

Federal Council Updates



Review and Discussion
July 22, 2019



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This is a review and discussion of items from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) June 8-11 webinar meeting and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (GMFMC) June 15-18 webinar meeting.

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Photo courtesy of Bear Williamson and friends.

GMFMC Discussions



Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps: Final Action

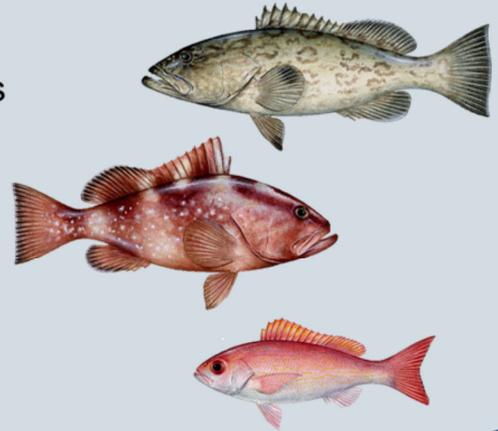
- Prohibits fishing year-round in these areas
- Only commercial reef fish vessels can transit with reef fish

Red grouper

- Considering changes to quotas and allocations
- Potential in-season recreational quota closure

Vermilion snapper

- Not overfished or undergoing overfishing
- Assessment shows harvest can increase



GMFMC took final action to prohibit fishing year-round in the Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps areas, which are located far offshore Florida's Big Bend. These areas were originally established to protect gag grouper spawning aggregations. GMFMC also recommended prohibiting the possession of any reef fish species inside Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps year-round, except for vessels with a vessel monitoring system (VMS) and a valid commercial reef fish permit that are in transit with all fishing gear stowed. This action was taken by GMFMC in response to concerns that fishermen are illegally bottom fishing for grouper and other reef fish in these areas under the guise of trolling. Currently, bottom fishing is prohibited in these areas, but trolling is allowed May through October, and possession of reef fish is prohibited except during transit when gear is stowed. These proposed changes are subject to approval and implementation by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

GMFMC continued discussions of adjusting red grouper catch levels and allocations based on the recent stock assessment. The stock is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, but is below management targets and was likely impacted by the recent prolonged red tide event. The recent assessment includes the new Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) recalibration estimates, which more than doubled the estimates of recreational harvest compared to the previous survey. These estimates have implications for commercial and recreational allocations. NOAA Fisheries presented projections indicating how potential allocation and catch level decisions could result in early recreational quota closures. GMFMC will continue discussions at future meetings.

A recent stock assessment for vermilion snapper indicates the stock is neither undergoing overfishing nor overfished. The assessment includes the new MRIP recalibration estimates, and indicates the stock is capable of supporting increased harvest. Therefore, GMFMC will consider increasing catch limits for this fishery at future meetings.

Gulf Recreational Red Snapper Issues



- Calibrations needed between MRIP and state data collection programs
 - Allow for “apples to apples” comparisons
 - Track landings in the same currency as the quota
 - Ensure quotas are not exceeded and overfishing does not occur
- GMFMC to consider adjusting state quotas or setting buffer on the overall private recreational quota
 - Preliminary calibrations indicate FL quota could increase slightly but decreases for other states
 - Buffer could mean shorter seasons for FL



Currently, Gulf recreational red snapper (and other species) landings are being tracked using multiple data collection programs, such as MRIP, the State Reef Fish Survey, and other state surveys. One of the big topics GMFMC discussed at their meeting was calibration of recreational red snapper data from the state data collection programs to MRIP. These calibrations are necessary to allow for “apples to apples” comparisons between the state surveys and MRIP, to track landings in the same currency as the quota, and to ensure quotas are not exceeded and overfishing does not occur.

Multiple states have been working with NOAA Fisheries to finalize these calibrations so that they may undergo scientific review. In August, the GMFMC will discuss the finalized calibrations and consider how to best address the calibrations to ensure that quotas and the overfishing limit are not exceeded. Options include adjusting state quotas based on the finalized calibrations (i.e., reallocation among states) or setting a buffer on the Gulf-wide private recreational quota. NOAA Fisheries provided preliminary adjustments to state red snapper quotas based on preliminary calibrations. These preliminary calibrations indicate that Florida’s quota could increase slightly (by roughly 7%) but other states could face significant reductions if quotas are adjusted based on the calibrations. If the GMFMC chooses to impose a buffer on the overall private recreational quota, this could result in a significantly lower quota and shorter red snapper seasons for Florida, as FWC would have to set seasons to ensure that the quota is not exceeded. FWC staff will continue to be engaged on this topic as calibrations are finalized and the GMFMC discusses how to move forward.

