MEMORANDUM

To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: March 3, 2022
Subject: Final Rules – Goliath Grouper

Purpose: Obtain approval of final rules to modify goliath grouper (goliath) regulations.

Why: Restore harvest opportunities for goliath while also promoting continued population rebuilding.

Top Points:
1) A limited, highly regulated harvest would provide additional access opportunities that are consistent with FWC’s management philosophy, which recognizes the species’ role in the ecosystem and allows stakeholder access to goliath while promoting continued rebuilding of the population.
2) Goliath continue to increase in abundance since the fishery was closed in 1990, and the population can now sustain a limited and highly regulated harvest.
3) Goliath require a tailored approach to harvest because of their unique life history traits and stakeholders’ widely varied values and opinions regarding the fishery.

Affected Parties: Recreational fishermen, sightseeing divers, dive tour operators, and others interested in goliath and Florida’s reef ecosystems.

Summary: Currently, access to the goliath resource is provided through catch-and-release fishing and diving ecotourism opportunities, but requests to reopen harvest have increased in recent years as the population rebuilds. At the October 2021 Commission Meeting, Commissioners approved a proposed rule for a limited, highly regulated harvest with direction for staff to explore specific changes for the final rule and explore gear restrictions to reduce potential impacts of catch-and-release fishing at spawning aggregation sites. Changes for the final rule are indicated with asterisks below. The final rule would:
• Allow harvest of up to 200 goliath per year, with no more than 50 from Everglades National Park.
• Award one permit and tag per person per year via random-draw lottery.
• Establish a lottery application fee of $10 and a permit fee of $150 for residents and $500 for non-residents, if awarded.*
• Establish a slot limit of 24-36 inches total length with hook-and-line as the only allowable gear.*
• Create an open harvest season of March 1 through May 31 each year.
• Allow harvest from all state waters except those of Martin County, including the St. Lucie River and its tributaries, south through the Atlantic coast of Monroe County, and Dry Tortugas National Park.*
• Establish a requirement for harvesters to submit harvest and biological information.

The final rules would allow users additional access opportunities, protect spawning aggregations and areas of heavy dive ecotourism, and provide researchers with needed data while allowing the population to continue to rebuild. This approach would allow FWC to continue to manage this fishery for a diversity of values and recognize goliath’s important role in the ecosystem. Additionally, staff will provide considerations for future rulemaking related to addressing catch-and-release fishing for goliath at spawning aggregation sites in Atlantic state waters as directed by the Commission.

Staff Recommendation: Approval of the proposed rule for final adoption, including publication of the necessary Notice of Change, to be effective July 1, 2022.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter: Jessica McCawley, Director, Division of Marine Fisheries Management.

Affected rule: 68B-14, F.A.C.