



Gulf Gray Triggerfish
Adoption of Federal Standards
July 11, 2017
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This presentation will present a proposed rule to adopt federal standards for the Gulf gray triggerfish rebuilding plan and provide a discussion of a limited fall 2017 harvest season for Gulf gray triggerfish.

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Gulf Gray Triggerfish



- Overfished since 2006
- Recreational fishery closed for 2017 in federal and state waters due to a quota overrun in 2016
- In April, the Council approved a new plan to rebuild the fishery while still allowing fishing opportunities

Federal rule changes pending approval by U.S. Secretary of Commerce

- Decrease recreational bag limit from 2 to 1 fish
- Increase recreational minimum size limit from 14 to 15 inches
- Annual recreational closures: January – February, June – July
- Increase commercial trip limit from 12 to 16 fish



Federal rule changes expected to take effect in 2018

Gray triggerfish has been overfished since 2006. To rebuild the gray triggerfish stock, the Council took final action to amend the gray triggerfish rebuilding plan at its April meeting. The Council considered ways to balance rebuilding the stock while allowing for adequate fishing opportunities. For the recreational sector, which has had recent quota overages and early closures, the Council decided to reduce the bag limit from two to one fish, increase the size limit to 15 inches fork length, and add January and February to the annual closed season (currently June and July are closed annually to recreational harvest). The commercial sector has not met its quota in recent years and currently has a 12-fish trip limit, which essentially allows commercial fishermen to keep gray triggerfish as bycatch. The Council decided to increase the commercial trip limit from 12 to 16 fish so that the commercial sector can harvest more of their quota. The federal rule changes are pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and are expected to take effect in 2018.

Current Regulations – Gulf State Waters

Recreational

- Bag limit: 2 per person per day
- Minimum size limit: 14 inches fork length
- Spawning season closure from June 1 – July 31

Recreational harvest closed in state and federal waters for 2017



Commercial

- Valid SPL, RS, and federal commercial Gulf reef fish permit required
- Minimum size limit: 14 inches fork length
- Commercial harvesters must follow Gulf federal trip limits, seasons, and closures



Current gray triggerfish recreational regulations in Gulf state waters include a bag limit of two per person per day, a minimum size limit of 14 inches fork length, and an annual spawning season closure from June 1 – July 31. Recreational harvest is closed in state and federal waters for all of 2017.

To harvest gray triggerfish commercially in the Gulf, harvesters must hold a valid saltwater products license (SPL), a restricted species (RS) endorsement, and a federal commercial Gulf reef fish permit. The minimum size limit for commercial harvest is 14 inches fork length. State rules require commercial harvesters to follow Gulf federal trip limits, seasons, and closures in state waters. Since commercial harvesters must follow federal trip limits, no changes are needed to state commercial gray triggerfish rules to make state regulations consistent with the change to the federal commercial trip limit.

Proposed Changes for Gulf State Waters

68B-14.0035 Size Limits: Amberjacks, Black Sea Bass, Gray Triggerfish, Grouper, Hogfish, Red Porgy, Snapper

- Recreational minimum size limit would be increased from 14 to 15 inches fork length

68B-14.0036 Recreational Bag Limits: Snapper, Grouper, Hogfish, Black Sea Bass, Red Porgy, Amberjacks, Tilefish, Exception, Wholesale/Retail Purchase Exemption

- Recreational bag limit would be decreased from 2 to 1 fish per person per day

68B-14.0041 Recreational Gulf Gray Triggerfish Season

- Recreational harvest would close each year from Jan. 1 through the end of February, in addition to current June 1 through July 31 spawning closure



Proposed final rules to adopt federal regulations would modify 68B-14.0035, Florida Administrative Code (FAC), to increase the recreational minimum size limit from 14 to 15 inches fork length, modify 68B-14.0036, FAC, to decrease the recreational bag limit from two to one fish per person per day, and modify 68B-14.0041, FAC, to close recreational harvest each year from Jan. 1 through the end of February, in addition to the current June 1 through July 31 spawning closure.

