South Atlantic Council Updates

Review and Discussion
October 7, 2020

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This is a review and discussion of items from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) September 14-17 webinar meeting. Topics in this presentation include the Council's response to the Presidential Executive Order (EO) on seafood competitiveness and economic growth, and the dolphin wahoo fishery.

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Unless otherwise noted, images throughout the presentation are by FWC.
Photo courtesy of Leann Hanzlik.

Council Actions

Presidential EO: Promoting American Seafood and Economic Growth

- Council recommendations
  - Increase scientific research and monitoring
  - Address shark depredation
  - Modernize wreckfish commercial fishery
  - Increase access for commercial rock shrimp harvesters

Bullet and Frigate Mackerel – Final Action

- Added to Dolphin Wahoo FMP as Ecosystem Component species

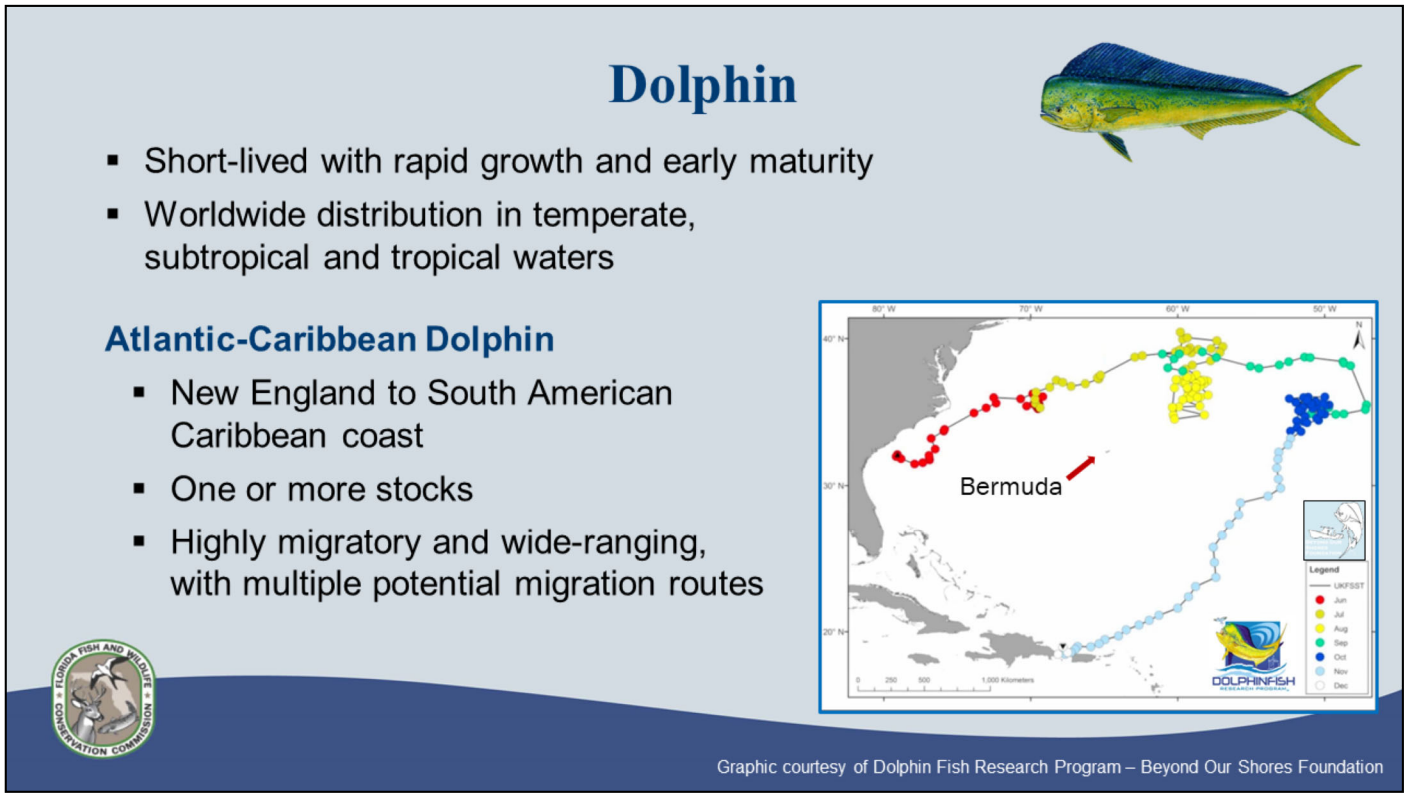
Photo courtesy of Sean Skakandy

In May 2020, the President signed Executive Order (EO) 13921 on Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth. Within the EO, the President directed each regional fishery management council to provide recommendations on reducing burdens on domestic fishing and increasing sustainable seafood production. In September, the Council finalized their prioritized list, and the top recommendations included:

- Increase scientific research, monitoring, and assessment of Council-managed species. This includes better monitoring and estimation of recreational catch, as well as increases in quantity and frequency of federal stock assessments.
- Address shark depredation in commercial and recreational fisheries, which contributes to reduced harvest and increased mortality of released fish. Fishermen from all sectors throughout the Atlantic coast and Gulf of Mexico have urged the federal councils and NOAA Fisheries to address this problem.
- Update the commercial wreckfish catch share program, which is the oldest of its kind in the nation. It needs updates to improve efficiency and meet federal requirements established after it began.
- Restore access to historic rock shrimp fishing grounds in part of a closed area. The closed area boundary may be reconfigured to allow shrimping without posing harm to the deepwater coral reef the closed area protects.

