



## Gulf Council Issues

Review and Discussion

September 3, 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) August 10-13 meeting in New Orleans, LA.

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## Red Snapper Updates



- **Sector Reallocation** – Council took final action to reallocate based on MRIP calibration results
  - If approved by Secretary of Commerce, allocation will shift from 51% commercial/49% recreational to 48.5% commercial/51.5% recreational starting in 2016
- **Regional Management** – Public hearings to be held in late October
  - Commission will discuss details at November FWC meeting
- **For-hire Industry** – Scoping meetings to be held on options for managing charter boats and headboats separate from each other
  - Options include traditional and allocation-based management tools
  - Council also considering separate management for headboat industry for gag grouper



The Council took final action to approve sector reallocation for the red snapper fishery (Amendment 28). The Council voted to reallocate based on the recent calibration of Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) catch estimates, which will result in allocations of 48.5% for commercial and 51.5% for recreational (current sector allocations are 51% commercial and 49% recreational). Based on Commission direction, FWC staff supported this action. If Amendment 28 is approved by the US Secretary of Commerce, it will take effect during 2016. The portion of the 2016 commercial quota that is slated to be reallocated to the recreational sector under this amendment will be held back from commercial IFQ holders, then distributed to the recreational sector when Amendment 28 takes effect.

The Council will hold public hearings on regional management for the recreational red snapper fishery in late October in Destin and the St. Petersburg area. The Commission will discuss the details of regional management options at the November FWC meeting. Final Council action is anticipated in January 2016.

The Council will also hold public scoping meetings on options for managing charter boats and headboats separate from each other with respect to red snapper. These meetings will be held in conjunction with the regional management public hearings. Options for separate management include traditional management tools like bag and size limits, as well as allocation-based management tools such as IFQs, fish tags, and fishing cooperatives similar to the headboat pilot program that is currently underway. The Council is also considering separate management for the headboat industry for gag grouper.

## Gag Grouper



- Data indicates last stock assessment was overly optimistic
- Council-preferred management options (supported by FWC):
  - Do not increase annual catch limit (ACL)
  - Remove Dec. 3 through Dec. 31 recreational closed season (Open July 1 – Dec. 31)
  - Recreational minimum size limit increase from 22 to 24 inches
- With minimum size limit increase, Council could consider a longer recreational season
  - Current state season: Apr. 1 – June 30 in four-county region; July 1 – Dec. 3 elsewhere
  - Current federal season: July 1 – Dec. 2
  - Federal season could be set from Apr. 1 – Dec. 31 to increase fishing opportunities along entire Florida Gulf coast and allow recreational sector to catch more of its allocation
- Council final action scheduled for October



### *Direction requested on recreational season*

A recent stock assessment indicates that gag grouper is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, but updated catch-per-unit-effort data indicates that the assessment results are overly optimistic. Fishermen have also expressed concern about gag grouper, so the Council is taking a conservative approach to management. Previously, the Council had been considering large increases to the annual catch limit (ACL) for gag grouper. The Council's current preferred alternatives would not increase the ACL, but would raise the recreational minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches total length (TL) and remove the Dec. 3 – 31 portion of the recreational closed season. This would result in a federal recreational season open July 1 – Dec. 31. The Council is also considering raising the minimum size limit for black grouper from 22 to 24 inches TL, because this species is commonly confused with gag grouper. The FWC representative has supported these options at your direction.

Removing the December portion of the recreational closed season would provide a modest increase in fishing opportunities for gag grouper at a time of year that is particularly important for southwest Florida. Recent analysis indicates that with a minimum size limit of 24 inches, the recreational season could be set to open in the spring and close Dec. 31 without exceeding the recreational ACL. An earlier season opening would increase fishing opportunities from the Panhandle to southwest Florida, and allow the recreational sector to harvest more of its allocation. Currently, state waters off Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties are open from Apr. 1 – June 30, while the rest of Gulf state waters (excluding Monroe County, which follows the Atlantic season) are open July 1 – Dec. 3. The current federal season is July 1 – Dec. 2. The recreational ACL has not been met in recent years.

Staff requests direction on whether to continue to support the Council's current preferred alternative for the recreational season, which would set the federal harvest season at July 1 – Dec. 31, or to advocate for a longer season that would allow additional fishing opportunities and for more of the recreational allocation to be caught. This season could be set from Apr. 1 – Dec. 31 to encompass the Gulf state season. The Commission could then modify the Gulf state season to be consistent with the federal season and uniform across state waters. Final Council action is scheduled for October.

