

Gulf Council Updates



Review and Discussion
December 11, 2019



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

This is a review and discussion of items from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) October 21-24 meeting in Galveston, TX.

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

Photo by Capt. Larry McGuire

Final Action



Two-day for-hire possession limit

- Clarifies two-day possession limits on for-hire trips longer than 24 hours
- Allows passengers to retain their two-day possession limit at any time if the trip is at least 30 hours
- Pending approval by U.S. Secretary of Commerce



The Council took final action to modify federal for-hire multi-day trip possession limits, which will allow anglers on federal for-hire fishing trips that meet certain requirements and last longer than 30 hours to possess two daily bag or vessel limits of reef fish or mackerel at any time during those trips. Currently, under limited circumstances, customers on for-hire trips longer than 24 hours can possess two daily bag limits of reef fish and mackerel. On these trips, customers must possess a paid receipt for a for-hire trip exceeding 24 hours, multiple licensed operators must be aboard, the vessel must have sleeping berths in accordance with U.S. Coast Guard regulations, and the trip must exceed 24 hours before returning to the dock. The Council's final action was taken in response to several for-hire captains, who asked the Council to clarify exactly when on these trips their customers can possess their two-day bag limits.

The Council will submit these proposed changes to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation. Similar regulations are in place for Florida state waters. At a future FWC meeting, staff will present for Commission consideration potential changes to state rules that are consistent with this new federal change.

Red Grouper Stock Assessment



- Not overfished or undergoing overfishing, below management targets
- 2018 red tide likely had major impacts but not included in assessment
 - Management changes likely
- First assessment to include new MRIP data
 - Data indicate recreational harvest significantly higher than previously estimated
 - Implications for recreational and commercial allocations
- Discussions will continue on catch recommendations and allocations



The Council reviewed the results of the most recent Gulf red grouper stock assessment, which indicates red grouper is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, but the stock is not meeting certain management targets. The stock is below the 30% spawning potential ratio (SPR) management target, and the stock biomass is the lowest that has been observed in the assessment time series (which begins in 1986).

Additionally, the assessment only includes data through 2017, and did not include data from the recent red tide event that occurred off west Florida in 2018, which likely had major impacts on the stock. Over the past several years (prior to the 2018 red tide event), recreational and commercial fishermen have reported declines in Gulf red grouper.

Also, this assessment was the first to include the new Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey estimates, which more than doubled the estimates of recreational red grouper harvest compared to the previous effort survey. These new estimates have implications for sector allocations. Currently, the sector allocations of 76% commercial and 26% recreational are based on landings from 1986-2005. Applying these new landings data to the time series used to determine sector allocations results in revised allocations of 59.48% of the quota to the commercial sector and 40.5% to the recreational sector.

Projections for future harvest for 2020-2024 differ depending on whether the current or revised allocations are assumed for future harvest. The Council's SSC will discuss these projections at their next meeting and provide scientific advice to the Council. Previously, the Council reduced the red grouper annual catch limit (ACL) from 10.77 million pounds (mp) to 4.16 mp in 2019 based on fishermen's concerns and anticipated impacts from the 2018 red tide. Because these ACLs are based on the "old" MRIP estimates, they are not directly comparable to the projections based on the new stock assessment. This ACL will remain in place until changed, and essentially caps harvest at 2017 levels.

The Council will begin work on an amendment that could modify the red grouper allocations and catch levels based on the new assessment, and will continue discussions at future Council meetings.

Other Council Discussions



Madison Swanson and Steamboat Lumps MPAs

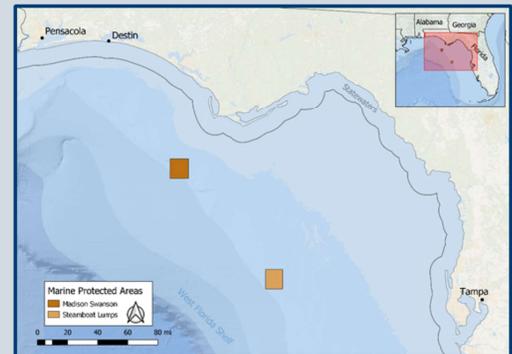
- Originally established to protect gag grouper spawning aggregations
- Illegal grouper fishing occurring under the guise of trolling
- Potential trolling prohibition

Recreational greater amberjack

- Options to allow for both a May and fall harvest, and balance regional needs

Commercial IFQ program

- Potential changes to ownership of shares in red snapper and grouper/tilefish IFQ programs



The Council discussed several other items at their October meeting.