In December, the Council will begin to modernize the wreckfish commercial catch share program and increase fishing access for rock shrimp commercial harvesters.

The Council took final action to approve the addition of bullet and frigate mackerel to the Dolphin Wahoo Fishery Management Plan (FMP) as Ecosystem Component species. This is to acknowledge their ecological role in the diet of wahoo. There are no regulations associated with the designations, which are now subject to approval and implementation by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.



Much of the discussion at the Council's September meeting focused on dolphin. The next several slides provide a broad overview of the fishery, stakeholder comments, and potential management changes being discussed by the Council. Staff will seek Commission direction related to dolphin.

Dolphin are short-lived fish, rarely living longer than four years. They grow rapidly, and faster than most other fishes. In their first year, they can increase in length by 1.5 to 5.5 inches per month. They can reach sexual maturity by four months of age.

Dolphin are found in tropical, subtropical, and temperate waters worldwide. Water temperature appears to strongly affect their distribution, and they show preference for waters with surface temperatures between 66 to 84°F.

The dolphin found off Florida are part of a larger population in the Atlantic and Caribbean. The population ranges from New England to the Caribbean coast of South America. It's unknown whether they comprise one or more stocks of fish.

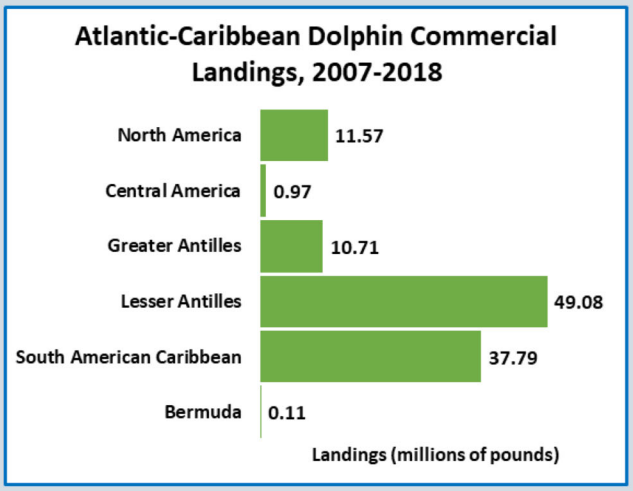
Dolphin are highly migratory, and their movements are wide-ranging. There are multiple potential routes dolphin can take throughout the Atlantic and Caribbean. The graphic on the slide illustrates the migratory path of a dolphin satellite-tagged by the Dolphinfish Research Program. This dolphin was tagged off the Carolinas in June, then it moved out into open ocean waters north of Bermuda and continued traveling east before looping back to the Greater Antilles in November.

Atlantic-Caribbean Dolphin Fishery

- International fishery
- Status unknown and assessment unlikely

Recent Public Comments

- Concern from the Keys/South Florida
  - Large fish are fewer and arriving later
- Recreational fishery expanding in northeastern U.S.

