

Gulf Council Issues



Review and Discussion
May 1, 2019



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) April 1-4 meeting in Biloxi, MS. Commission direction is requested on the closure of recreational harvest of gray triggerfish and greater amberjack in Gulf state waters.

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

- Gulf Council updates
- Recreational closures – *DIRECTION REQUESTED*
 - Gray triggerfish
 - Greater amberjack



This presentation will provide an update on recent Gulf Council discussions including red snapper, red grouper, greater amberjack, and several other Council items. Staff will also present updates on recent gray triggerfish and greater amberjack recreational closures in federal waters and seek direction on potential closures in Gulf state waters.

Council Updates - Final Action



Red snapper state management for 2020 and beyond

- Gulf states will have authority to manage private recreational harvest in federal waters beginning in 2020
- Pending approval by U.S. Secretary of Commerce

Red grouper

- Final action to reduce annual quota as a precautionary measure until next stock assessment

2019 federal for-hire red snapper season

- June 1 – Aug. 1 (62 days) set by NOAA Fisheries



The Council took final action on two items at the April meeting and discussed the 2019 federal for-hire red snapper season set by NOAA Fisheries.

The Council took final action to delegate management of the private recreational red snapper fishery in federal waters to each of the Gulf states. If approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, this transfer of management to the states would begin in 2020 and would replace the exempted fishing permits (EFPs) that are currently being used by each state to test this concept. This plan was unanimously supported by all Council members and is a step forward in fisheries management for recreational red snapper.

The Council also took final action to reduce the red grouper quota from 10.77 million lbs. to 4.154 million lbs., which is the total recreational and commercial harvest during 2017. In recent years, many recreational and commercial fishermen from Florida have expressed concern about red grouper, and a recent interim analysis indicated the stock is likely undergoing overfishing and is potentially overfished. This quota reduction is a precautionary measure until the next stock assessment is completed and the Council can adjust management accordingly. In October 2018, the Council requested NOAA Fisheries take emergency action to lower the quota for Gulf red grouper for 2019, and this is pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

Finally, NOAA Fisheries recently announced the 2019 red snapper season for federally permitted for-hire vessels, which will be June 1 – Aug. 1, 2019 (62 days). State for-hire operations without a federal permit are limited to fishing in state waters only and must abide by the state red snapper season which is June 11- July 12 (32 days). For 2019, the buffer between the federal for-hire component's annual catch target (ACT) and annual catch limit (ACL) was reduced from 20% to 9% because this component has stayed within its quota ACT. Reducing the buffer level allows the federal for-hire season to be open longer in 2019 than 2018.

Other Council Discussions



Commercial greater amberjack trip limit

- Discussed reducing commercial trip limit to help extend season
- Commercial season routinely closes early

Carryover of unharvested quota

- Postponed final action to examine adverse effects of overages on rebuilding stocks

Red snapper sector allocation

- Postponed adjusting sector allocations until August to consider implications from Modern Fish Act and recreational data updates



The Council discussed several other items at the April meeting:

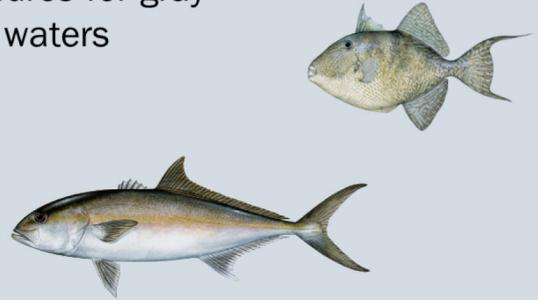
Greater amberjack: The Council discussed reducing the commercial trip limit for greater amberjack from 1,500 lbs. to 500 lbs. to help extend the commercial season. The commercial fishery has closed early over the past several years, and many fishermen have asked for reduced trip limits to help ensure longer seasons to meet market demands. This trip limit reduction would essentially make greater amberjack a bycatch fishery, but could help reduce dead discards of amberjack by reef fish fishermen targeting species such as red snapper and grouper.