Madison Swanson and Steamboat Lumps MPAs: The Council discussed concerns that illegal recreational bottom fishing is occurring under the guise of bottom trolling in the Madison Swanson and Steamboat Lumps Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). These MPAs were originally established to protect gag grouper spawning aggregations, and are located far offshore of Florida's Big Bend. These areas are also known to hold large numbers of red grouper. Currently, no bottom fishing is allowed in these areas but trolling is permitted May through October. Law enforcement has noted it is difficult to enforce the no-bottom fishing regulations when trolling is allowed. The Council decided to begin an amendment that would consider eliminating all fishing in these MPAs to continue grouper protection in these areas.

Recreational greater amberjack: The Council is considering management changes to recreational greater amberjack regulations. Both the Council and FWC have received feedback about revisiting recreational management measures with the goal of allowing recreational harvest in both May and fall. The Council is considering options including fractional bag limits (e.g., one fish per two anglers), adjusting the seasons, setting split season quotas (May and fall quota), and creating regional zones with their own unique quotas. The next stock assessment for greater amberjack is expected to be completed in 2021.

Commercial Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Programs: The Council is considering changes to the commercial red snapper and grouper/tilefish IFQ programs that could affect who may own shares in these fisheries. Currently, any U.S. citizen or permanent resident can own shares, even if they have never fished commercially or do not have the required commercial reef fish permit to fish their shares. The Council is considering ways to ensure shares of these fisheries are in the hands of commercial fishermen, which could mean requiring shareholders to hold a commercial reef fish permit to harvest. The Council is also considering whether past commercial fishermen/IFQ shareholders should be grandfathered into the IFQ program.

Discussions on these items will continue at future Council meetings.

No Direction Requested



- Input on Council items is welcome
- Next Gulf Council meeting is Jan. 27-30 in New Orleans, LA



Photo by Robert Pratte

No Commission direction is requested at this time, however, input on Council items is always welcome. The next Gulf Council meeting is Jan. 27-30, 2020 in New Orleans, LA.

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



Current Greater Amberjack Regulations

Recreational

- Bag limit: 1 per person per day
- Minimum size limit: 34 inches fork length
- Open season from Aug. 1 – Oct. 31, May 1-31

Commercial

- Minimum size limit: 36 inches fork length
- Annual season closure: March 1 – May 31
- Commercial harvesters must follow federal trip limits, seasons, and closures in state waters



Regulations for Gulf greater amberjack in state waters are similar to regulations for federal waters. For recreational harvest, there is a bag limit of one fish per person per day, a minimum size limit of 36 inches fork length, and an open season from Aug. 1- Oct. 31 and May 1-31.

The minimum size limit for commercial harvest is 36 inches fork length. There is an annual spawning season closure from March 1- May 31 each year. The fishery also closes for the year when the commercial quota is met. State rules require commercial harvesters to follow Gulf federal trip limits, seasons, and closures in state waters.

Greater Amberjack Recreational Catch History, 2011-2019

Year	Annual Catch Target	Percentage of ACT Harvested	Federal Recreational Closure Date	State Recreational Closure Date
2011	--	--	--	--
2012	--	--	--	--
2013	--	--	--	--
2014	894,538	102%	August 24	--
2015	1,130,000	119.7%	September 28	November 21
2016	1,034,442	189.7%	June 1	September 10
2017	385,413	206.1%	March 24	April 22
2017/2018*	716,713	87%	--	--
2018/2019	902,185	103%	November 1	May 3
2019/2020	1,086,985	9% (<i>preliminary</i>)	November 1	November 1



In 2018, a final rule modified the recreational greater amberjack seasonal closure to be November through April and June through July. Additionally, this rule adjusted the fishing year, and the quota is now monitored annually from Aug. 1 to July 31. Therefore, the recreational season is open Aug. 1- Oct. 31 and then May 1-31, occurring over two separate calendar years.

*As a result of the timing when these rules went into effect, only landings from Jan. 1 - July 31, 2018 are attributed to the 2017-2018 fishing year.

Two-Day For-Hire Possession Limit in Gulf of Mexico

Federal regulations (NOAA)

- Charter/headboat trip that spans more than 24 hours
- Must have two licensed operators and each passenger must have a receipt verifying trip length
- Applies to reef fish, king mackerel, and Spanish mackerel

Florida state regulations

- Charter/headboat trip that spans more than 24 hours
- Must have a sleeping berth for each passenger and each passenger must have a receipt verifying length of trip
- Applies to reef fish

