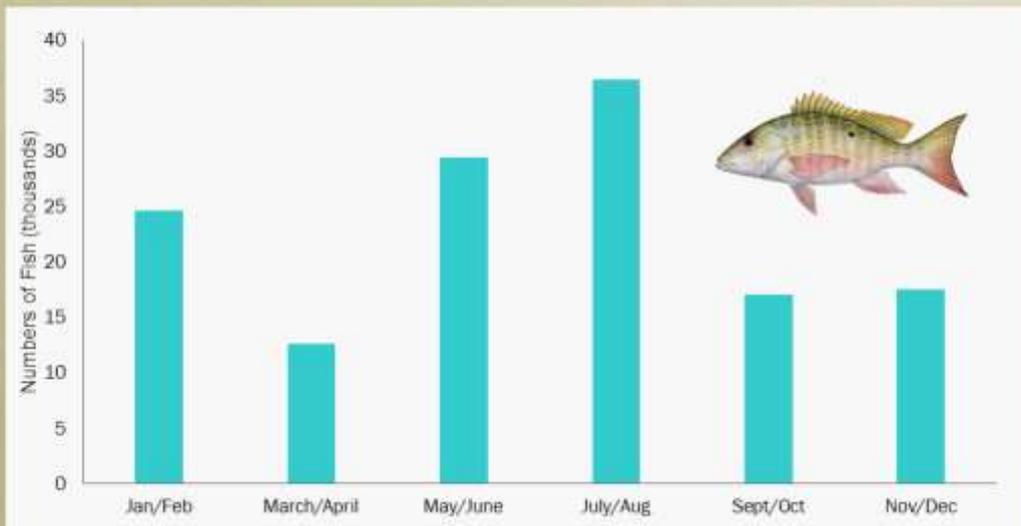
Current Mutton Snapper Regulations

Harvest Regulations by Area		All State Waters	South Atlantic Federal Waters	Gulf Federal Waters
Recreational	Size Limit	16 inches TL		
	Bag Limit	10 fish within snapper aggregate (per/person/day)		
	Closed Season	None		
Commercial	Size Limit	16 inches TL		
	Harvest Limits	July-April: no restrictions; May-June: 10 fish/person/day or trip		None
	Closed Season	None		
	Allowable Gears	Hook and line and spearing		Hook and line, spearing, and bottom longline



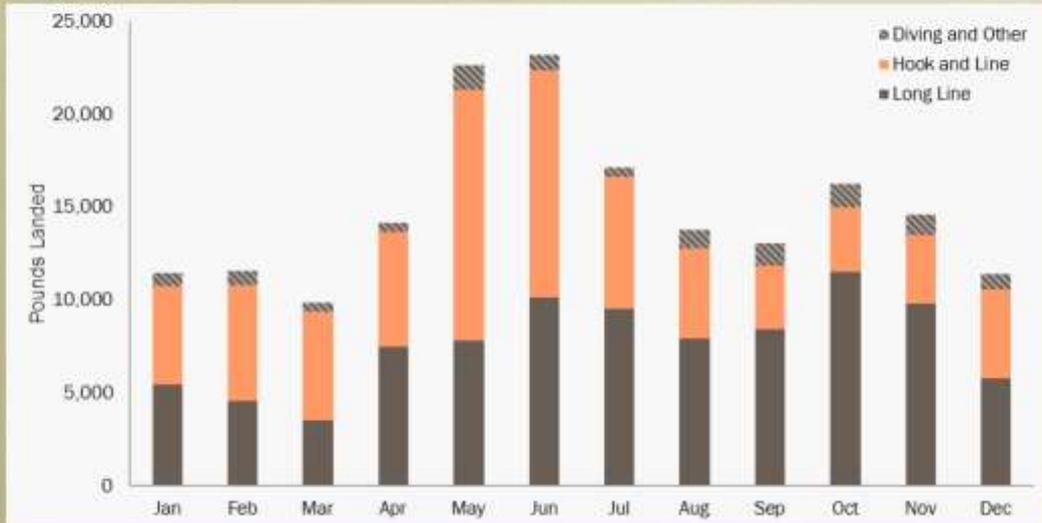
As was previously mentioned, mutton snapper are jointly managed by FWC and both federal Councils. Their jurisdictional boundaries converge in the Keys, which is where the majority of mutton snapper harvest occurs. While many of the mutton snapper regulations are similar across all three jurisdictions, there are key differences. In all state waters and Atlantic federal waters, commercial harvesters are limited to 10 fish per person per day or trip, whichever is more restrictive, during May and June. During the rest of the year, there are no commercial trip limits. In Gulf federal waters, commercial harvesters may use long-line gear, which is a gear prohibited for use to harvest any fish in state waters and to harvest mutton snapper in Atlantic federal waters.

