

Gulf Cobia



Final Public Hearing
December 7, 2017



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This presentation provides a summary of stakeholder feedback on the cobia fishery in the Gulf of Mexico and proposed final rules to amend the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) cobia regulations in 68B-19, Florida Administrative Code (FAC).

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Photo courtesy of Sure Lure Charters.

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

Background

- FWC staff have heard a variety of concerns related to cobia in recent years
 - Panhandle stakeholders have requested management changes
- 2013 Gulf-wide federal stock assessment
 - Not overfished or undergoing overfishing
- Upcoming federal assessments
 - Atlantic – late 2018
 - Gulf – 2019



Photo courtesy of Robert Sperry

In recent years, FWC staff have heard a variety of concerns related to the status of cobia in the Gulf of Mexico, particularly from the Panhandle. Based on these concerns, Panhandle stakeholders requested that the Commission implement more conservative regulations to address their concerns for this prized fishery in Florida's Gulf coast waters.

The 2013 federal stock assessment that evaluated cobia Gulf-wide did not indicate that the stock was overfished or undergoing overfishing at the time. Both Atlantic and Gulf cobia are expected to be assessed in the next few years. An Atlantic federal assessment is scheduled to begin in late 2018 and the next Gulf federal assessment is not scheduled to begin until 2019. Based on their concerns about the status of this fishery, many anglers in the Panhandle have requested that FWC take immediate action to add additional conservation measures for Gulf cobia until the next stock assessment can be completed.

Timeline

- **April 2017:** Stakeholders brought concerns about the status of cobia in the Panhandle to the Commission
 - Commission directed staff to reach out to stakeholders
- **May 2017:** Staff held 5 in-person public workshops along the Gulf coast and a webinar to gather public input
- **July 2017:** Commission approved draft rules modifying the minimum size limit, commercial limit, and recreational and commercial vessel limits in Gulf state waters north of the Monroe – Collier county line
- **Today:** Final public hearing
 - Revisit the previously discussed size limit change



At the April Commission meeting, stakeholders brought their concerns about cobia in the Panhandle to the Commission. Based on these concerns, the Commission directed staff to gather additional feedback from anglers. In May, staff held five in-person workshops and an online webinar to gather input on the status of the Gulf fishery and what, if any, changes stakeholders would like to see in cobia regulations. Staff also received considerable public feedback through other communications, including FWC's Saltwater Comments webpage.

In July, the Commission approved draft rules to increase the minimum size limit, reduce the commercial limit, and lower recreational and commercial vessel limits in Gulf state waters north of the Monroe – Collier county line.

Today is a final public hearing for these draft rules. Staff will provide an update on stakeholder input gathered since the draft rule hearing and, based on that feedback, will revisit the previously discussed size limit change.

Cobia – Gulf of Mexico

- Migratory species
 - The Gulf Migratory Group is managed from the Georgia/Florida border throughout the Gulf of Mexico
- Grow rapidly during first 2 years
 - Females grow faster and live longer than males
- Females mature between ages 2 and 3 (34-41 inches)
- Spawning occurs April – September and peaks from May – July



Cobia is a migratory species that occurs along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Although cobia are migratory, some information indicates that not all cobia make long-distance migrations throughout the entire region of these migratory groups, but instead make inshore-offshore migrations within an area of the coast. However, since cobia generally exhibit region-wide migratory behavior, they are managed at the federal level as a migratory species. The Gulf Migratory Group is managed from the Georgia/Florida border throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Cobia off Florida's coast are managed in state waters by FWC and managed jointly in federal waters by the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic fishery management councils.

Gulf cobia are one of the fastest-growing fish targeted by anglers, and growth is most rapid in the first two years of life. Females generally grow faster and live longer than males, with females living up to 11 years and males living up to nine years. Females begin maturing around age two, which corresponds to a size of about 34-37 inches fork length, and most females are mature by age three, approximately 39-41 inches fork length.

Cobia are batch spawners, meaning that individual cobia spawn more than once during the spawning period. In the Gulf, spawning occurs between April and September, peaking from May through July. Although definitive spawning locations are unknown, evidence suggests spawning may occur in both shallow coastal waters and offshore.

