



## Gulf Council Issues

Review and Discussion

November 18, 2015

**Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**  
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This is a review and discussion of actions and discussions from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) Oct. 5-8 meeting in Galveston, TX.

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## Gag Grouper – Final Action



- New recreational season will run June 1 through Dec. 31
  - Helps minimize discards during red snapper season
  - Provides additional fishing opportunities for southwest Florida
- Recreational minimum size limit will increase from 22 to 24 inches total length for gag and black groupers
- No changes to annual catch limit
- Pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce
- Council will now consider 24-inch minimum size limit for commercial gag grouper harvest



The Council approved new management measures for the gag grouper fishery. The new recreational season would run June 1 through Dec. 31. This season was selected as a way to help eliminate discards of gag grouper during the red snapper season in June, while also providing additional fishing opportunities for southwest Florida anglers during December. Fishermen have emphasized that being able to harvest gag grouper in late December is important for southwest Florida anglers and for-hire businesses. In addition, the Council approved a recreational size limit increase for gag and black groupers from 22 inches total length (TL) to 24 inches TL. The recreational size limit for black grouper was modified because anglers commonly confuse these two species. The recreational annual catch limit (ACL) has not been met in recent years. However, based on input from stakeholders, the Council did not modify the gag grouper ACL. This amendment is now pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

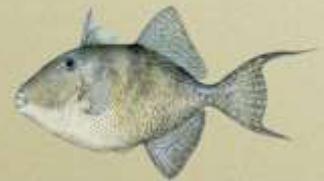
A season opening earlier in the spring was considered by the Council and would have provided more fishing opportunities, but several stakeholders and Council members stated that a precautionary approach to the recreational season length may be warranted until the upcoming 2016 stock assessment is completed. There was also concern that an earlier season opening could result in an ACL closure that would prevent fishing late in the year. The most recent stock assessment indicated that gag grouper is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, but updated catch-per-unit-effort data and testimony from a large number of fishermen indicates that the assessment results were overly optimistic.

Staff will bring gag grouper to a future Commission meeting to consider options for Gulf state waters. At future Council meetings, the Council will consider raising the commercial gag grouper minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches to match the new recreational size limit.

## Gray Triggerfish Stock Assessment Results



- Stock assessment indicates gray triggerfish are not undergoing overfishing, remain overfished, and continue to decline
  - Results are at odds with observations from many fishermen
- Assessment indicates stock will not be rebuilt by current 2017 deadline and a new rebuilding plan is needed
- Council will consider options such as a 1-fish recreational bag limit and increasing the minimum size limit



A recent stock assessment indicates that gray triggerfish is not undergoing overfishing, remains overfished, and continues to decline. These results are at odds with observations from fishermen in the northern Gulf, who have recently been seeing more and larger triggerfish. Gray triggerfish has been in a rebuilding plan since 2008. In 2013, a two-fish bag limit and a closed season during June and July was put in place for the recreational sector. ACLs were also reduced and accountability measures were put in place that require quota overages be paid back the following year. This year, harvest of gray triggerfish in federal waters closed on Feb. 7, and the Commission also closed state waters to recreational harvest on that date for the remainder of 2015 to prevent a quota overage.

The stock assessment indicates that even with current management measures, gray triggerfish will not be rebuilt by the current rebuilding plan deadline of 2017. This means the Council will be required to implement a new rebuilding plan and consider additional management measures to rebuild the stock. The Council has asked staff to develop management options including a one-fish recreational bag limit and recreational minimum size limit increase. These changes could potentially allow for a longer triggerfish season while rebuilding the fishery. The Council will review these options and develop a new rebuilding plan for gray triggerfish at future meetings.

## For-Hire Electronic Reporting



- Requested by for-hire industry to improve fishery data
- Council-preferred options:
  - Electronically report at end of each trip before arriving at the dock
  - Require electronic device to automatically record vessel location
    - Approved devices would include smartphones, computers, or vessel monitoring systems (VMS)
- Final Council action may occur in January
- South Atlantic Council considering electronic reporting at less frequent intervals without automatically recording location



Both the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils have been considering requiring federally-permitted for-hire vessels to report trip information electronically. The Councils had been collaborating on developing options for for-hire electronic reporting, but recently decided to take action independently. The for-hire industry, particularly in the Gulf, has been requesting a requirement to report their trip information electronically to improve the timeliness and accuracy of for-hire fishery data that is used to track landings and quotas. Headboats are already required to report electronically, but charter vessels are not.

