

Gulf Greater Amberjack



Adoption of Federal Standards
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Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This presentation summarizes a proposed rule to adopt federal standards for the Gulf greater amberjack recreational season.

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

Gulf Greater Amberjack Background



- Stock continues to be overfished and undergoing overfishing
- Recreational fishery has closed increasingly early in recent years due to quotas being met or exceeded
- Council approved and continues to develop measures to rebuild the stock while optimizing recreational opportunities
- In July, the Commission directed staff to support recreational management options that minimize harvest during spawning season and benefit stakeholders and their businesses
- In August, the Council set an interim recreational season to keep the fishery from opening Jan. 1, 2018, and to allow time to analyze split season options to balance stakeholder preferences



The 2017 Gulf greater amberjack stock assessment indicates the stock continues to be overfished and undergoing overfishing. The recreational fishery has closed increasingly early in recent years due to quotas being met or exceeded. In 2017, the recreational greater amberjack fishery closed in federal waters on March 24, and the Commission closed harvest in state waters on April 22. In response to the repeated early closures, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) has been developing measures to rebuild the stock while optimizing recreational fishing opportunities.

In July, the Commission directed staff to support recreational management options that would minimize harvest during the spawning season, and also benefit Florida stakeholders and their businesses. The greater amberjack spawning season extends from early spring to early summer with peak spawning from March 1 through May 31. The current fixed closed season of June 1 through July 31 was designed to allow greater amberjack harvest opportunities while other popular reef fish, e.g., red snapper, are usually closed.

In August, the Council took final action to reduce annual catch limits and set an interim recreational season for the greater amberjack fishery that would open July 1. This interim recreational season was set to prevent the fishery from opening on Jan. 1, 2018, and allow time for the Council to analyze split season options to balance stakeholder preferences for season openings in the spring and fall. The Council set a final recreational season at the October Council meeting that is expected to be implemented in early 2018 and will replace the interim season that would open July 1.

Gulf Greater Amberjack Rebuilding Plan



- In October, the Council approved new recreational season measures
 - Recreational season will be open May 1–31 and Aug. 1 – Oct. 31
 - Fishing year start date changed from Jan. 1 to Aug. 1
- Measures allow for fishing opportunities in both the spring and fall while minimizing chance of a quota closure
- Minimizes harvest during peak spawning
- Council will consider options such as fractional bag/vessel limits for the recreational fishery and trip limits for the commercial fishery

Federal rule changes pending approval by U.S. Secretary of Commerce and expected to take effect in 2018



At the October meeting, the Council took final action to approve a new recreational season for greater amberjack that would be open May 1–31 and Aug. 1 – Oct. 31. The fishing year start date will change from Jan. 1 to Aug. 1, which means quota accounting and monitoring will now occur from Aug. 1 – July 31 each year instead of on a calendar year. These measures will allow for fishing opportunities in both the spring and fall while minimizing the chance of a quota closure. Federal rule changes are pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and are expected to take effect in 2018.

There are varying opinions among stakeholders across the Gulf over the greater amberjack season. Stakeholders in the Florida Panhandle were supportive of a spring season since the fish are abundant offshore during that time of year. Many Panhandle for-hire businesses heavily depend on a spring amberjack season to draw customers to the coast since harvest of other popular species, such as red snapper, is closed. Stakeholders in the western Gulf were supportive of a fall season when more anglers have access to the resource. Due to early closures over the past few years, anglers have not been able to participate in the fishery off the western Gulf states. Additionally, the Council was concerned about allowing harvest during spawning season (peak spawning March 1 – May 31) as the species is trying to rebuild. As a compromise, the Council approved a split season providing spring harvest opportunities from May 1-31 at the request of Florida anglers, and a fall season from Aug. 1 – Oct. 31 benefiting anglers Gulf wide.

At a future meeting, the Council will consider additional rebuilding actions that could set a recreational fractional bag/vessel limit and reduce commercial trip limits based on stakeholder requests.

Proposed Changes for Gulf State Waters

68B-14.004 Recreational Amberjack Season

- Set May 1–31 and Aug. 1 – Oct. 31 as the recreational harvest season

These changes are consistent with pending federal rules



The proposed final rules to adopt federal regulations would modify 68B-14.004, Florida Administrative Code (FAC), to set the Gulf recreational greater amberjack season as May 1–31 and Aug. 1 – Oct. 31.

Considerations for Federal Consistency

- Adjusted season minimizes the chance of a quota closure
- Nov. 1 – April 30 closure allows NOAA Fisheries time to analyze fall season landings before May season, which could help avoid quota overages
- Majority of recreational harvest comes from Florida
- May season provides important fishing opportunities for Florida anglers and for-hire businesses
 - Florida landings are high during spring season
- Fall season allows harvest opportunities to anglers across the Gulf states
 - Provides harvest opportunities at popular fishing events in Florida
- Inconsistent state season could result in a shortened federal season that reduces the May season



There are a number of points to consider in deciding whether to amend state rules for Gulf greater amberjack.

First, the adjusted recreational harvest season minimizes the chance of a quota closure. Harvest is expected to be high in May, so starting quota accounting in August ensures harvest will be open during the fall. The fixed season closure from Nov. 1 – April 30 will allow NOAA Fisheries time to analyze fall season landings before the May opening, which could allow them to more accurately predict when the quota will be reached and help avoid quota overages. Any quota overages from the previous harvest season must be deducted from the next year's quota. Since greater amberjack has had several payback provisions over the past few years, this new season is designed to help avoid large paybacks.

A large portion of the recreational Gulf greater amberjack harvest occurs off Florida's coast. The May season will provide important fishing opportunities for Florida anglers and for-hire businesses when landings have been highest. The fall season will provide harvest opportunities to anglers across the Gulf states, especially anglers in the western Gulf. Additionally, the fall season will provide several harvest opportunities for Florida recreational anglers at popular fishing events, such as the Destin Rodeo.

Finally, any inconsistent state season could result in a shortened federal season, which could shorten the May portion of the season. Any reduction in the May season would have a negative impact on Florida anglers and for-hire businesses.

Staff Recommendation

Modify Gulf greater amberjack regulations to be consistent with pending federal rules

- Set May 1–31 and Aug. 1 – Oct. 31 as the recreational harvest season

If approved by the Commission, the rule will be noticed and filed without further hearing as allowed under the adopting federal standards provision of section 120.54(6), Florida Statutes

If the Commission approves the proposed season, staff recommend closing Gulf greater amberjack to recreational harvest via Executive Order from Jan. 1 – April 30, 2018



Staff recommend the Commission modify Gulf greater amberjack regulations to be consistent with pending federal rules and set the recreational harvest season as May 1-31 and Aug. 1 – Oct. 31.

If approved by the Commission, the rules will be noticed and filed without further hearing as allowed under the adopting federal standards provision of section 120.54(6), Florida Statutes. The proposed rules would only be filed for state waters if the Gulf greater amberjack federal season is approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and implemented by NOAA Fisheries.

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

If the Commission approves the proposed season, staff recommend closing Gulf greater amberjack to recreational harvest via Executive Order from Jan. 1 – April 30, 2018. This order is a stop-gap measure while federal and state regulations for 2018 are being implemented. If an Executive Order is not issued, the greater amberjack recreational season would open in Jan. 1 in Florida state waters. Any harvest would count towards the 2018 quota, and likely result in reduced opportunities in federal waters.