This is a review and discussion of actions and discussions from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (Council) Sept. 30 through Oct. 5 meeting in Charleston, SC, as well as anticipated actions and discussions at their Dec. 3-7 meeting in Kitty Hawk, NC.

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The South Atlantic Council took final action to approve several items in October:

**Spiny lobster:** The Council approved updated federal spiny lobster regulations that are more consistent with FWC regulations and reinstated a process by which FWC can directly request NOAA Fisheries update federal regulations to be consistent with future FWC rule changes. The South Atlantic and Gulf councils jointly manage spiny lobster in federal waters and, historically, have set federal spiny lobster regulations based on FWC regulations because this fishery occurs almost entirely off Florida. The Gulf Council approved these changes at their August meeting.

**Commercial snapper grouper regulation changes:** The Council approved a 12-inch gray triggerfish minimum size limit, which matches state waters. Attempting to prevent or delay early season closures, they approved changes to the season structure, trip limits, and/or size limits for vermilion snapper, greater amberjack, and other jacks. They approved a season structure change for snowy grouper and revised trip limits for blueline tilefish in an attempt to keep these fisheries open concurrently because these fish are often caught together. They also approved a bycatch-level trip limit for red porgy during the current closed season to reduce regulatory discards. In general, these changes were driven by commercial harvester preferences and not by sustainability concerns, and they are supported by Florida’s commercial fishermen.

**King mackerel:** The Council approved larger commercial trip limits for king mackerel off Volusia through Miami-Dade counties for March through September. The higher trip limits address concerns that the current trip limit is too low to make king mackerel fishing economically feasible in that area.

**Quota adjustments:** The Council’s Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommended new quotas for vermilion snapper and black sea bass based on stock assessments completed in 2018. Neither stock is overfished nor undergoing overfishing. The SSC determined the current black sea bass quota is too high and should be reduced to prevent future overfishing. The Council approved a quota increase for vermilion snapper and a quota decrease for black sea bass.

These changes are pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.
The Council had been considering a limited-entry program for federal snapper grouper for-hire permits. However, after reviewing public comment at their October meeting, they ended work on the program. Private recreational anglers overwhelmingly opposed for-hire limited entry because they thought it would reduce their opportunities or increase their cost to take a for-hire fishing trip. Very few federally-permitted charter captains commented on the limited-entry program; however, of those that did, the majority were opposed.

In October, the Council elected Jessica McCawley, FWC’s Director of the Division of Marine Fisheries Management, as the Chair. Mel Bell, the Council member representing South Carolina’s Division of Natural Resources, was elected as the Vice-Chair. McCawley and Bell will each serve a two-year term.
In December, the Council is expected to take final action to revise the commercial yellowtail snapper accountability measure (AM), which may lengthen the fishing season. The proposed change to the commercial AM would allow the commercial fishery to remain open until 80% of the total Atlantic yellowtail snapper quota is caught. The total Atlantic yellowtail snapper quota is allocated between the commercial (52.56%) and recreational (47.44%) fisheries. Currently, the commercial AM requires closure of the fishery once the commercial quota is met. Changing the AM may provide up to three weeks of additional commercial fishing by giving the commercial fishery some access to the recreational quota.

The commercial yellowtail snapper fishery regularly meets its quota, as it did this year, triggering the AM that closes the fishery. The recreational fishery lands 65% or less of their quota annually, meaning a portion of the total yellowtail snapper quota goes unharvested.

Parts of the commercial industry highly support this change, while other participants feel that this change is not necessary right now and want to wait until after the next stock assessment before considering regulatory changes. The Council will consider further changes to yellowtail snapper regulations after the 2019 stock assessment.

The Council is also scheduled to take final action on proposed changes for recreational snapper grouper regulations, including:

- Reducing the federal recreational minimum size limit for gray triggerfish in federal waters off Florida to match the state minimum size limit of 12 inches
- Modifying the 20-fish aggregate bag limit for species without individual bag limits to specify that no more than 10 fish can be of any one species (this includes gray triggerfish)
- Creating a deep-water grouper and tilefish aggregate, which would include snowy grouper, misty grouper, yellowedge grouper, blueline tilefish, golden tilefish, and wreckfish, with a 3-fish aggregate bag limit and fishing seasons of January through February and May through August

These potential actions are based upon the Council’s strategic plan and stakeholder feedback. Florida stakeholders support the changes for gray triggerfish.
No specific direction is requested at this time; however, input on Council items is always welcome.

The next Council meeting is March 4 through 8 in Jekyll Island, GA.