

South Atlantic Council Issues



Review and Discussion
December 7, 2017



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This is a review and discussion of actions from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Sept. 25-29 meeting in Charleston, SC, as well as a preview of discussions scheduled for the Dec. 4-8 Council meeting in Atlantic Beach, NC. The September meeting was originally scheduled for Sept. 11-15, but was rescheduled due to Hurricane Irma.

Division: Marine Fisheries Management
Authors: Erika Burgess, Jessica McCawley, and Martha Guyas
Contact Phone Number: 850-487-0554
Report date: November 3, 2017

2017 Atlantic Red Snapper Fishing Season

- NOAA Fisheries took emergency action to open the season in 2017
 - Council requested action in response to research showing substantial abundance increases
 - Many stakeholders and federal legislators requested a 2017 season
- Commercial season opened Nov. 2 with a 75-lb. trip limit and no size limit
- Recreational season opened Nov. 3-5 and Nov. 10-12
 - 1-fish bag limit and no minimum size limit
 - Anglers encouraged to report catches via a website and proactively minimize dead discards
- FWRI collected biological samples and conducted intensive surveys of harvest and effort



Except for short mini-seasons in 2012-2014, red snapper has been closed to harvest in Atlantic federal waters since 2010 because the stock was overfished and undergoing overfishing. In October, NOAA Fisheries used emergency action to allow a 2017 recreational and commercial fishing season for Atlantic red snapper. The Council formally requested emergency action during their September meeting because recently-released fishery-independent data, which includes six years of red snapper research by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI), indicated the stock increased substantially since 2009. Stakeholders from all sectors and several of Florida's federal legislators requested NOAA Fisheries open the fishery.

The quota for the 2017 season was 42,510 fish, which is equal to harvest during 2014 and the highest level of harvest during the 2012-2014 mini-seasons. This level of harvest did not impede rebuilding in 2014 and, therefore, is unlikely to result in overfishing or prevent stock rebuilding in 2017.

Red snapper quotas are allocated 28.07% to the commercial sector and 71.93% to the recreational sector. During the 2017 season, recreational and commercial fishermen were subject to the same regulations as the 2013 and 2014 seasons. The commercial season opened Nov. 2 and will close once the quota is met. Commercial harvesters are limited to 75 pounds per trip with no size limit. The recreational season opened for two three-day weekends (Friday – Sunday) on Nov. 3 and ended Nov. 12. Recreational anglers were allowed a one-fish bag limit with no minimum size limit. Anglers were asked to report their harvest on a website operated by the Council. All fishers were encouraged to employ practices to reduce the likelihood of discard mortality, such as use descending devices and single-hook rigs, minimize handling time, and end fishing after the bag or trip limit had been met.

To maximize the scientific opportunity of the 2017 recreational and commercial fishing seasons, and to improve harvest estimates, FWRI collected biological samples from harvested fish and intensively surveyed recreational fishing harvest and effort.

2018 Atlantic Red Snapper Fishing Season



- Council approved a quota of 42,510 fish for the 2018 season
- Anglers will be asked to minimize dead discards
- Opportunity for voluntary recreational reporting via an app
- 2017 and 2018 seasons unlikely without FWRI's dedicated fishery-independent sampling
- Beyond 2018, Council is considering additional changes
 - Requiring descending devices and single-hook rigs to reduce discard mortality
 - Recreational snapper-grouper permit and mandatory reporting
 - Seasonal, deep-water, recreational bottom-fishing closure



Photo courtesy Teri Bowman



*2018 season pending approval
by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce*

The Council also took final action in September to approve a quota for the 2018 red snapper season. Like the 2017 season, the quota of 42,510 fish is equal to harvest during 2014. This conservative measure would allow some red snapper harvest while NOAA Fisheries and the Council develop a new approach to establish quotas for 2019 and beyond using abundance indices from fishery-independent research. A new approach is necessary because NOAA Fisheries determined uncertainty in the 2016 red snapper stock assessment inhibits the Council from using the assessment to establish a quota. The 2018 quota is considered conservative because, like in 2014, this level of harvest is not expected to cause overfishing or hinder rebuilding.

If approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, NOAA Fisheries will announce the length of the weekends-only recreational fishing season prior to its anticipated start in mid-July. The Council estimates the recreational season would last between four and seven days. The commercial fishery is expected to open the second Monday in July and close when the quota is met. All regulations governing harvest will remain the same as 2017 and all fishers will again be asked to employ practices to reduce discard mortality. For the 2018 season, recreational anglers will have the opportunity to report their catches via the iAngler mobile app.

In the absence of a regular fishery over the last seven years, the most reliable indicator of red snapper stock health comes from fishery-independent research, including FWRI's studies using traps, underwater cameras, and hook-and-line gear. FWRI collaborated with commercial and charter fishermen for this work. Without this fishery-independent research, it is unlikely that the Council and NOAA Fisheries would be able to open red snapper in 2017 and 2018.

Additional regulatory changes are possible after 2018. The Council is still considering mandatory measures to reduce discard mortality, such as requiring descending devices and limiting harvesters to single-hook rigs. They are also considering means to improve estimates of recreational harvest and effort, like a recreational snapper-grouper permit and mandatory recreational reporting via a mobile app. As an alternative to the recreational snapper-grouper permit, the Gulf Reef Fish Survey could be expanded statewide to improve harvest estimates of Atlantic snapper-grouper species. Improved estimates of recreational harvest would improve stock assessments and better inform management. Lastly, the Council may still consider seasonal, deep-water, recreational bottom-fishing closures to reduce red snapper dead discards.

December Council Meeting Topics



Red grouper

- Stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing
- Final action to reduce the quota and end overfishing expected
- During 2018, the Council will develop a new rebuilding plan
 - Expect federal regulatory changes

For-hire limited-entry program for snapper grouper

- Discussions of a moratorium for issuing new snapper-grouper for-hire permits
- Considering limits on the number of for-hire vessels allowed in federal waters

King mackerel trip limits

- Upon stakeholder request, Council will consider increased commercial trip limits in federal waters off Florida



The Council's December meeting is the same week as the December FWC Commission meeting. The following topics are a few of the items on the Council's agenda.

Red grouper: According to a 2017 stock assessment, red grouper is overfished and is undergoing overfishing despite having been managed under a rebuilding plan since 2011. The assessment revealed the stock is unlikely to be rebuilt before 2030. This is due in part to low recruitment (i.e., the number of young red grouper joining the population) in recent years. To end overfishing and promote rebuilding, the Council is expected to approve quota reductions at their December meeting. During 2018, the Council will develop a new rebuilding plan for red grouper, which will likely include additional federal regulatory changes.

For-hire limited-entry program for snapper grouper: The Council is scheduled to discuss a moratorium on issuance of new federal snapper-grouper for-hire permits. This could be the first step in the creation of a limited-entry program that would limit the number of vessels allowed to operate for-hire trips targeting snapper grouper in Atlantic federal waters. This is significant to Florida because almost 60% of the permits are issued in the state. Both for-hire and recreational stakeholders are divided on this issue. FWC staff, as directed by the Commission in July, will conduct intensive stakeholder outreach on limited-entry.

King mackerel trip limits: Stakeholders have requested the Council increase commercial king mackerel trip limits off east Florida during the month of March because the king mackerel market peaks during this time. They claim recent changes to king mackerel trip limits, which went into place in state and federal waters in May 2017, are too conservative for the month of March. The Council may hold meetings to gather additional public feedback on this topic in early 2018.

No Direction Requested



- Input on Council items is welcome
- Next Council meeting is Dec. 4-8 in Atlantic Beach, NC
 - Overlaps with December Commission meeting



Photo courtesy Devin Paul



Staff is not seeking direction on specific Council items at this time; however, input on Council items is always welcome.

The next Council meeting is Dec. 4-8 in Atlantic Beach, NC. This overlaps with the December Commission meeting.