

# Gulf Council Update



Review and Discussion  
October 7, 2020



**Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**

This is a review and discussion of items from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (GMFMC) September 28-30 webinar meeting.

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

# 2020 Gulf Red Snapper Season

## June 11 – July 25 (45 days)

- Preliminary estimates indicate 70% of Florida quota was caught

## Upcoming Fall Weekends Season (6 days)

- Oct. 17-18
- Oct. 24-25
- Oct. 31-Nov. 1



Photo courtesy of Bear Williamson



Preliminary estimates indicate that around 70% of Florida's quota was harvested during the 2020 recreational red snapper summer season, which was open from June 11 through July 25 (45 days) in Gulf state and federal waters off Florida. Since FWC is managing private recreational red snapper harvest in state and federal waters, FWC has the flexibility to reopen harvest when quota is available. Staff determined that a fall season of six weekend days would provide anglers additional harvest opportunities and is unlikely to result in a quota overage. The 2020 fall season was recently announced by FWC and Governor Ron DeSantis, and the season will occur on the following Saturdays and Sundays: Oct. 17-18, Oct. 24-25, and Oct. 31- Nov. 1.

# Gulf-wide Red Snapper Recreational Data Issues



- State landings and quotas are not in same currency
  - Calibrations between MRIP and state data collection programs would allow for “apples to apples” comparisons
- Overfishing of stock may have occurred in 2019

## Next Steps

- Council will consider adjusting state quotas (calibrations), placing a buffer on quotas, and other options
  - Options could affect Florida’s quota
- Incorporate results from “Great Red Snapper Count” and upcoming interim stock assessment



Currently, Gulf recreational red snapper landings are being tracked using multiple data collection programs, including MRIP, the State Reef Fish Survey, and other state surveys. The annual quotas are set based on MRIP data but tracked using the state surveys. Calibration of recreational red snapper data collected from the state surveys to MRIP currency is necessary to allow for “apples to apples” comparisons between the state surveys and MRIP. Landings need to be tracked in the same currency as the quota to ensure quotas are not exceeded and overfishing does not occur.

Recent calculations by NOAA Fisheries indicate that the red snapper overfishing limit (OFL) (15,500,000 lbs.) for the entire Gulf red snapper stock was likely exceeded in 2019; thus, overfishing may have occurred due to several factors. First, NOAA Fisheries recently determined that Texas exceeded its quota by 110,526 pounds in 2019, and this overage was deducted from the Texas 2020 season. Texas has filed a lawsuit against NMFS to challenge this determination. Louisiana also exceeded their quota in 2019 by a small margin. Lastly, NOAA Fisheries considered landings data based on MRIP currency, rather than the state surveys for purposes of tracking overall harvest by the private recreational component of the recreational fishery, and MRIP estimates of harvest for Alabama and Mississippi were much higher than their state surveys. As a result, NOAA estimates that the private recreational annual catch limit (ACL) was exceeded by 27% in 2019, and this caused the OFL to be exceeded.

The Council will continue to discuss options for addressing these data issues including adjusting state quotas through calibration, potentially implementing an overall buffer on the private recreational red snapper quota, and other options. These options could affect Florida’s recreational quota. If quotas are adjusted based on calibrations, Florida’s quota could increase slightly (by roughly 6%) while other states could face significant reductions. If the Council 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.

The Council intends to consider the results of an independent study known as the “Great Red Snapper Count” and an upcoming interim stock assessment analysis based on this study as they decide how to move forward. Preliminary results from the Great Red Snapper Count indicate red snapper may be up to three times more abundant in the Gulf than previously estimated; thus management changes may be warranted.

# Gulf Cobia Assessment Update



- Gulf cobia stock: Gulf of Mexico and East Florida
- Undergoing overfishing, but not overfished
- Important to reduce fishing mortality
- Stakeholders have expressed concern over status of stock
  - 2018: FWC reduced vessel limit to 2 fish per vessel in Gulf state waters
- Council to consider management changes including modifying bag, vessel, size, and catch limits



Photo courtesy of Sure Lure Charters



A recent stock assessment update indicates that the Gulf cobia stock (which also includes cobia off the east coast of Florida) is undergoing overfishing and has been for quite some time. This assessment includes data through 2018 and recreational fishing effort estimates based on the new MRIP Fishing Effort Survey (FES). The stock is below the 30% spawning potential ratio (SPR). The Council learned that harvest will need to be reduced by about one-third to end overfishing and prevent the stock from becoming overfished.

Stakeholders in Florida and throughout much of the Gulf have expressed concerns about the status of cobia for the past several years. In 2018, FWC reduced the vessel limit for cobia in Gulf state waters from 6 to 2 per vessel in response to stakeholder concerns. In 2019, the minimum size limit in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico was increased from 33 to 36 inches in response to stakeholder concerns.

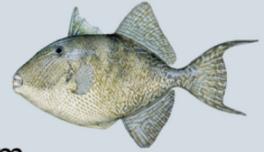
At future meetings the Council will consider potential management changes, including modifying the recreational and commercial bag limit, vessel limit, size limit, and catch limits. Since cobia off the east coast of Florida are part of the Gulf of Mexico stock, the South Atlantic Council may also need to consider potential changes to management for cobia in federal waters off Florida's Atlantic coast.

# Council Discussions



## Recreational Gray Triggerfish

- Reopened Sept. 1 – Oct. 25 in Gulf state and federal waters



## Topics Being Explored

- Redfish management by three states (AL, MS, and LA) to 9 nm
- Sector separation for red and gag grouper, greater amberjack, and gray triggerfish
- Review of king mackerel landings and allocations



The Council also discussed several other topics at the October meeting.

After considering recreational landings data for gray triggerfish, which was open from March 1 – May 1, NOAA Fisheries determined that the recreational quota was not met during the open season. In response, NOAA Fisheries reopened Gulf recreational gray triggerfish from Sept. 1 – Oct. 25 to allow additional harvest opportunities. FWC issued an Executive Order to reopen Gulf state waters consistent with this federal season.

The Council decided to explore several topics at future meetings. The Council will explore ramifications of allowing Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana to manage red drum harvest out to 9 nautical miles (nm) off their states. Currently, state waters for these three states only extends from shore to 3 nm, whereas Texas and Florida Gulf waters extend out to 9 nm from shore. Additionally, the Council will explore options to implement sector separation for greater amberjack, gray triggerfish, red grouper, and gag grouper. Sector separation would create separate quotas for the private angler and for-hire components of these recreational fisheries. Currently, red snapper is the only fishery with sector separation for the recreational fishery. Finally, the Council requested an analysis of king mackerel landings and quotas based on MRIP FES landings estimates for the recreational fishery. This would be considered by the Council alongside results of a recent stock assessment update for Gulf king mackerel.

# No Direction Requested



- Input on council items is welcome
- Next webinar meetings
  - Oct. 26-29
  - Nov. 30 – Dec. 1



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

The next GMFMC meeting is Oct. 26-29 and Nov. 30-Dec. 1.