Points to Consider

- Most Gulf gray triggerfish recreational landings are from the Florida Panhandle and Alabama
- Stock has been overfished since 2006, but fishermen report seeing more and bigger fish recently
- Gray triggerfish have a unique spawning behavior
 - Spawning occurs May through August with peak in June and July
- Harvest tends to be highest during warm weather months but occurs year-round
- Discard mortality is low (5%)



There are a number of points to consider in deciding whether to amend state rules for Gulf gray triggerfish. Off Florida's Gulf coast, a large portion of recreational gray triggerfish harvest occurs in state waters. Over the past 15 years, the portion of gray triggerfish harvest off Florida from state waters has ranged from 25% to 75% annually.

Gray triggerfish occur throughout the Gulf of Mexico, but most are landed in the Florida Panhandle and Alabama. The Gulf stock has been overfished since 2006, and the Council recently approved a new rebuilding plan to help rebuild the overfished stock. Recently, fishermen have reported seeing more and bigger gray triggerfish, which makes sense given the quota was caught so quickly in 2016.

Gray triggerfish have a unique spawning behavior in which they form harems. Males form territories and build nests, and females care for their eggs in the nests. Spawning occurs from May through August and peaks during June and July. Since 2013, harvest of gray triggerfish has been closed during June and July to protect spawning fish. Harvest tends to be highest during warm weather months, but occurs year-round.

Finally, discard mortality of gray triggerfish is estimated to be 5% in the recreational fishery, which is low compared to other reef fish. This means that most fish that are caught and returned to the water are likely to survive after release.

Consideration for Possible 2017 Recreational Gray Triggerfish State Season

Commission closed state waters for 2017, but expressed interest in a limited fall season

Open for limited season in 2017

- Many believe stock is improving and fishery should be open
- Maintains state waters fishing opportunities

Keep state waters closed in 2017

- Helps break cycle of quota overages
 - All Gulf harvest in excess of ACL (19,987 pounds) will be deducted from 2018 quota
- Maintain federal waters fishing opportunities for 2018
- Contributes to stock rebuilding



When the Commission closed state waters for 2017 to be consistent with federal closure, Commissioners expressed interest in considering a limited fall season.

Since November, staff has received input from stakeholders through an online comment portal as well as telephone communications regarding gray triggerfish and whether to consider a limited harvest during fall 2017. If opened, anglers that fish in state waters would benefit from fishing opportunities that will not be available in federal waters this year. Many stakeholders expressed frustration about the gray triggerfish closures because they believe the stock is improving and that fishing opportunities should be provided. Federally-permitted for-hire vessels must follow the federal season, even in state waters, so they would not be able to take advantage of a potential open season state waters.

Some stakeholders feel that the continued closure of state waters would help break the cycle of quota overages in this fishery by limiting the chances of the 2017 ACL being exceeded. Any harvest in excess of the 19,987 pound ACL in 2017 (which could be updated based on recent landings information) will be deducted from the 2018 ACL and ACT, and will likely result in a reduced federal season in 2018. Keeping state waters closed for 2017 will help provide more fishing opportunities in federal waters for 2018, as well as contribute to the rebuilding plan for the gray triggerfish stock.

Staff Recommendation

- Modify Gulf gray triggerfish regulations to be consistent with pending federal rules:
 - Decrease recreational bag limit from 2 to 1 fish
 - Increase recreational size limit from 14 to 15 inches fork length
 - Annual recreational closures: January – February in addition to current June – July spawning closure

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

- Continue 2017 recreational harvest closure to maintain harvest opportunities in 2018



Staff recommends the Commission modify the Gulf gray triggerfish regulations to be consistent with pending federal rules:

- Decrease the daily recreational bag limit from two to one fish per person
- Increase the recreational size limit from 14 to 15 inches fork length
- Modify the annual recreational closures by adding a January – February closure in addition to current June – July spawning closure

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 gray triggerfish rebuilding plan regulations for federal waters are approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce and implemented by NOAA Fisheries.

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

In addition, staff recommends continuing the 2017 recreational harvest closure in Gulf state waters. This would help maximize recreational harvest opportunities in 2018 for both state and federal waters.