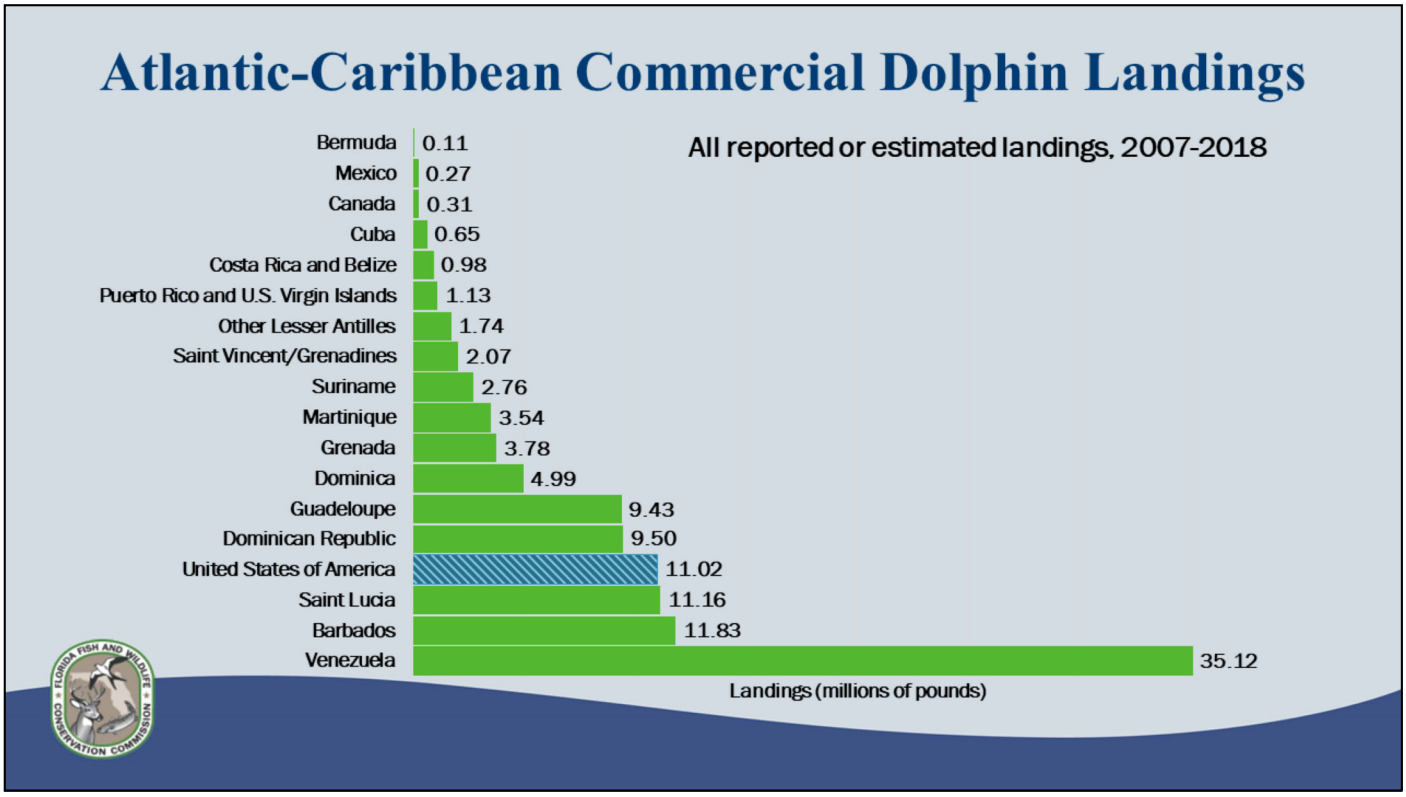


Due to their wide-ranging movements and broad distribution, Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin make up an international fishery. Twenty-three nations and territories report commercial harvest of Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Commercial landings by sub-region, as reported to or estimated by the FAO, are displayed in the graph on this slide.

Actual harvest of Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin cannot be quantified because many nations in this region do not share their landings. Also, almost nothing is known about recreational harvest of dolphin by anglers outside the U.S.

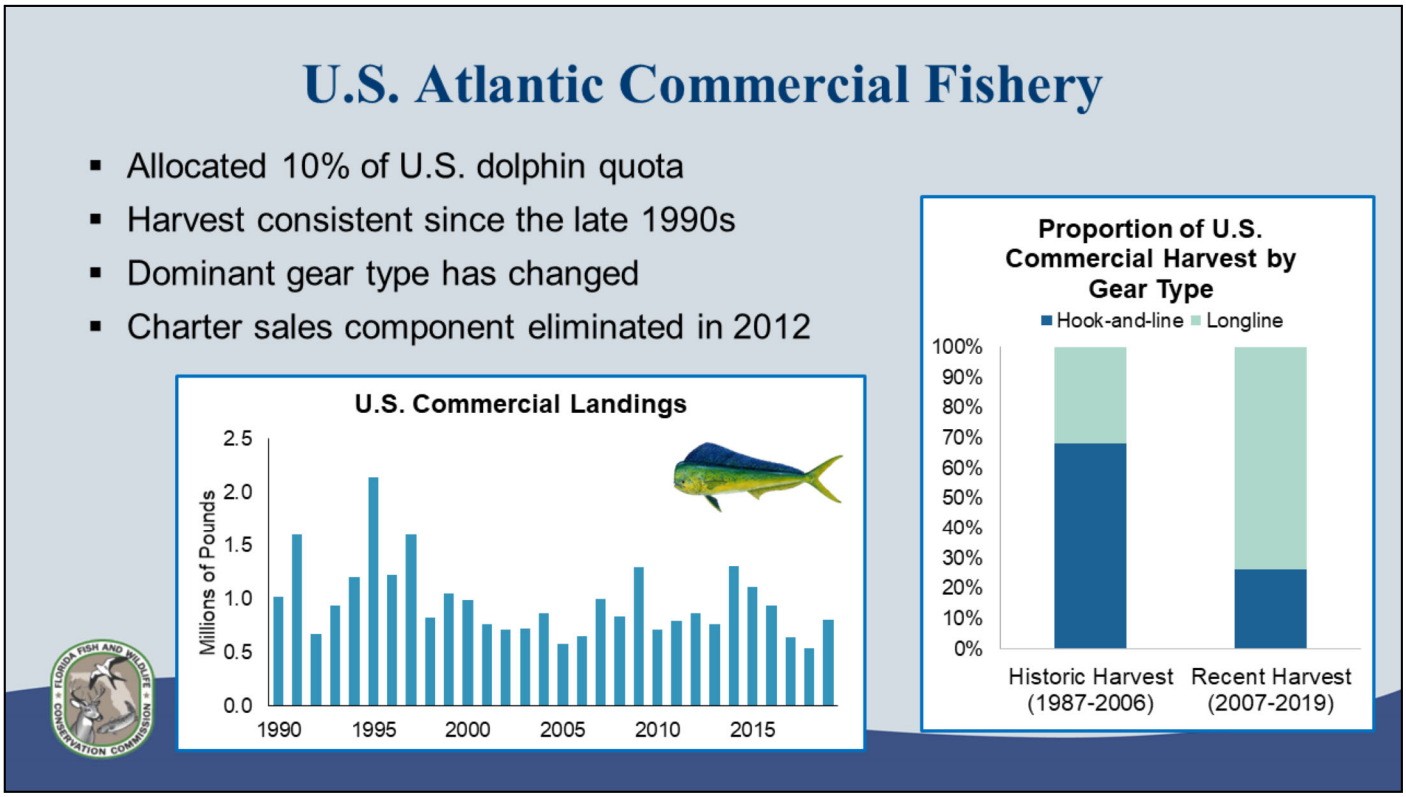
The status of the dolphin fishery is unknown as it has not been successfully assessed. A successful stock assessment would require an international effort. However, because so much is unknown about the fishery (e.g., amount of harvest, stock structure) and the absence of fishery-independent monitoring of this stock, a traditional stock assessment is unlikely.

