

# MEMORANDUM



**To:** Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners  
**From:** Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management  
**Date:** December 7, 2017  
**Subject:** Gulf Cobia – Final Public Hearing

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## **Purpose:**

Staff will present proposed final rules to modify the regulations for cobia (68B-19, Florida Administrative Code) in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico in response to stakeholder concerns about the status of the cobia fishery.

## **Summary:**

Cobia off the coast of Florida are part of a migratory stock that ranges throughout the Gulf of Mexico and Florida's east coast. Cobia is managed in Florida state waters by FWC and managed jointly in federal waters by the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic councils. The 2013 federal stock assessment for this stock did not indicate there was cause for concern at the time. However, stakeholders in Florida, particularly in the Panhandle, have expressed concerns about the status of the fishery. The next Gulf-wide federal stock assessment is scheduled for 2019, but Panhandle stakeholders have asked that FWC take immediate action based on the declines they have experienced in recent years.

At the April Commission meeting, stakeholders brought their concerns about the cobia fishery in the Panhandle forward to the Commission. Based on these concerns, the Commission directed staff to gather 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 the FWC Saltwater Comments webpage.

Based on the feedback received prior to the July Commission meeting, the Commission approved draft rules to provide additional conservation measures for cobia in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico as a stop-gap measure until the next stock assessment is completed. The draft rules included increasing the minimum size limit, reducing the commercial trip limit, and decreasing the vessel limit for all harvesters. Since the draft rule hearing, staff have heard considerable concern from stakeholders in the Big Bend and southwest Florida that increasing the size limit to 38 inches may eliminate their opportunity to keep cobia, because their area of the state does not traditionally get large fish nearshore. Based on these concerns and the most recent stock assessment results, staff recommend moving forward with the portions of the draft rule that are widely supported, including reducing the commercial trip limit from two to one cobia per harvester and reducing the vessel limit from six to two cobia per vessel for all harvesters, while maintaining the current size limit of 33 inches fork length.

## **Staff Recommendation:**

Staff recommend approving the proposed final rules to reduce the commercial trip limit and the recreational and commercial vessel limit effective February 1, 2018. If approved, staff will advertise changes to the proposed draft rules via a Notice of Change.

## **Staff Contact and/or Presenter:**

Melissa Recks, Division of Marine Fisheries Management