Current Regulations

State waters

- **Minimum size limit:** 33-inches fork length (FL)
- **Recreational limits:** 1 fish/person with a max of 6 fish/vessel
- **Commercial limits:** 2 fish/person with a max of 6 fish/vessel

Approved draft rules changes for Gulf state waters:

- *Minimum size limit: 38 inches FL*
- *Commercial: 1 fish/person*
- *Recreational and commercial: 2 fish/vessel*

Federal waters

- **Recreational** and **Commercial**
 - 33-inch FL minimum size limit
 - 2 fish/person
 - *No vessel limit*



Photo courtesy of Trey Wheeler

Currently, in Florida state waters, cobia regulations include a minimum size limit of 33-inches fork length for all harvesters. Recreational harvesters are limited to one cobia per person per day with a daily maximum of six cobia per vessel, whichever is more restrictive. Commercial harvesters are also limited to six cobia per vessel per day, but are allowed two cobia per person daily, whichever is more restrictive.

Draft rules approved at the July Commission meeting included increasing the recreational and commercial the minimum size limit to 38 inches, reducing the commercial limit to one cobia per person per day (to be consistent with the recreational bag limit), and reducing the commercial and recreational vessel limit to two fish per vessel per day. These changes would apply to Gulf state waters north of the Monroe – Collier county line.

In both Gulf and Atlantic federal waters off Florida, all recreational and commercial harvesters must abide by a 33-inch minimum size limit and a bag limit of two fish per person per day. There is no vessel limit for cobia in federal waters off Florida.

Public Feedback

Panhandle

- Consensus that the local fishery has been poor in recent years
- Strong support for increasing the size limit and reducing the vessel limit
- Some areas strongly support a harvest closure and/or prohibiting commercial sale

Big Bend and Southwest Florida

- Most report the fishery has been very good in recent years
- Some support for a reduced vessel limit
- Limited support for increasing the size limit and only if research suggests it is necessary
- **Update since draft rule hearing**
 - Fishery is different from that of the Panhandle
 - Anglers concerned the proposed 38-inch size limit may eliminate their opportunity to keep cobia



In May 2017, staff held five in-person public workshops around the Gulf coast along with an online webinar. Stakeholders were also able to provide comments online and via phone. In general, stakeholder opinions differed between the Panhandle and the Big Bend/southwest Florida.

For the purposes of this topic, the Panhandle includes Escambia through Franklin counties. In this area, stakeholders agreed the cobia fishery has been poor in recent years; however, there was not a consensus on the underlying cause. Many stakeholders believed the cause was a significant decline in the stock. Others believed changes in weather patterns and recent, warmer spring water temperatures have changed cobia migration patterns and that the cobia have simply not come near shore in large numbers in the past few years. Despite differing opinions on the reason for poor fishing, stakeholders that we heard from Panhandle-wide strongly supported increasing the minimum size limit and reducing the vessel limit. In some areas of the Panhandle, stakeholders also strongly supported a multi-year harvest closure or prohibiting the commercial sale of cobia. The majority of Panhandle stakeholders that provided feedback would like Florida to take the lead on management changes for this fishery and encourage other Gulf states and the Gulf Council to follow suit.

The Big Bend and southwest Florida includes Wakulla through Collier counties for the purposes of cobia feedback. In contrast to the Panhandle, most stakeholders from this area reported a very good fishery in recent years. Despite the fishery being strong in this area, some anglers in this region still support a reduced vessel limit. However, there was only limited support for increasing the minimum size limit, and only if research suggests that it is necessary to sustain the fishery.

Staff have continued to receive public input, particularly from the Big Bend and southwest Florida, since the Commission approved draft rules in July 2017. The cobia fishery in the Big Bend and southwest Florida operates differently than that of the Panhandle. Anglers from these areas traditionally do not see as large of fish in nearshore and inshore waters as in the Panhandle, and have expressed a great deal of concern that the proposed 38-inch minimum size limit may eliminate their opportunity to keep cobia.

Proposed Final Rules

68B-19.002 Definitions

- Define state waters of the Gulf of Mexico as state waters north of the Monroe – Collier county line for the purpose of FWC's cobia regulations

68B-19.004 Bag and Vessel Limits

- In state waters of the Gulf of Mexico
 - Reduce the commercial limit from 2 to 1 cobia per person per day
 - Reduce the vessel limit for recreational and commercial harvesters from 6 to 2 cobia per vessel per day



Staff propose maintaining the current 33-inch minimum size limit instead of increasing to 38 inches



Based on the feedback received, staff propose that FWC take a proactive lead on cobia management in the Gulf by implementing additional conservation measures until a Gulf-wide assessment can be completed and state and federal fishery managers can determine if more restrictive measures are necessary.

The proposed final rules would modify 68B-19.002, FAC, to define state waters of the Gulf of Mexico, for the purpose of FWC's cobia regulations, as all state waters north of the Monroe – Collier county line. The proposed final rules would also modify 68B-19.004, FAC, to reduce the commercial limit to one cobia per person per day and reduce the vessel limit for recreational and commercial harvesters to two cobia per vessel per day in state waters of the Gulf.