Though available data do not indicate need for concern regarding the sustainability of Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin, fishermen have expressed concerns and anecdotal information suggests a change in the fishery. In the last five years, South Florida and Keys charter captains and anglers report mostly encountering small dolphin, and when large fish arrive, they are less abundant and show up later in the year. Recently, a few anglers in Virginia and North Carolina reported a gradual decline in seasonal availability of dolphin. Conversely, there are anecdotal reports from fishermen in the northeastern U.S. (New Jersey – Massachusetts) that dolphin are becoming more abundant and the recreational dolphin fishery there is growing.



This figure offers a more detailed view of commercial harvest of Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin, as reported to or estimated by the FAO. The FAO collects data on global seafood harvest. Reporting to the FAO is voluntary, but in some cases, the FAO generates their own estimates of commercial harvest.

The figure shows total reported or estimated landings from 2007 through 2018. Commercial landings from twenty-three nations and territories are included. The United States (hashed blue bar) ranks fourth in Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin commercial landings, behind the South American nation of Venezuela and the island nations of Barbados and Saint Lucia.



Many of the recreational and charter fishermen from South Florida and the Keys who report concerns about the dolphin fishery have suggested U.S. commercial longline harvest may be the cause. They believe that longlines, a more efficient gear, can remove too many fish from a given area at once, and that this negatively affects the sustainability of the population.

The Council manages the U.S. Atlantic dolphin fishery in federal waters from Maine through Florida. They establish an annual quota that is allocated between the recreational and commercial sectors. Ten percent of the quota, or 1,534,485 pounds, is allocated to the commercial sector.

U.S. commercial landings have been consistent since the late 1990s, and commercial landings are often well below the commercial quota. The U.S. commercial fishery started primarily as a hook-and-line fishery, but beginning in 2007, longline harvest became the dominant commercial gear used. Traditionally, dolphin caught on charter vessels could be sold commercially. Local charter-caught dolphin sales were a regionally important source of dolphin for retail markets and restaurants, particularly in Florida. However, the Council ended charter sales in 2012 because they were concerned that sale of recreationally caught dolphin could be counted toward the commercial ACL and result in early closures of the commercial dolphin fishery or that they may be counted against both the recreational and commercial ACLs. Based on recent Council discussions, counting recreational harvest against the commercial quota remains a concern for some Council members. At the time, some Council members were concerned whether charter operations would be able to maintain compliance with seafood safety protocols.

Potential Causes of Changes in Dolphin Fishery

- Increased international harvest?
- Warming ocean waters and other environmental factors
  - Range expansion
  - Distribution shifts
  - Movement pattern changes

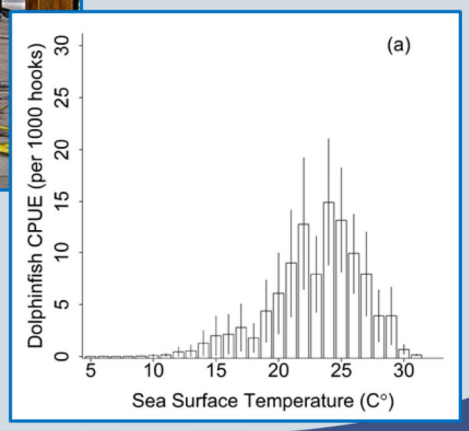


Photo courtesy of Grant Gisondo. Figure from Farrell et al. 2014.

