

Gulf Council Issues



Review and Discussion
December 12, 2018



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This is a review and discussion of actions and discussions from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) Oct. 22-25 meeting in Mobile, AL.

Division: Marine Fisheries Management

Authors: Kristin Foss and Martha Guyas

Contact Phone Number: 850-487-0554

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Unless otherwise noted, images throughout the presentation are by FWC.

Outline

- Cobia and red grouper
- Other Council discussions
- Red snapper
 - 2018 Florida EFP season update
 - 2019 Florida EFP season – *DIRECTION REQUESTED*
 - State management plan 2020 and beyond



This presentation will provide an update on recent Gulf Council discussions including cobia and red grouper. Several red snapper items will be presented including an update on the 2018 Florida Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP), options for the 2019 Florida EFP season, and recent Council discussion on potential state management for 2020 and beyond. Commission direction is requested on the 2019 Florida EFP season.

Cobia and Red Grouper



Cobia – final action

- Increased minimum size limit from 33 to 36 inches
 - Will conflict with FWC's Gulf rule
- Pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce



Red grouper – emergency action

- Fishermen's concerns and recent data indicate stock is likely undergoing overfishing and potentially overfished
- Council requested NOAA Fisheries take emergency action to lower the quota in 2019



In October, the Council took final action to increase the cobia size limit from 33 to 36 inches fork length (FL) in Gulf federal waters based on concerns from stakeholders about the Gulf cobia stock. This new regulation is pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. This new size limit will conflict with Florida's Gulf minimum size limit, which is currently 33 inches FL. Last year, the Commission considered increasing the minimum size limit for cobia in Gulf state waters from 33 to 38 inches FL, but there was concern from anglers in the Big Bend and southwest Florida that a larger minimum size limit would severely limit the ability of these anglers to harvest cobia. Anglers from these areas do not traditionally encounter large fish nearshore compared to those in the Panhandle. The Council considered but rejected setting bag and possession limits of one fish per person per day and two fish per vessel (which was recently adopted by FWC for the Gulf coast). This was due to testimony from the western Gulf where stakeholders are less concerned about the status of the stock.

The Council also requested NOAA Fisheries take emergency action to lower the quota for Gulf red grouper in 2019 from 10.77 million lbs. to 4.6 million lbs. or a number equal to the 2017 landings, whichever is lower. This was in response to an interim analysis that indicated the stock is likely undergoing overfishing and is potentially overfished. Many recreational and commercial fishermen from Florida have expressed concern about the red grouper stock. Neither the recreational or commercial fisheries have come close to their quotas for red grouper in the last two years. The next red grouper stock assessment is expected to be completed in 2019.

Other Council Discussions



Gray snapper

- Considering potential changes to quotas and management thresholds

Carryover of unharvested quota

- Discussed options to allow quota that goes unharvested in one year to be harvested in the next year

Reef fish management objectives

- Reviewed Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan to modernize and streamline management objectives

Fishery Ecosystem Plan

- Began developing a Fishery Ecosystem Plan to help integrate ecosystem science into Gulf fisheries management



The Council discussed several items in October:

Gray (mangrove) snapper: The recent gray snapper stock assessment indicated the stock has been experiencing overfishing since 2015. As a result, the Council discussed adjusting the acceptable biological catch (ABC), annual catch limits (ACLs), and management thresholds for gray snapper.

Carryover of unharvested quota: The Council discussed options to allow quota that goes uncaught in one year to be transferred to the next year's quota under certain circumstances. The Council will continue discussing plan details, such as which species should be eligible for quota carryover and how much leftover quota should be added to the next year's quota.

Reef fish management objectives: The Council began to review the current management objectives in the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan. Several of these objectives were set more than 30 years ago, and as a result, the Council recommended several changes that would modernize and streamline the objectives for the reef fish fishery.

Fishery Ecosystem Plan: The Council began developing a Fishery Ecosystem Plan for the Gulf of Mexico to help integrate ecosystem science into Gulf fisheries management. Other Councils, like the Pacific Fishery Management Council, have ecosystem plans for their regions.

The Council will continue discussing these items at future meetings.

2018 Red Snapper EFP Update

- EFP pilot program for 2018 and 2019
 - Florida managing private recreational red snapper season in both state and federal waters
- 2018 Florida season June 11 – July 20 (40 days)
 - Federal waters – private anglers only
 - State waters – private anglers and state for-hire vessels
 - 113% of state quota harvested
 - Overage will have to be paid back in 2019



This year, Florida and the other Gulf states are testing pilot programs to manage the recreational red snapper season in both state and federal waters through Exempted Fishing Permits (EFP). This pilot study allows FWC to test the concept of state management by managing recreational red snapper harvest in Florida's Gulf state and federal waters for 2018 and 2019. The 2018 red snapper season was open June 11 – July 20 (40 consecutive days) in Florida state and federal waters for private recreational anglers. For-hire operations that do not have a federal reef fish permit could also target red snapper during this 40-day season, but they were limited to fishing them in Gulf state waters only. The federal for-hire season was open in federal waters June 1 – July 21 (51 days).