Average Florida Recreational Harvest, Gulf and South Atlantic Combined, by 2-month Wave



Over 99.9% of all U.S. mutton snapper landings, recreational and commercial, occur in Florida. This graph shows the average number of mutton snapper harvested by recreational anglers by two-month wave for the years 2004 to 2014. (Data for 2015 are incomplete and are not included.) It does appear that recreational harvest increases during the May – June portion of the spawning season, as is suggested by stakeholders. However, more individual fish are harvested in July and August. There is also a relatively high level of landings in January and February, which may be attributed to an increase in effort during the tourist season.

Average Monthly Florida Commercial Landings by Gear, 2004-2014



This graph depicts average Florida mutton snapper commercial harvest from state and federal waters by month and gear, based on data from 2004 to 2014. Florida's commercial mutton snapper harvest is over 97% of all U.S. commercial harvest. Unlike recreational harvest, commercial mutton snapper harvest is highest during May and June, despite a seasonal trip limit of 10 fish per person in all state waters and Atlantic federal waters. Long-line landings are higher than hook-and-line landings year-round; however, hook-and-line landings exceed long-line landings during the spawning months.

Addressing Mutton Snapper Management

Joint South Florida Committee

- Conceived in 2011 to address multi-jurisdictional issues for south Florida species
- First meetings and public hearings held in 2013
- Unable to reach a resolution on several issues to date
- Councils are addressing many management items through separate processes instead

Moving Forward

- Both Councils are developing independent mutton snapper amendments, but will remain engaged with each other during the process
- FWC has opportunity to take the lead on any proposed regulatory changes
 - South Atlantic Council has supported this option



For several south Florida reef fish species, there are management issues directly tied to the convergence of the three jurisdictional boundaries in the Florida Keys. This is true for mutton snapper.

In 2011, the FWC and the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils formed a Joint South Florida Committee (Joint Committee) in order to address problems unique to the region. The first Joint Committee meetings and public hearings were held in 2013. Based on public input, one of the issues the Joint Committee took up was mutton snapper harvest limits.

At the most recent joint meeting of the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils, the two bodies were unable to reach a resolution on the wide array of management changes for south Florida species brought forward by the Joint Committee for consideration. Since then, each Council has decided to independently tackle some of the south Florida management issues, including mutton snapper, in order to prevent further delays in addressing management needs.

For mutton snapper, each Council is considering management changes because the 2015 stock assessment recommended a lower quota. As they each develop amendments to consider modifying their share of quota, the Councils will consider changes to modify bag and trip limits within their respective jurisdictions. While they are working separately, the Councils have indicated that they would like to remain engaged with each other on mutton snapper management to avoid creating more disparate regulations. The Councils would also like to avoid creating more discrepancies between federal and state rules. The Gulf Council has expressed a desire to track the South Atlantic Council's development of rule changes because 82% of the fishery is allocated to the South Atlantic. The South Atlantic Council has expressed support in FWC taking the lead in regulatory changes because the fishery almost exclusively operates in Florida. Based on the length of time required for federal rule-making and the expressed intentions of the Councils to create uniform regulations, there is an opportunity for FWC to take the lead to propose changes to mutton snapper regulations in order to address stakeholder concerns.