Because increasing the minimum size limit to 38 inches (as previously approved) could severely limit the ability of Big Bend and southwest Florida anglers to harvest cobia, staff propose maintaining the current 33-inch minimum size limit.

Regulatory Considerations

Size limit:

- Majority of females not mature at the current size limit (33 inches)
- Size limit increase may disproportionately affect Big Bend and SW Florida anglers

Closure: Strong support in some areas, but not supported along the majority of the Gulf coast

Bag/vessel limit: Florida limits already more strict than federal waters and most Gulf states

Commercial harvest/sale:

- Support for reducing the limit and vessel limit
- Harvest is allowed in federal waters

Recreational harvest:

- Responsible for majority of harvest
- Support for reducing the vessel limit
- Few trips harvest more than 2 fish per vessel



Photo courtesy of Eszter Keresztes



More conservative regulations would be a stop-gap measure until next assessment

There are a number of points to consider when deciding whether to modify current regulations.

Regarding the size limit, the majority of female cobia are not mature at the current 33-inch minimum size limit. It is expected that the majority of females would be mature and potentially have had an opportunity to spawn if the size limit were raised to 38 inches. However, a size limit increase of this magnitude may disproportionately affect anglers in parts of the Gulf where the traditional local fishery primarily encounters smaller cobia.

Although stakeholders in some isolated areas strongly support a temporary closure, this idea is not supported along the majority of the Gulf coast.

Florida's one-fish recreational bag limit is already more strict than federal waters and all other Gulf states, and Florida state waters are the only place in the Gulf where harvest of cobia is further limited by a vessel limit.

With respect to commercial limits, there was broad support among the stakeholders we heard from for reducing the trip and vessel limit for commercial cobia harvesters. Toward this end, staff's proposal would result in the same bag and vessel limits for both recreational and commercial harvesters in Gulf state waters. The stakeholder request to prohibit commercial sale of cobia is complicated by the fact that commercial harvest is allowed in federal waters and Florida has traditionally allowed fish that are legally harvested in federal waters to be transported through state waters and landed.

The majority (~89%) of Florida's Gulf cobia harvest occurs in the recreational sector, and there was broad support for reducing the recreational vessel limit. Additionally, few trips harvest more than two fish per vessel.

Implementing more conservative regulations for this fishery would serve as a stop-gap measure until the upcoming assessment is completed to inform future management.

Staff Recommendation

Approve the proposed final rules to provide additional conservation measures for cobia in Florida's Gulf state waters:

- Reduce the commercial limit from 2 to 1 cobia per person per day
- Reduce the recreational and commercial vessel limit from 6 to 2 cobia per vessel per day
- Apply these changes to Gulf state waters north of the Monroe – Collier county line



Maintain the current 33-inch minimum size limit

Make the rules effective Feb. 1, 2018; advertise change to the proposed rules via a Notice of Change



Photo courtesy of Justin Wallheiser

Staff recommend providing additional conservation measures for cobia in Florida's Gulf state waters as a stop-gap measure until the upcoming federal stock assessment can be completed by approving the proposed final rules to reduce the commercial limit to one cobia per person per day and reduce the vessel limit to two cobia per vessel per day for both recreational and commercial harvesters. Staff recommends these changes apply to Gulf state waters north of the Monroe – Collier county line.

Because a size limit increase may disproportionately affect anglers in parts of the Gulf where the traditional fishery primarily encounters smaller cobia, staff recommends that the Commission maintain the current 33-inch minimum size limit instead of implementing the draft rule to increase the size limit.

If approved, staff recommends making these rules effective Feb. 1, 2018. Staff would advertise the change to the proposed size limit rules via a Notice of Change.

Staff have evaluated the proposed final rules under the standards of 68-1.004, FAC, and found them to be in compliance.

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



 Cobia Regulations in Gulf State Waters 				
State	Size Limit	Bag Limit	Season	Commercial Regulations
Florida	33 in. fork length	1 per person per day, maximum 6 per vessel per day	None	33 in. fork length; 2 fish per day, maximum of 6 per vessel
Florida Federal Waters	33 in. fork length	2 per person	None	33 in. fork length; 2 fish daily possession limit
Alabama	33 in. fork length	2 per person	None	33 in. fork length; 2 fish possession limit
Mississippi	33 in. fork length	2 per person	None	Illegal to sell cobia caught in Mississippi territorial waters or Cobia landed in Mississippi
Louisiana	33 in. fork length	2 per person	None	33 in. fork length; 2 fish per person per trip
Texas	37 in. total length	2 per person	None	37 in. total length, 2 fish bag limit, 4 fish possession limit