Florida's state quota for 2018 was 1,778,515 lbs. Landings estimates for the 2018 Florida season show that 2,010,726 lbs. was harvested, which is 113% of the quota. The overage of 232,211 lbs. (13%) will have to be paid back in 2019, which will result in a shortened season for 2019.

2019 Florida EFP Season

- Estimated 2019 Florida EFP quota: 1,722,095 lbs.
 - Accounts for 232,211 lbs. overage from 2018 season
 - Accounts for recent recreational quota increase
- 2019 estimated season length: 32 days
- Staff suggests continuous season: June 11 - July 12
 - Reopen in fall if quota available



Direction requested: 2019 Gulf red snapper season

The estimated 2019 Florida EFP quota is 1,722,095 lbs. This number accounts for the 232,211 lbs. overage from the 2018 season and Florida's portion of the expected 2019 red snapper quota increase, which is 175,791 lbs. The quota increase is pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

Staff estimates that this adjusted 2019 quota would allow for a 32-day recreational red snapper season. This estimate accounts for the high catch rates observed in 2018 and is expected to keep harvest within Florida's quota, assuming the season structure for 2019 is similar to the season set in 2018. Staff suggests having a continuous season starting June 11 through July 12 (32 days) to provide optimal harvest opportunities for Florida anglers and help reduce the risk of an overage. This season would be structured similar to the 2018 season, which also opened June 11. If there is quota available after the summer season, FWC could reopen in the fall for a limited harvest.

Commission direction is requested on the 2019 Florida red snapper season.

Future Red Snapper State Management through Council Process – 2020 and Beyond



- Continued discussions on individual state management plans to manage recreational fishery in Gulf state and federal waters
- Current Council preferred: quota based on EFP allocations
 - Florida's allocation: 45.78%
- Support for an allocation option to redistribute additional quota Florida received in EFP to other states
 - Florida's allocation: 43.73%
- Public workshops will be held in December and January in Florida
- *Final action likely at January Council meeting*



The Council continued discussions on establishing long-term state management plans for the recreational harvest of red snapper starting in 2020. These individual plans would allow each state to manage their recreational fishery in Gulf state and federal waters under a Council-set ACL.

The Council's preferred alternative would establish state allocations based on the ones used in the state Exempted Fishing Permits (EFP). Of the options currently being considered by the Council, this provides Florida the greatest allocation of 45.78%. This option also provides Florida anglers with the most equitable access to harvest opportunities considering the significantly longer seasons that were set by the other Gulf states under their EFPs. In 2018, Florida's season was set at 40 days based on the quota provided to Florida. Staff believes this option would provide the Commission the best ability to set recreational seasons that are satisfactory to anglers while promoting conservation of red snapper.

At the Council's October meeting, a new allocation alternative was added that would essentially redistribute the additional quota Florida received to make the 40-day season possible in 2018 to the other states. Under this new option, Florida's allocation would be 43.73%. Other states are not comfortable with using the EFP allocations for state management after the EFPs expire because they feel they need more allocation to allow for longer seasons in their states. For example, this year Alabama estimated a 47-day season. However, their season closed after 28 days because their quota was estimated to have been met early. Alabama's season was open for 3-day weekends starting June 1, including the week of July 4. Fishing effort is typically higher on weekends than weekdays, which could partly account for their shorter season.

The Council is scheduled to hold public hearings on state management December 3 in Pensacola and December 4 in Destin. Additional Council public hearings will be held in the Tampa/St. Pete area and Fort Myers in January 2019. FWC staff plan to supplement these public hearings with additional FWC-led meetings in Tallahassee, Crystal River, and Key West in January 2019.

The Council will likely take final action at the upcoming January Council meeting.

Direction Requested



- 2019 Gulf red snapper season structure – *DIRECTION REQUESTED*
 - Approve 2019 red snapper season: June 11 – July 12 (32 days)
 - Fall reopening if quota available
- Staff will continue advocating for equitable access to harvest opportunities for Florida anglers in red snapper state management
 - EFP quota allocations
- Input on other Council items is welcome
- Next Gulf Council meeting is Jan. 28-31 in Orange Beach, AL



Staff recommends approving a draft season structure for the 2019 Gulf recreational red snapper season that would be finalized at the Commission's February meeting. The proposed 2019 season would be June 11 – July 12 (32 days) with the possibility of a fall reopening if quota is available.

Staff will continue advocating for equitable access to harvest opportunities for Florida anglers in red snapper state management, particularly with the EFP quota allocations.

Input on additional Council items is always welcome. The next Gulf Council meeting is Jan. 28-31 in Orange Beach, AL.