Staff-proposed Mutton Snapper Changes for Workshops

Recreational

- **Regular season (July/August – April):** 5 fish within 10-fish snapper aggregate bag limit
- **Spawning season (May – June/July):** 2 fish per person within the 10-fish snapper aggregate bag limit and a maximum of 12 fish per vessel

Commercial

- **Regular season (July/August – April):** consider separate gear limits; possibly 300 lbs. per trip for hook and line, and another limit to allow bycatch on long-line vessels in Gulf federal waters
- **Spawning season (May – June/July):** 2 fish per person and a maximum of 12 fish per vessel



Seek Feedback on Timing of Spawning Season Regulations



If the FWC takes the lead in this process, staff recommends gathering public input on specific changes for mutton snapper recreational bag and commercial trip limits. Staff has compiled recommendations provided at past public meetings, as well as the changes discussed by the Joint Committee, and developed a proposal for Commission consideration.

For the recreational fishery, staff proposes lowering the regular season (July/August – April) bag limit from 10 fish to five fish within the 10-fish snapper aggregate bag limit. This would address concerns that a 10-fish limit is too high for mutton snapper harvest outside of the spawning season. During the spawning season (May – June/July), staff proposes further reducing the recreational bag limit to two fish within the 10-fish snapper aggregate bag limit and establishing a vessel limit of 12 fish. This would address the most commonly heard concern that anglers take too many mutton snapper during the spawning season. A vessel limit of 12 fish may also discourage recreational anglers from attempting to sell their recreational bag limits, which is illegal.

For the commercial fishery, staff recommends considering separate gear-specific trip limits during the regular season (July/August – April), such as 300 pounds per trip for hook-and-line vessels and some other limit for long-line vessels that operate in Gulf federal waters. Staff also proposes reducing the current commercial limit from 10 fish per person to two fish per person and a maximum of 12 fish per vessel during the spawning season. Setting the commercial harvest limit equal to the recreational bag limit during the spawning season would discourage commercial fishermen from directly targeting spawning aggregations of mutton snapper while allowing incidentally-caught mutton snapper to be retained, thus reducing potential regulatory discards.

Staff also recommends gathering feedback on the timing of spawning season regulations for mutton snapper. The current 10-fish bag limit for the commercial fishery during the spawning season occurs during May and June only, but peak spawning occurs from May through July.

If FWC workshops are held, workshop feedback would be shared with the Councils for their consideration.

Timeline

Public Workshops

- Collaboration between FWC and South Atlantic Council
- Proposed for February 2016
- Locations: Stuart, Ft. Lauderdale, Key Largo, Key Colony Beach, Key West, Naples, and a webinar

FWC Rule-making

- Return with draft rule in April 2016

Federal Rule-making

- Council final action anticipated spring or summer 2016



Should the FWC take the lead in the process of changing recreational bag limits and commercial trip limits for mutton snapper and soliciting public comment, staff would work in coordination with the Councils to maximize public input on the issue.

FWC could hold public workshops along with the South Atlantic Council in February 2016. The South Atlantic Council will hold three public hearings in south Florida during this time. Staff recommends FWC hold three additional public workshops. Between the South Atlantic Council and FWC, public meetings could be held in Stuart, Ft. Lauderdale, Key Largo, Key Colony Beach, Key West, and Naples. FWC staff would also hold a state-wide webinar on the issue. The Gulf Council will take public comments on mutton snapper during their regularly scheduled Council meetings.

If directed, staff could return with a draft rule and stakeholder input from public workshops for Commission consideration in April 2016.

The South Atlantic and Gulf Councils will likely take final action on mutton snapper changes in spring or early summer of 2016.

Staff Recommendation

FWC take the lead on mutton snapper and conduct public workshops on:

- Reducing recreational limits to 2 fish per person within the 10-fish snapper aggregate bag limit and 12 fish per vessel during the spawning season (May – June/July)
- Reducing recreational bag limit to 5 fish per person within the 10-fish snapper aggregate the rest of the year (July/August – April)
- Setting the commercial limit equal to the recreational limit during the spawning season (May – June/July)
- Establishing a gear-specific commercial trip limit during the rest of the year (July/August – April)
- Timing of spawning season regulations

If directed, staff will return with stakeholder feedback and a draft rule at the April Commission meeting



Staff recommends that FWC take the lead in addressing concerns expressed by stakeholders about harvesters exploiting mutton snapper spawning aggregations and current year-round mutton snapper recreational bag limits and commercial trip limits.

