

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: November 18, 2015
Subject: Mutton Snapper

Purpose:

Staff will provide a review of the current status and regulations for mutton snapper, public concerns about the regulations, and a proposal for management changes for the recreational and commercial mutton snapper fisheries for Commission discussion.

Summary:

The 2015 mutton snapper stock assessment, conducted by FWRI, showed that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. This is consistent with the previous stock assessment's findings that the stock is healthy; however, changes to the assessment model resulted in a lower estimate of the size of the adult population. Because of the lower adult population size estimate, the quota will be reduced. The new commercial quota will be near current harvest levels, while the recreational quota will remain well above current harvest estimates.

As adults, normally solitary mutton snapper form large aggregations around full moons at spawning sites throughout the Florida Keys. These spawning aggregations peak from May through July. Because of the predictable timing and known locations of spawning aggregations, spawning mutton snapper can be easy targets for fishermen. Riley's Hump is closed to fishing to protect spawning mutton snapper. Since it's closure, researchers have documented a 400% increase in the number of spawning fish at Riley's Hump.

Since 2007, stakeholders have expressed concern that mutton snapper possession limits are too high and that reductions are needed. Stakeholders are particularly concerned about harvest of mutton snapper during the spawning season. Suggestions have been made to either close the fishery during the spawning season or reduce all possession limits during the spawn. Stakeholders voiced concerns at past Gulf Council, South Atlantic Council, and FWC workshops and, most recently, during the July 2015 FWC Division of Marine Fisheries Management statewide workshops.

Current regulations limit recreational anglers to 10 mutton snapper within the 10-fish aggregate snapper bag limit per day in all waters of the Gulf and Atlantic. From May through June, commercial harvesters in all all state waters and federal waters of the Atlantic are limited to 10 mutton snapper per person per day or trip. During the remainder of the year for those waters, and year-round for Gulf federal waters, there is no commercial possession limit for mutton snapper.

Although mutton snapper is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, FWC could consider a number of management options to respond to stakeholder concerns. Stakeholders have suggested reducing the mutton snapper recreational bag limit to 5 fish during the regular season and to 2 fish during the spawning season (May-June or July), both within the existing aggregate snapper bag limit. Stakeholders have also asked for an additional reduction in the commercial limit during the spawn, suggesting that the limit match the reduced recreational bag limit of 2 fish. Some stakeholders have also suggested a vessel limit during the spawning season for both sectors, as well as a commercial trip limit during the regular season.

Mutton snapper is managed in state waters by FWC and in federal waters by the Gulf Council and South Atlantic Council. Each federal Council is initiating changes to mutton snapper regulations based on the findings of the 2015 stock assessment. In addition to revising quotas, the federal changes may include reductions in bag and trip limits. Because mutton snapper is primarily a Florida fishery, FWC could consider taking the lead on regulatory changes. The South Atlantic Council will hold workshops on mutton snapper in early 2016. If directed by the Commission, FWC staff will hold additional workshops and return with a draft rule in April.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff requests that the Commission direct staff to gather additional public input on mutton snapper management options at public workshops and return in April 2016 with a draft rule.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Jessica McCawley, Director, Division of Marine Fisheries Management