Increased harvest at the international scale, or increased use of longlines in the international fishery could be changing the population and reducing the amount of large dolphin available for harvest in the Keys and South Florida. However, only 23 nations and territories report their commercial harvest of Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin to the FAO, and the only information they report is landings and not the type of gear used for harvest. Also, the magnitude of harvest from the international recreational fishery is unknown. Additional data on total commercial harvest and recreational harvest from all nations is needed to investigate this further.

However, there could be other potential reasons for the observed changes in the dolphin fishery in the Florida Keys and South Florida. Warming ocean temperatures and other environmental changes could be contributing to range expansion, distribution shifts, or changes in movement patterns for Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin. Dolphin have a narrow temperature preference (66 to 84°F). Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin catch rates are found to peak when the water surface temperature is 24°C (75°F) and are negligible when temperatures are above 29°C (84°F), which is illustrated in the figure on the slide. Because of this temperature preference, warming ocean waters could affect the range of dolphin, shift their distribution, or influence their migration routes.

Reports of more frequent encounters with dolphin in the northeastern U.S. and a growing directed recreational fishery there indicate range expansion for dolphin. Fewer encounters with larger dolphin in South Florida and the Keys could be linked to warming sea surface temperatures or increased fishing pressure directed at larger fish. Anecdotal reports from South Florida and the Keys indicate a change in timing of arrival of large dolphin, which may indicate changes in movement patterns with increasing water temperature. Further investigation of historical data (e.g., sea temperatures, international harvest) may offer additional insight on the causes behind changes in the dolphin fishery in South Florida and the Keys.

Potential Council Actions on Dolphin

- Revise quota and allocation based on new MRIP estimates
- Lower dolphin recreational vessel limits
  - U.S. Atlantic coast
  - Florida only
- Restrictions for longline harvest
  - Gear restrictions and regulations
  - Only allow HMS-permitted vessels in fishery
  - Prohibit longline harvest

Photo courtesy of Gabriel Bahra

The Council is considering several changes for dolphin, partly based on the new MRIP Marine Recreational Information Program Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP FES) revisions, and partly based on stakeholder concerns raised on the previous slides.

The Council is considering revising quotas and sector allocations for dolphin due to MRIP FES revisions that produced much larger estimates of historic recreational catch. Historic landings were used to set the dolphin quota since there is no stock assessment. Allocations are also based on historic landings. The current allocation is 90% recreational and 10% commercial. (Note: The Council is considering similar changes for wahoo).

At the request of fishermen, the Council is considering reducing the recreational vessel limit for dolphin from 60 to 40 fish. They may apply this change to the entire U.S. Atlantic coast, or it may only be for Florida. Concerned anglers and charter captains from South Florida and the Keys suggested this change to improve the fishery, but this is opposed by fishermen from North Carolina.

Due to concerns about the U.S. commercial dolphin fishery now being dominantly by the longline gear versus hook-and-line gear, the Council is considering restrictions for longline harvest. Currently, there are minimal restrictions for using longline gear to harvest dolphin. The Council has discussed vessel limits to curb longline harvest, additional gear requirements and restrictions to protect sea turtles and marine mammals, and restricting participation by only allowing HMS-permitted vessels to catch dolphin on longline gear. In the past, FWC Commissioners have been opposed to longline harvest of dolphin, and staff has reiterated this position at Council meetings.

Staff Recommendation

Send letters regarding FWC concerns for management of the dolphin fishery

- South Atlantic Council
  - Request restrictions for U.S. longline harvest
  - Ask for coastwide reduction of recreational vessel limit
- U.S. Departments of Commerce and State
  - Request engagement with foreign nations and increased information on international harvest

Next Council meeting: December 7-11

Photo courtesy of Easton Cainby

The Commission has voiced concerns about dolphin in South Florida and the Keys, and directed staff to oppose the use of longlines in the U.S. dolphin fishery. Staff is seeking further direction from the Commission on how to proceed.

Staff recommend the Commission send letters regarding FWC concerns for management of the dolphin fishery to the Council, as well as the U.S. Departments of Commerce and State.

The Commission could request the Council prohibit longlines in the U.S. Atlantic dolphin fishery. The Commission could also ask the Council to apply any reductions in recreational vessel limits to the entire U.S. Atlantic recreational fishery, instead of only to Florida, so recreational anglers throughout the U.S. reduce harvest and promote a sustainable fishery.