## Other Council Discussions



- Removing circle hook requirement for commercial yellowtail snapper harvest
  - Requested by industry
  - Final action scheduled for October
- Federal shrimp permit moratorium expires 2016 – public hearings to be held in Fort Myers and Tampa after next Council meeting
  - Options include continuing the moratorium or considering ways to maintain or add fishery participants
- Continuing development of a joint amendment for king mackerel that would:
  - Redefine the location of the stock mixing zone
  - Set new ACLs
  - Modify subzone management and subquotas
- Allow sale of bycatch by federal shark gill net fishery



The Council also discussed management of several other species including yellowtail snapper, shrimp, and king mackerel. At the request of Keys commercial fishermen, the Council is considering eliminating the requirement that circle hooks be used to harvest yellowtail snapper commercially. This requirement could be removed in areas of southwest Florida only, or the entire Gulf of Mexico. Final action is scheduled for October.

On shrimp, the Council discussed how to address the current moratorium on federal commercial shrimp permits, which is set to expire in October 2016. The Council could continue the current moratorium or look at various ways to maintain or add participants in the fishery, such as creating a permit pool or setting a target number of permits. Florida public hearings will be held to get input from fishermen in Fort Myers and Tampa sometime after the October Council meeting.

Results from the 2014 king mackerel stock assessment found that the boundaries used to manage the Gulf and Atlantic stocks need to be revised, and changes to catch limits are necessary. Based on the findings of the assessment, the Gulf and South Atlantic councils are proposing to set a new, year-round boundary between the Gulf and Atlantic stocks at the councils' jurisdictional boundary, which is at 83 degrees west longitude off the Florida Keys. Some mixing occurs between the stocks, but the assessment found that the area where mixing occurs is smaller than previously believed and in waters south of Monroe County. Other management changes proposed for king mackerel include new ACLs for each stock, subzone trip limits, and subquotas. There is also a proposal to restore the ability of fishermen in the federal Atlantic shark gill net fishery to sell king mackerel that are incidentally caught in their nets.

## Direction Requested



- Direction requested on recreational gag grouper season
  - Current Council-preferred option: July 1 – Dec. 31
  - A longer season that encompasses Gulf state waters season, such as April 1 – Dec. 31, could be considered
- Input on other Council items is welcome
- Next Gulf Council meeting is Oct. 5-9 in Galveston, TX



Staff requests direction on Gulf gag grouper recreational season and whether to support the Council's current preferred alternative, which set the open season at July 1 through Dec. 31, or to seek a longer season that potentially could encompass Florida's Gulf state waters season. Currently, Gulf state waters off Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson, and Taylor counties are open from April 1 through June 30, while the rest of the Gulf state waters (excluding Monroe County, which follows the Atlantic season) are open July 1 through Dec. 3. If the federal season is set to Apr. 1 – Dec. 31, the Commission could modify the Gulf state season to be consistent with the federal season and uniform across state waters.

As always, input on other Council items is welcome. The next Gulf Council meeting is October 5-9 in Galveston, TX.

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



## Gag Grouper Recreational Season Estimates Under Various Minimum Size Limit and Spawning Season Closure Options

		Action 3 Alternative 4 Options		
Minimum Size Limit		Alt. 3a 20-fathom closure in effect	Alt. 3b No 20-fathom closure	Alt. 3c Feb-Mar closed in all waters
22 inches	ACL	5/28-12/31 (218 days)	5/28-12/31 (218 days)	5/28-12/31 (218 days)
	ACT	6/21-12/31 (194 days)	6/21-12/31 (194 days)	6/21-12/31 (194 days)
24 inches	ACL	2/6-12/31 (329 days)	2/19-12/31 (316 days)	No ACL closure (306 days)
	ACT	4/18-12/31 (258 days)	4/18-12/31 (258 days)	4/18-12/31 (258 days)



The table above shows recreational gag grouper harvest season estimates for 22 and 24 inch minimum size limit options assuming different spawning season closure options. A given year's season would be calculated based on how long NOAA projects it will take the recreational sector to catch its ACL as long as the ACL was not exceeded in the previous year. If the ACL is exceeded in one year, the following year's recreational season length will be calculated based on how long it will take to reach the annual catch target (ACT).

Currently, waters beyond the 20-fathom boundary line (which is in federal waters) are closed to shallow-water grouper harvest during February and March, which is the peak spawning season for gag grouper. Gag grouper form spawning aggregations and most of these aggregations occur beyond 20-fathoms. The first column of season estimates (Alt. 3a) shows what the projected season would be assuming this 20-fathom closure is in effect for gag grouper. This results in the longest recreational harvest season estimates (opening February 6 for a 329-day season assuming the ACL was not exceeded in the previous year; otherwise opening April 18 for a 258-day season). The middle column (Alt. 3b) shows season estimates assuming the 20-fathom closure is not applied to gag grouper, and the right column (Alt. 3c) shows harvest season estimates assuming all Gulf waters are closed to gag harvest in February and March.