

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Division of Marine Fisheries Management
Gil McRae, Director, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute

Date: February 8, 2017

Subject: Goliath grouper review and discussion

Purpose:

Staff will provide a review and discussion of the biology and recently-completed stock assessment of goliath grouper. Staff will also present an overview of potential management strategies that could be pursued at a future meeting to potentially provide additional information about this species in Florida and allow harvest opportunities.

Summary:

Historically, the distribution of goliath grouper within the continental U.S. stretched from North Carolina through Texas, with the center of abundance extending from the central east coast of Florida to the Florida Panhandle. The southeastern U.S. goliath grouper population experienced severe decline during the 1980's as a result of overfishing and has been closed in both state and federal waters since 1990. However, in recent years, goliath grouper encounters and reports of high abundance have become more frequent in south Florida. This has allowed for a goliath grouper catch and release fishery and a goliath dive-viewing industry to develop in south Florida, but has also created concerns that this species has become a nuisance in some areas. Outside of south Florida, goliath grouper remain largely extirpated in their historic range.

Given the 'data-poor' nature of this fishery (e.g., 26 years of no landings, high uncertainty in historical landings, many unknowns in life history), it has been difficult to assess the status of the stock and objectively evaluate whether recovery has been achieved. A 2010 stock assessment led by FWC was inconclusive on whether the stock had recovered to sustainable levels. FWC staff recently completed a new assessment with data through 2014. Although results are highly uncertain (i.e., there is a large margin of error), this new assessment indicates that goliath grouper abundance in south Florida has greatly increased since the fishery was closed in 1990. However, the results of this assessment were not accepted by scientific peer reviewers, because of several data limitations and indications that stock recovery outside south Florida has likely not been achieved.

Staff will review goliath grouper management history, biology, and the latest assessment results, as well as provide an overview of stakeholder perspectives, federal management of goliath grouper, research needs, and how those needs could be met. Staff will present an overview of potential general management strategies that could be considered for this fishery in Florida state waters if the Commission is interested in pursuing a limited harvest (such as using harvest tags, size and bag limit restrictions, limited harvest seasons and areas). If the Commission is interested in further exploring management options, then staff would request time to gather stakeholder input before returning to the Commission for further consideration.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff requests Commission direction regarding the future management of goliath grouper in state waters. If directed, staff would develop specific management actions for Commission consideration and gather stakeholder input.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

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