The Gulf Council-preferred options would require all federally-permitted for-hire vessels in the Gulf to electronically report fishery data at the end of each trip before arriving at the dock. The devices used to make this report would be required to automatically record vessel location at certain time intervals. Reporting devices would have to be approved by NOAA Fisheries and would include smartphones, computers, or vessel monitoring systems (VMS). Council staff are contacting federal for-hire permit holders in the Gulf about these potential changes and will hold a webinar before the January Council meeting to gather public input. The Council could take final action on for-hire electronic reporting in January.

The South Atlantic Council will continue to also consider electronic reporting requirements for its own fleet. However, current South Atlantic Council-preferred alternatives would require electronic reporting at less frequent intervals and without automatically recording location.

## Additional Council Discussions



- **Hogfish:** Increase the minimum size limit for Gulf stock
- **Red snapper:** Consider reducing the buffer between the recreational ACL and annual catch target (ACT)
- **King mackerel (joint amendment with South Atlantic):**
  - Redefine the location of the stock mixing zone
  - Set new ACLs
  - Modify subzone management and subquotas
  - Increase the Gulf recreational bag limit
  - Modify sector allocations
  - No longer considering separating Gulf and South Atlantic permits



The Council also discussed management of several other species including hogfish, red snapper, and king mackerel. Based on the latest stock assessment for hogfish, the Council discussed redefining the stock boundary of the Gulf of Mexico hogfish stock, which would allow the West Florida and East Florida/Florida Keys hogfish stocks to be managed separately. The Gulf Council will consider increasing the minimum size limit for the Gulf stock.

On red snapper, the Council discussed potentially reducing the 20% buffer between the recreational ACL and annual catch target (ACT). This buffer was implemented by the Council two years ago in response to a lawsuit, but some Council members question if this buffer is necessary. Council staff will develop and analyze options for Council consideration at a future meeting.

The Gulf and South Atlantic councils are proposing to set a new, year-round boundary between the Gulf and Atlantic king mackerel stocks at the councils' jurisdictional boundary west of the Florida Keys. Other management changes proposed for king mackerel include new ACLs for each stock, subzone trip limits, and subquotas. The Council also discussed increasing the recreational bag limit in the Gulf from two to four king mackerel per person and changing sector allocations. Public hearings on this amendment will be held in February.

The Council also considered action that would create separate Gulf and South Atlantic mackerel permits, but voted to discontinue development of this item because the South Atlantic Council opposed it.

## 2015 Greater Amberjack Federal Recreational Season Closure



- Gulf federal waters closed to recreational harvest on Sept. 28, 2015, because ACT projected to be met
- Season scheduled to reopen Jan. 1, 2016
- NOAA Fisheries requesting FWC close state waters during the federal closure
  - Could help prevent a quota overage
  - Any quota overage must be “paid back” the following year
  - Amberjack overfished and undergoing overfishing



Direction requested on recreational season



Greater amberjack closed to recreational harvest in Gulf federal waters for the remainder of the year on Sept. 28, 2015, because the recreational ACT was projected to be met. The fishery will reopen on January 1, 2016. NOAA Fisheries recently sent a letter to the Commission requesting that Florida close state waters to recreational harvest of greater amberjack for the remainder of the year to match the federal waters closure.

The recent closure of greater amberjack in Gulf federal waters will have a negative impact on fishermen fishing in Gulf federal waters. However, closing state waters to recreational harvest could help prevent a quota overage. Quota overages must be “paid back” the following year, so leaving state waters open for the remainder of 2015 could result in a shortened federal season in 2016. Amberjack is considered overfished and undergoing overfishing.

Staff requests direction on the recreational season for greater amberjack in Gulf state waters for the remainder of 2015.