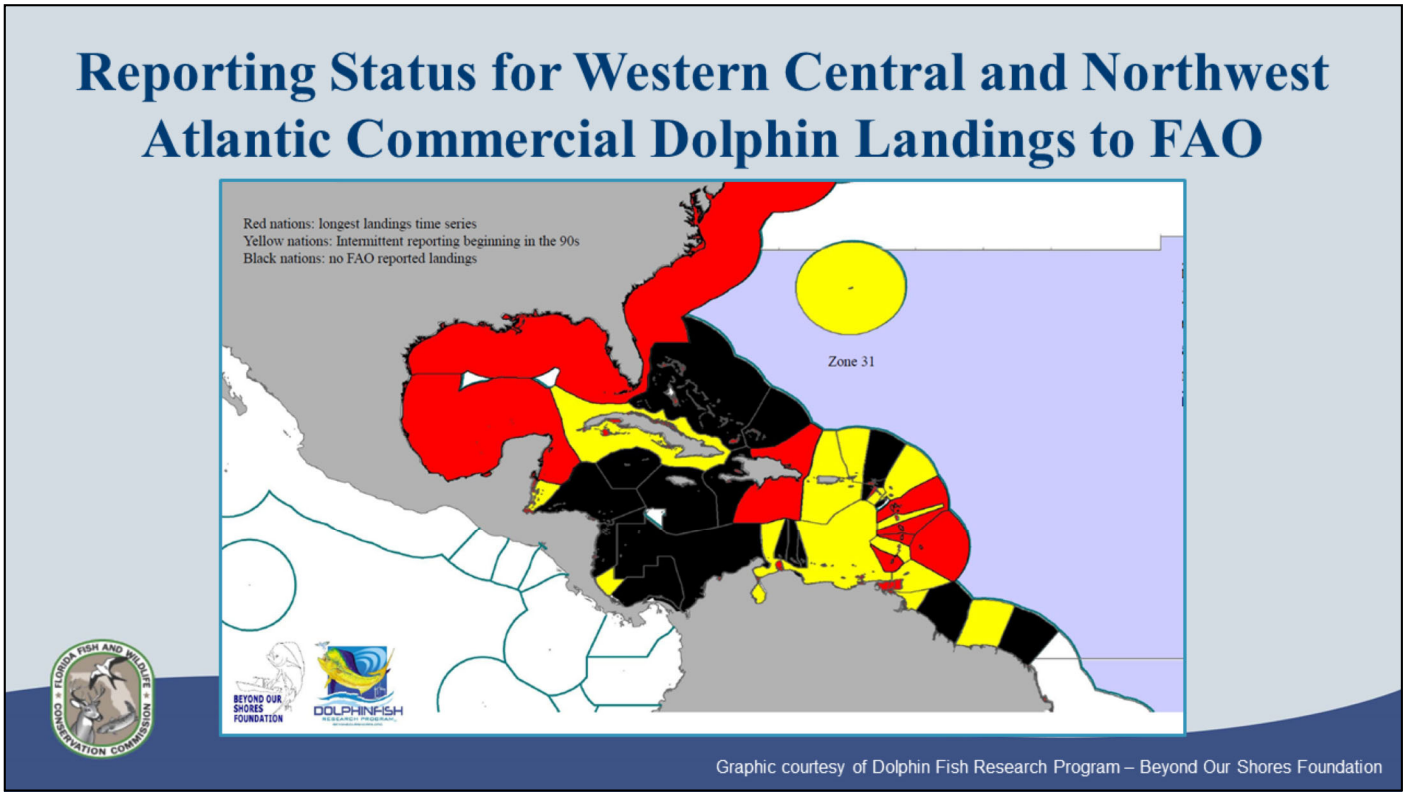
As dolphin is an economically and socially important international fishery throughout the Atlantic and Caribbean, the Commission could request the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Department of State engage with foreign nations regarding management of this fishery. The Commission could request the U.S. government work with foreign nations to improve understanding of all harvest pressure on Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin.

Input on other on Council items is always welcome.