2020 Atlantic Red Snapper Seasons



Recreational season

- July 10, 11, 12, and 17
- Intensive surveys and biological sampling by FWRI

Commercial season

- Open July 13
- Closes when commercial quota is met



The federal 2020 Atlantic red snapper recreational season will occur over four days: July 10, 11, and 12 (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) and July 17 (Friday). The recreational season length, which is based upon estimated harvest rates from the 2019 recreational season, is set to constrain harvest below the quota. The Atlantic federal quota for all sectors is 42,510 fish. The quota is allocated 71.93% (29,656 fish) to the recreational sector and 28.07% (124,815 pounds) to the commercial sector.

The daily recreational bag limit is one fish per person with no minimum size limit. As in previous years, FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) will conduct intensive monitoring during the federal season to develop robust estimates of recreational red snapper harvest and effort, and collect biological samples for future stock assessments.

The commercial Atlantic red snapper season opens Monday, July 13, and will remain open until the commercial quota is met. The commercial vessel limit is 75 pounds per trip and per day.

During the five-day Atlantic red snapper recreational season in 2019, anglers caught an estimated 49,674 red snapper. Florida's recreational harvest during the federal recreational season was estimated to be 44,113 fish, which was 89 percent of all 2019 South Atlantic recreational landings. The 2019 commercial season lasted 54 days. Commercial fishermen harvested 120,961 pounds of red snapper, or 97% of their quota.

SAFMC Dolphin and Wahoo Discussions



Quotas and allocations

- Re-evaluating based on new MRIP estimates

Pelagic longline harvest

- Some support for prohibiting harvest by longline
- Considering restrictions similar to HMS regulations

Bullet and frigate mackerel

- Proposed as Ecosystem Component species
 - Large component of the wahoo diet



Photo courtesy Gabriel Bahra (top) and Sean Skakandy (bottom)

SAFMC manages the dolphin and wahoo fisheries in U.S. Atlantic federal waters from the Florida Keys through New England. In June, SAFMC discussed several topics related to these fisheries.

The overall quotas for dolphin and wahoo are based on historic landings since there are no stock assessments for these fish. Allocations for these two fisheries are also based on historic landings. Because historic recreational estimates increased after MRIP was revised with the new effort survey, SAFMC is re-evaluating quotas and sector allocations for these fisheries.

The new MRIP recreational harvest estimates are much larger, so any new allocation for dolphin or wahoo based solely on landings will likely diminish the small, but important commercial dolphin and wahoo fisheries. Thus, SAFMC is exploring allocation options that would maintain and not shrink the commercial fisheries, such as setting the commercial allocations as pounds of fish and not as a percentage.

SAFMC members continue to debate pelagic longline harvest of dolphin and wahoo, with Council members from Florida seeking to shrink or eliminate this component of the commercial fishery. There is a general interest in aligning the dolphin and wahoo pelagic longline regulations with Highly Migratory Species (HMS) regulations or only allowing harvesters with HMS permits to take dolphin and wahoo on longlines. Such changes could provide conservation benefits to protected and prohibited species.

SAFMC proposes designating bullet and frigate mackerel as Ecosystem Component (EC) species in the Dolphin Wahoo Fishery Management Plan to acknowledge their ecological role. Studies indicate bullet and frigate mackerel are a major component of the wahoo diet. There are no planned regulations or management actions for bullet and frigate mackerel because harvest of both species is minimal (averaging less than 7,000 pounds combined annually). SAFMC may take final action on this in September.

SAFMC Issues



Recent stock assessments

- Not overfished or undergoing overfishing
 - Greater amberjack
 - King mackerel
- Overfished and undergoing overfishing
 - Red porgy



Snapper grouper best fishing practices now in effect

- Descending devices aboard vessels
- Non-stainless-steel hooks
- Non-offset circle hooks north of Melbourne, FL



SAFMC received reports on stock assessments completed this spring. Atlantic greater amberjack and Atlantic king mackerel are neither overfished nor undergoing overfishing. Harvest of both species has remained consistent and both stocks have benefited from recent periods of strong recruitment of young fish into the fishery. Conversely, assessment results were not favorable for red porgy. Despite being in a rebuilding plan for almost three decades, Atlantic red porgy remains overfished and it was undergoing overfishing at the end of the assessment period (2017). The red porgy assessment indicates the most significant factor preventing recovery is chronic poor and declining recruitment. Based on the assessments, SAFMC will revise the quotas for all three species. They will also revise the red porgy rebuilding plan, which will likely include drastic cuts to the quota and other regulation changes.

Allocations of quota between the recreational and commercial sectors for greater amberjack, king mackerel, and red porgy are based on ratios of historic landings. Like with dolphin and wahoo, the new MRIP recreational harvest estimates trigger SAFMC to reconsider sector allocations when revising quotas for these species. SAFMC will consider social and economic factors in addition to historic landings when they reconsider sector allocations for these species.