## 2015 Red Grouper Federal Recreational Season Closure



- Gulf federal waters closed to recreational harvest on Oct. 8, 2015, because ACL projected to be met
- Season scheduled to reopen Jan. 1, 2016
- NOAA Fisheries requesting FWC close state waters during the federal closure
  - Could help prevent a quota overage
  - If overage occurs, 2016 season could be shortened to avoid another overage
- Recreational bag limit reduced from 4 to 2 fish per person in state and federal waters as of May 2015 to allow longer recreational season
  - March-April 2015 harvest higher than usual



*Direction requested on recreational season*



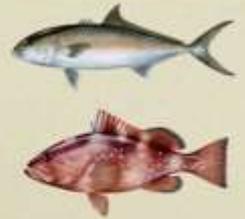
Similar to greater amberjack, red grouper closed in Gulf federal waters for the remainder of the year on Oct. 8, 2015, and NOAA Fisheries sent a letter to the Commission requesting that Florida close state waters to recreational harvest of red grouper for the remainder of the year to match the federal waters closure. The fishery will reopen on January 1, 2016.

This federal closure will negatively impact many fishermen (both charter captains and private anglers) in southwest Florida who rely on red grouper during the latter part of the year. Closing state waters to recreational harvest could help prevent a quota overage. There is no quota payback required for quota overages in the red grouper fishery like there is for greater amberjack; however, if the red grouper ACL is exceeded, the 2016 red grouper season would likely be shortened as an accountability measure to ensure that the ACL is not exceeded again in 2016. In that case, the 2016 would be set based on the 1.73 million pound (mp) ACT rather than the 1.9 mp ACL.

This closure has been especially frustrating for fishermen because the recreational bag limit for red grouper was recently reduced from 4 to 2 fish per person in an effort to reduce harvest pressure and keep the recreational season open year-round. This rule was implemented in both state and federal waters during May 2015. However, recreational red grouper harvest was particularly high this year in March and April, which contributed to projections indicating that the ACL was reached early.

Staff requests direction on the recreational season for red grouper in Gulf state waters for the remainder of 2015.

## Greater Amberjack and Red Grouper Recreational State Season Considerations



### Benefit of keeping state waters open

- Maintaining state waters fishing opportunities

### Benefits of closing state waters

- Can help prevent quota overages and shortened seasons in 2016
- Federally permitted for-hire vessels must follow federal rules even when fishing in state waters
- Would contribute to stock rebuilding for greater amberjack

### Additional Consideration

- Approximately 13% of greater amberjack harvest and 15% of red grouper occurs in state waters



There are several factors to consider when addressing the seasons for recreational greater amberjack and red grouper in Gulf state waters. One benefit of state waters remaining open is opportunities for Florida anglers to harvest greater amberjack and red grouper, even when federal waters are closed.

One benefit of closing state waters is preventing quota overages of greater amberjack and red grouper. Any quota overage of greater amberjack by the recreational sector must be “paid back” the following year, so leaving state waters open during the remainder of 2015 could result in a shortened federal season in 2016. For red grouper, an overage would likely result in a shortened season in 2016 to avoid a subsequent quota overage.

Another consideration is that federally-permitted for-hire vessels must follow the federal season, even in state waters. This means that anglers fishing off of federally-permitted vessels cannot keep any greater amberjack or red grouper during the federal closure, even if these vessels are fishing in state waters. Finally, closing harvest of greater amberjack could contribute to stock rebuilding. Greater amberjack is currently considered to be overfished and overfishing is occurring. Approximately 13% of greater amberjack and 15% of red grouper harvest occurs in state waters.

Based on these considerations, staff recommends authorizing the Executive Director to close Gulf state waters to the recreational harvest of greater amberjack and red grouper via Executive Order for the remainder of 2015. This closure for state waters could begin immediately.

## Direction Requested

- Direction requested on greater amberjack and red grouper recreational seasons in Gulf state waters
  - Consider closing Gulf state waters to recreational harvest for the remainder of 2015
- Input on other Council items is welcome
- Next Gulf Council meeting is Jan. 25-29 in Orange Beach, AL



Staff requests direction on Gulf greater amberjack and red grouper. NOAA Fisheries has requested that the Commission close Gulf state waters to the recreational harvest of greater amberjack and red grouper. Staff recommends authorizing the Executive Director to close Gulf state waters to the recreational harvest of greater amberjack and/or red grouper via Executive Order for the remainder of 2015. This closure for state waters could begin immediately.

As always, input on other Council items is welcome. The next Gulf Council meeting is January 25-29 in Orange Beach, AL.