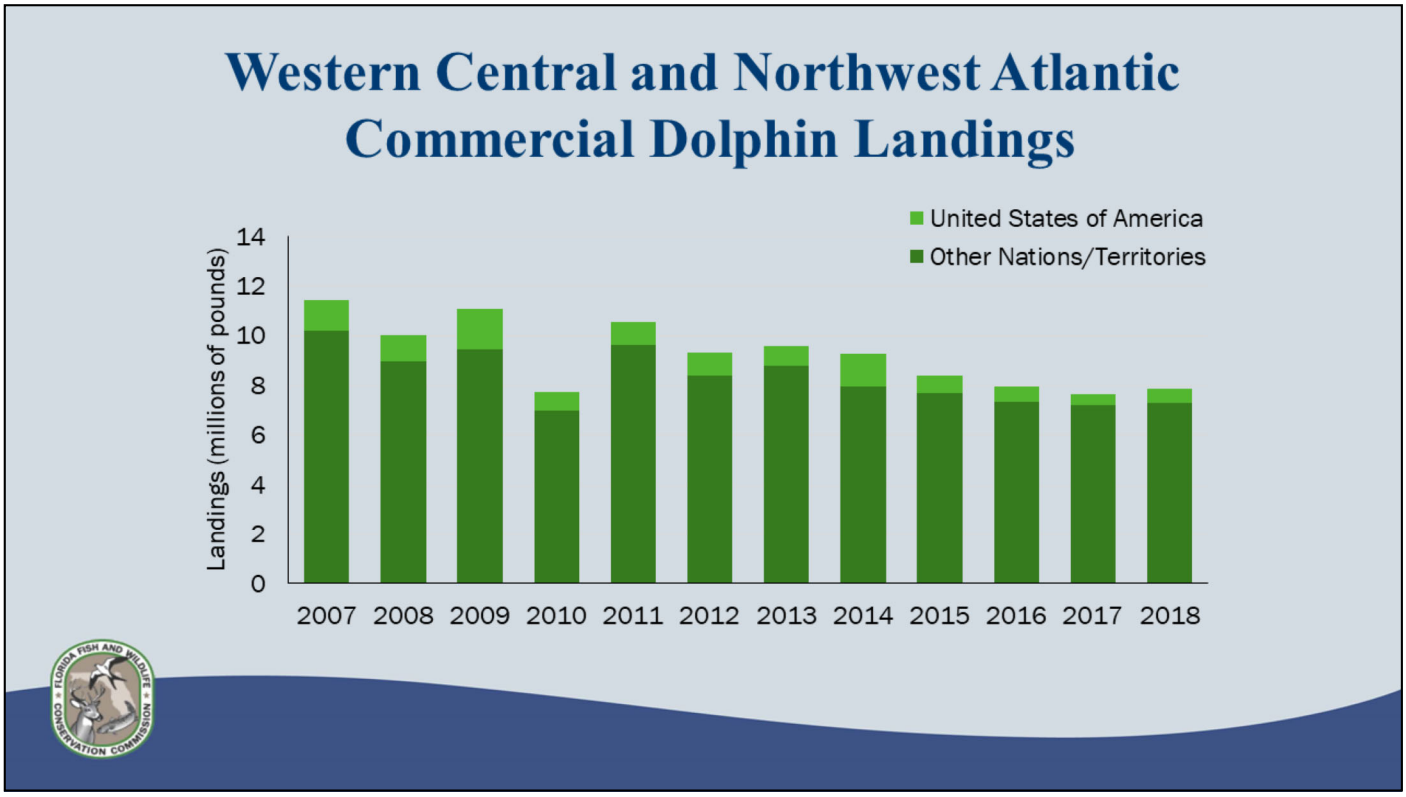
The next regular Council meeting is scheduled for December 7-11 in Wrightsville, NC.

Citation:
Farrell, E.R., A.M. Boustany, P.N. Halpin and D.L. Hammond. 2014. Dolphinfish (*Coryphaena hippurus*) distribution in relation to biophysical ocean conditions in the northwest Atlantic. Fisheries Research (151): 177-190.

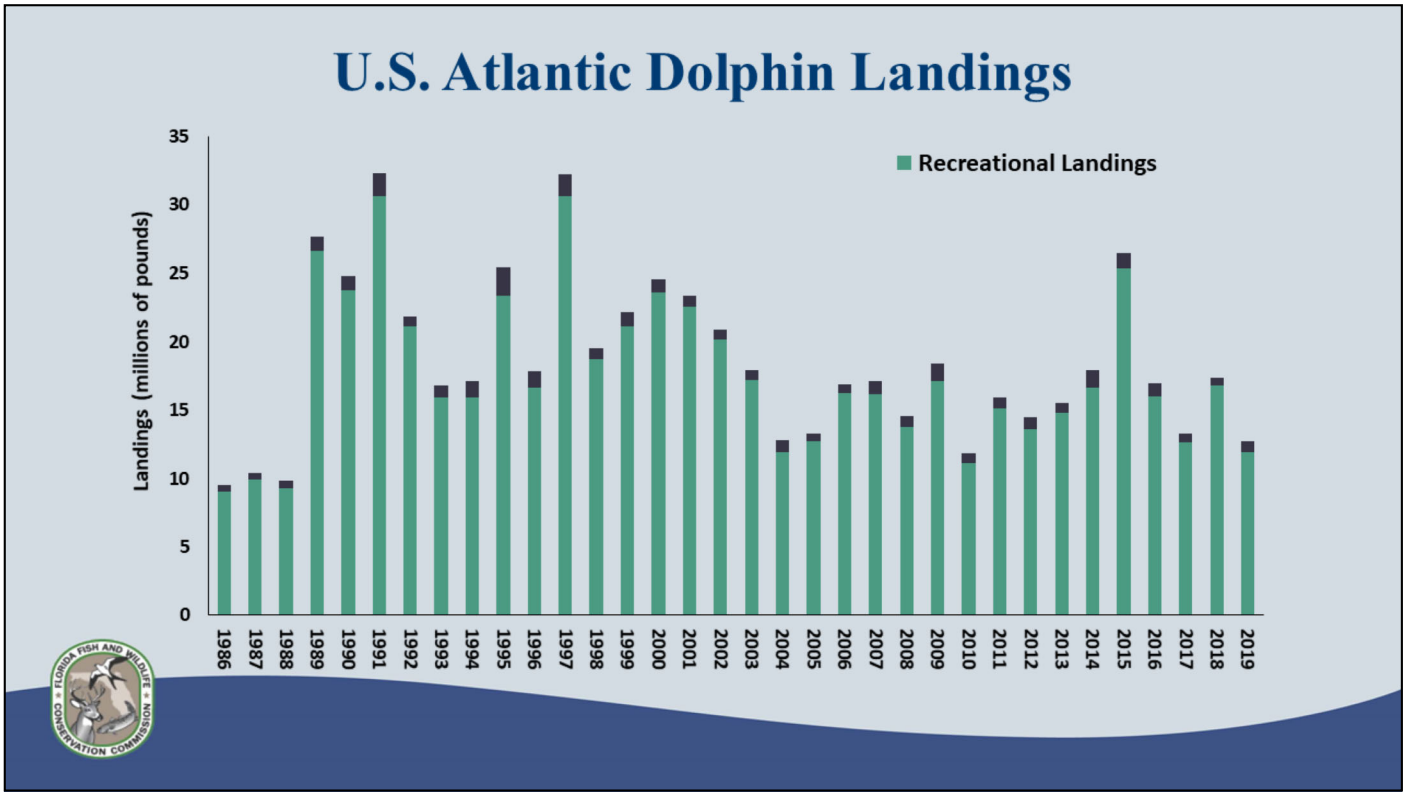
The following slides are considered backup material and are not anticipated to be part of the actual presentation