Beginning July 15, 2020, recreational and commercial fishermen will be required to have gear that can be used to implement best fishing practices and promote survival of released snapper grouper species. Descending devices will be required on vessels in the Atlantic when anyone is targeting snapper grouper species. Descending devices can be used to alleviate the potentially lethal effects of barotrauma by quickly returning fish to depth. Only non-stainless-steel hooks will be allowed for the harvest of snapper grouper species, meaning only degradable hooks can be used. Additionally, only non-offset circle hooks will be allowed for snapper grouper harvest north of Melbourne, Florida. This requirement is based on increased post-release survival rates for fish caught on non-offset compared to offset circle hooks.

Emergency Requests and Presidential EO



Council responses to COVID-19

- SAFMC sending U.S. Secretary of Commerce letter on red snapper
- Temporary changes addressing economic losses and forgone opportunities
 - SAFMC made requests for vermilion snapper and king mackerel
 - Both councils will consider other requests at their next meetings

Presidential Executive Order

- Promote American seafood competitiveness and economic growth
- Directed councils to respond with suggestions by Nov. 2020



Fisheries were one of many sectors of the U.S. economy and society hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic. The demand and market for seafood drastically changed as restaurants and other businesses closed. Charter clients cancelled when travel was restricted. In parts of the southeastern U.S., charter and recreational access were lost when marinas and boat ramps closed. At their June meetings, each council discussed whether they could provide economic relief to fishermen.

SAFMC decided to send a letter to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce regarding red snapper concerns and pandemic effects that also expressed their willingness to work with NOAA Fisheries to maximize harvest and access to the red snapper fishery. After comparing 2020 landings to quotas, SAFMC requested temporary emergency action (EA) to (1) increase the vermilion snapper commercial vessel limit from 1,000 to 1,500 pounds because 2020 harvest is below average and (2) increase the king mackerel recreational bag limit to four fish because the recent assessment showed increased harvest would be sustainable.

Both councils independently agreed that additional information would help determine whether other EA requests would be beneficial and prudent. For example, SAFMC wants to explore benefits and risks of allowing uncaught 2020 quota to rollover into 2021. Each council requested their staff provide more information for consideration at their next meetings.

In May, the President signed Executive Order (EO) 13921 on Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth, "to strengthen the American economy; improve the competitiveness of American industry; ensure food security; provide environmentally safe and sustainable seafood; support American workers...; and remove unnecessary regulatory burdens." The councils will submit prioritized recommendations by Nov. 2, 2020, to reduce burdens on domestic fishing and to increase production within sustainable fisheries. This may include repeal of regulations, revisions to national policy, and federal investment in research and infrastructure.

Modern Fish Act Topics



- Act authorizes use of flexible management in recreational fisheries
 - Magnuson Act requirements still apply

Joint Council Workgroup

- Will identify alternative management strategies

Government Accountability Office Report on Allocations

- Modern Fish Act mandated review of mixed-use fishery allocations
- Recommended NOAA Fisheries work with councils to develop processes for conducting and documenting allocation reviews
- Councils will continue working on allocation review procedures



The Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act (Modern Fish Act) was signed into law in December 2018. This law allows for the use of alternative management measures for recreational fisheries and required a study on mixed-use fisheries allocations.

Section 102 of the Modern Fish Act authorized each regional fishery management council to consider alternative management strategies to help improve and increase flexibility in recreational fisheries management. Potential alternative strategies include, but are not limited to, managing with extraction rates, fishing mortality targets, and harvest control rules. GMFMC and SAFMC formed a Joint Workgroup to discuss and consider alternative management measures. The Joint Workgroup first met in May and agreed that the goals to be achieved through alternative management for a species need to be identified to determine which strategy might be best for that species. Suggested goals include providing greater access for recreational fishermen in the red snapper fishery, stability in fisheries management, avoidance of in-season closures when possible, and improving data collection on harvest and discards. The Workgroup will meet again in late summer of 2020 to continue discussions.

The Modern Fish Act instructed the Congressional Government Accountability Office (GAO) to review mixed-use fishery allocations in both the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. This report, released in March 2020, examined each council's history of establishing and revising mixed-use fishery allocations, evaluated key sources of information available when reviewing allocations, and evaluated the extent to which the councils have developed processes to guide allocation reviews. The report recommended that each council work with NOAA Fisheries to develop documented processes for conducting allocation reviews and specify how allocation reviews are documented. Both councils received a presentation on this report at their June meetings and will work on allocation review procedures at future meetings.

No Direction Requested

- Input on council items is welcome
- Next meetings
 - GMFMC: Aug. 24-27
 - SAFMC: Aug. 7 and Sept. 14-18



No specific direction is requested at this time; however, input on council items is always welcome.

The next GMFMC meeting is Aug. 24-27. The SAFMC's Executive Committee will meet Aug. 7 to discuss potential items to address the Presidential EO and set work priorities. The full SAFMC will meet Sept. 14-18.