To accomplish this, staff recommends conducting public workshops on specific potential management changes to reduce mutton snapper harvest both during the spawning season and throughout the year. These changes would reduce the recreational bag limit during the spawning season to two fish per person and implement a new vessel limit of 12 fish. During the rest of the year, mutton snapper recreational bag limits would be reduced from 10 fish within the 10-fish snapper aggregate bag limit to five fish within the snapper aggregate. This would reduce the legal bag limit for mutton snapper, while retaining anglers ability to harvest 10 snappers in total. Commercial harvest changes would include matching the proposed recreational bag limit of two fish per person and 12 fish per vessel during the spawning season, as well as considering a gear-specific commercial trip limit of during the rest of the year. These gear-specific limits could be 300 pounds per trip for hook-and-line vessels and some other limit for long-line vessels in Gulf federal waters that would allow long-line vessels to retain mutton snapper caught as bycatch. Staff would also seek feedback on the timing of spawning season regulations.

During this process, staff would collaborate with the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils to maximize public input on this issue and to advocate for uniform regulations across jurisdictions.

If the Commission directs staff to proceed with workshops, staff will return with stakeholder feedback on these items and a draft rule at the April 2016 Commission meeting in south Florida.

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



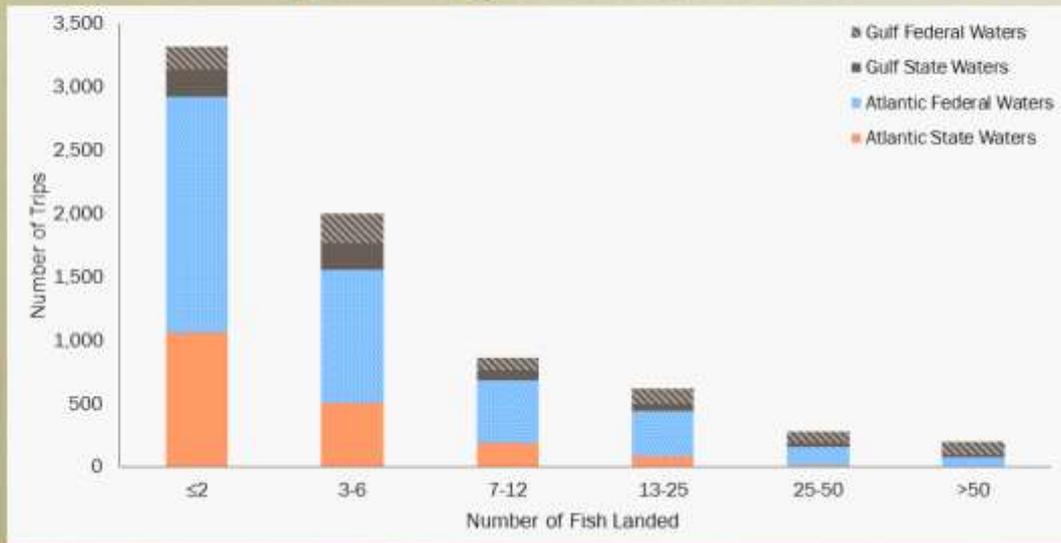
Number of Commercial Trips by Pounds Landed per Trip for the Regular Season, 2004-2014

Area Fished	Pounds Landed per Trip					
	≤100	100-200	200-300	300-400	400-500	>500
Atlantic State Waters	7,479	175	25	11	3	3
Atlantic Federal Waters	9,061	525	147	66	38	181
Gulf State Waters	1,800	76	20	7	2	6
Gulf Federal Waters	2,303	364	167	99	53	319



Based on landings from 2004 through 2014, most commercial trips that landed fish outside of the spawning season landed fewer than 100 pounds per trip. Only 10% of total trips taken over that 11-year period landed more than 100 pounds. Fewer than 3% of all trips landed more than 300 pounds per trip. Although trips landing over 300 pounds are not as common, they did contribute 55% of total landings by weight (804,405 pounds) during this time period.

Number of Commercial Trips by Number of Fish Landed in the Spawning Season, 2004-2014



This graph depicts the number of commercial trips by the amount of fish they landed (numbers) during the spawning season from 2004 through 2014. Most trips landed two or fewer fish. Eighty-five percent of trips landed 12 fish or less in May and June for the 11-year period.