Carryover of unharvested quota: The Council was scheduled to take final action on allowing quota that goes uncaught in one year to be transferred to the next year's quota under certain circumstances at the April meeting. However, the Council postponed final action on this amendment to examine adverse effects of periodic quota overages as well as quota carryover. It is unclear how large paybacks would affect fisheries that are rebuilding, and the Council has asked its scientific advisors to examine the issue more closely.

Red snapper sector allocation: The Council decided to postpone further consideration of reallocating red snapper between the commercial and recreational sectors until the August Council meeting. This will allow the Council to consider the implications of the Modern Fish Act, updates to recreational data, and other factors in development of this amendment.

Gray Triggerfish and Greater Amberjack

- NOAA Fisheries announced recreational closures for gray triggerfish and greater amberjack in federal waters
- Similar backgrounds
 - Negative stock assessments
 - History of overages
 - Increasingly restrictive regulations



Commission direction needed on potential closures in state waters



NOAA Fisheries recently announced closures of recreational harvest for both gray triggerfish and greater amberjack in Gulf federal waters. Both gray triggerfish and greater amberjack have similar management backgrounds. Both species have had a series of negative stock assessments and have a history of quota overages and early season closures. To help rebuild each stock and provide continued fishing opportunities, increasingly restrictive regulations and relatively small quotas have been put in place for both gray triggerfish and greater amberjack.

Staff is seeking Commission direction on potential closures in Gulf state waters to be consistent with the closures in federal waters.

2019 Gray Triggerfish Recreational Season Closure

- NOAA Fisheries will close fishery in federal waters on May 11 for the remainder of 2019 to prevent a quota overage
 - 2019 season closure based on 2018 harvest rates
 - ACL exceeded by 89% in 2018
- NOAA Fisheries requests FWC close recreational harvest in state waters for consistency with federal quota closure



Direction requested on recreational closure

Photo: Carol Cox

NOAA Fisheries recently announced the recreational harvest of gray triggerfish in Gulf federal waters will close May 11 for the remainder of the 2019 season due to harvest projections indicating that the recreational annual catch target (ACT) of 217,000 lbs. is projected to be met. These harvest projections are based on the 2018 gray triggerfish harvest, which exceeded the annual catch limit (ACL) by 89%. To prevent another overage and risk exceeding the overfishing limit, NOAA Fisheries is closing recreational harvest in Gulf federal waters.

NOAA Fisheries sent a letter to the Commission requesting FWC close Gulf state waters to recreational harvest to be consistent with the federal quota closure.

Staff requests Commission direction on closing the recreational gray triggerfish season in state waters.

Gray Triggerfish Recreational State Season Considerations

- No payback required
- Stock is rebuilding
 - Anglers report stock is improving
- New stock assessment underway
- Large amount of harvest in state waters
- If quota remains after NOAA Fisheries calculates 2019 harvest, fishery could reopen in fall
- Federal for-hire prohibited from harvest in state waters until federal season reopens



Staff recommends closing state waters, consistent with federal closure

There are several factors to consider when addressing the season for recreational gray triggerfish in Gulf state waters.

Quota paybacks are not required because gray triggerfish is not currently considered overfished or undergoing overfishing. The stock is considered to be rebuilding, and many anglers have reported more and larger gray triggerfish in the past few years. The next stock assessment is currently underway and should be completed by the end of 2019.

While keeping state waters open provides Florida anglers more opportunities for harvest, it is important to note that a large amount of recreational harvest comes from Florida state waters. Keeping state waters open could potentially result in a quota overage or the overfishing limit (OFL) being exceeded, which would require the Council to take action to prevent overfishing.

The federal fishery is closing May 11 based on what happened in 2018, not based on 2019. If quota remains after NOAA Fisheries calculates the 2019 harvest, the fishery could reopen in federal waters in fall 2019. However, if NOAA Fisheries determines the 2019 quota has been met, the recreational season in federal waters will reopen March 1, 2020, following the January and February annual closure.

Also, federal for-hire operations are prohibited from harvest in state waters until the federal season reopens. Therefore, if state waters are open, these operations are not allowed to harvest gray triggerfish as they must follow the more restrictive regulations.