This map illustrates the reporting status for nations and territories on harvest of Atlantic-Caribbean dolphin to the FAO. The coloring of a nation or territory's Exclusive Economic Zone indicates their reporting status. Red indicates landings for all years are reported to the FAO. Yellow indicates all or some years of landings are estimated by the FAO. Black indicates the nation or territory does not report landings to the FAO.



This graph displays the commercial harvest of dolphin in the Atlantic-Caribbean as reported to or estimated by the FAO from 2007 through 2018. Harvest from the U.S. is indicated in the lighter shade of green.



This figure displays U.S. Atlantic dolphin landings by sector from 1986 through 2019. In the U.S., recreational harvest in this fishery exceeds commercial harvest.

Atlantic Recreational Dolphin Regulations

	Florida Atlantic State Waters	Federal Atlantic Waters
Minimum size limit	20 inches fork length (FL)	FL – SC: 20 inches FL NC – ME: none
Bag limit	10 per person	10 per person
Vessel limit	Private vessels: 60 per vessel For-hire vessels: maximum of 10 per person fishing	Private and charter vessels: 60 per vessel Headboats: 10 per paying customer
For-hire permit requirement	Florida charter license	Atlantic dolphin/wahoo charter vessel/headboat permit

This table outlines regulations for recreational harvest of dolphin in Florida's Atlantic state waters compared to regulations for federal waters from Maine through Florida.

Atlantic Commercial Dolphin Regulations

	Florida Atlantic State Waters	Federal Atlantic Waters
Minimum size limit	20 inches fork length (FL)	FL – SC: 20 inches FL NC – ME: none
Vessel limit	Matches federal vessel limit	4,000-lb. trip limit enacted after 75% of quota is caught
Bycatch Allowance	Commercial fishermen fishing for species other than dolphin and using gear other than hook and line and spearing may retain up to 10 dolphin per day	None
Permit Requirements	SPL, RS, and federal Atlantic Dolphin-Wahoo commercial vessel permit	Federal Atlantic Dolphin-Wahoo commercial vessel permit
Permit exemption	None	When fishing north of 39°N. lat., a federally-permitted commercial vessel without a dolphin/wahoo permit is exempt from the recreational bag limit and may sell 200 lbs. of dolphin per trip

This table outlines regulations for commercial harvest of dolphin in Florida's Atlantic state waters compared to regulations for federal waters from Maine through Florida.

The Council received presentations on the 2020 federal Atlantic red snapper seasons. The 2020 Atlantic red snapper quota was 42,510 fish, which was allocated 71.93% (29,656 fish) to the recreational sector and 28.07% (124,815 pounds) to the commercial sector.

The federal recreational season occurred July 10, 11, 12, and 17. The season length was based on harvest rates from the 2019 recreational season and was set to constrain harvest to the recreational quota. FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) conducted intensive monitoring during the federal season: interviewing anglers, monitoring effort, and collecting biological samples. Based on their monitoring, FWRI's preliminary estimate is that Florida anglers harvested 33,767 red snapper during the federal season.

The federal commercial season opened July 13. NOAA Fisheries closed the commercial fishery on Sept. 5, 2020, after determining the commercial quota had been caught. As of Sept. 21, 2020, the estimate of commercial red snapper landings from the South Atlantic is 130,089 pounds.

All 2020 Atlantic red snapper landings are preliminary. The final estimates of recreational and commercial harvest will likely be different than the amounts presented here. Paybacks are not required for quota overages in the Atlantic red snapper fishery. If final estimates show landings exceeded the 2020 quota, the overage will not be deducted from the 2021 quota.

A new Atlantic red snapper stock assessment began this summer. The assessment results are expected in mid-2021 and may be used to set the quotas for the 2021 Atlantic red snapper season.