Based on this information, staff recommends closing recreational harvest of gray triggerfish in Gulf state waters for the remainder of the year via Executive Order. If the federal season reopens, staff recommends reopening state waters consistent with the federal opening.

2019 Greater Amberjack Recreational Season Closure

- New season structure began in 2018
 - Open Aug. 1 – Oct. 31, May 1-31
 - Quota monitored annually from Aug. 1 – July 31
- ACT was met in fall 2018, so federal fishery will not reopen in May
- Fishery will reopen Aug. 1 – Oct. 31, 2019
- NOAA Fisheries requests FWC close recreational harvest in May to be consistent with federal quota closure



Direction requested on recreational closure



A new season structure for recreational greater amberjack began in 2018 with the open season from Aug. 1 to Oct. 31 and May 1-31. The annual quota of 902,185 lbs. is monitored annually from Aug. 1 to July 31. NOAA Fisheries has determined 101.8% of annual catch target (ACT) for Gulf greater amberjack was met in fall 2018. Therefore, recreational harvest will not reopen as scheduled in May 2019.

The recreational greater amberjack fishery will reopen for the 2019-2020 season in federal waters Aug. 1 – Oct. 31, 2019.

NOAA Fisheries sent a letter to the Commission requesting FWC close Gulf state waters to recreational harvest to be consistent with the federal quota closure.

Staff request Commission direction on whether to close greater amberjack recreational harvest in Gulf state waters.

Greater Amberjack Recreational State Season Considerations



- Considered overfished and quota paybacks are required
 - Any overage would result in a shortened federal season next year
- Large portion of Gulf-wide harvest from Florida
 - 13% of harvest off Florida occurs in state waters
- Peak spawning is March – May
- Spring and fall seasons are important to Florida
- Federal for-hire prohibited from harvest in state waters until federal season reopens
- Next assessment is scheduled for 2020



Staff recommends closing state waters for May, consistent with federal closure

There are several factors to consider when addressing the seasons for recreational greater amberjack in Gulf state waters.

Greater amberjack is considered overfished and as a result, quota overage paybacks are required. While keeping state waters open provides fishing opportunities for Florida anglers, any overage could result in a shortened season next year. A large portion of the overall Gulf harvest occurs off Florida. Of the Florida harvest, around 13% of harvest occurs in state waters. Any harvest in Florida state waters could contribute toward a quota overage. Another consideration is that the peak spawning period for greater amberjack is March – May. Closing state waters for the remainder of May could help protect spawners and contribute to rebuilding.

Both spring and fall seasons are important to Florida. Many Panhandle for-hire businesses heavily depend on a spring amberjack season to draw customers to the coast since the harvest of other species such as red snapper is closed during this time of year. However, leaving state waters open during May could result in a shortened fall season and likely reduce the chance of a May 2020 season.

Also, federal for-hire operations are prohibited from harvest in state waters until the federal season reopens. Therefore, if state waters are open, these operations are not allowed to harvest greater amberjack as they must follow the more restrictive regulations. Harvest will reopen as scheduled on Aug. 1, 2019.

The next greater amberjack stock assessment is scheduled for 2020.

Based on this information, staff recommends closing recreational harvest of greater amberjack in Gulf state waters for the remainder of May 2019 via Executive Order.

Direction Requested

- Staff recommends closing Gulf recreational harvest of:
 - Gray triggerfish, consistent with federal closure
 - Remain closed for 2019 unless federal season reopens
 - Greater amberjack for the remainder of May 2019, consistent with federal closure
- Input on other Council items is welcome
- Next Gulf Council meeting is June 3-6 in Miramar Beach, FL



Staff recommends closing recreational harvest of gray triggerfish in Gulf state waters via Executive Order to be consistent with the closure in federal waters. The season would remain closed for 2019 unless the federal season reopens.

Staff recommends closing recreational harvest of greater amberjack in Gulf state waters for the remainder of May via Executive Order to be consistent with the closure in federal waters.

Input on additional Council items is always welcome. The next Gulf Council meeting is June 3-6 in Miramar Beach, FL.