

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners
From: Jessica McCawley, Director, Marine Fisheries Management
Date: July 10, 2017
Subject: Cobia – Draft Rule

Purpose:

Staff will present a summary of stakeholder feedback received on the status of the cobia fishery as well as a draft rule to modify the regulations for cobia (68B-19, Florida Administrative Code) in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico based on this feedback. Staff will also provide an update on the Atlantic coast 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. As such, cobia is managed in state waters by FWC and managed jointly in federal waters by the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils. The 2013 federal stock assessment for this stock did not indicate there was cause for concern. However, stakeholders in Florida, particularly in the Panhandle, have expressed concerns about the status of the fishery. The next 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 cobia 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, staff propose providing additional conservation measures for cobia in state waters of the Gulf of Mexico until the next stock assessment is completed. The proposed conservation measures include increasing the minimum size limit from 33 to 38 inches fork length and reducing the commercial trip limit to one (to be consistent with the current recreational bag limit) and reducing the recreational and commercial vessel limit from six to two cobia per vessel per day. These proposed changes would apply in all state waters north of the Collier-Monroe county line.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommend approving the proposed draft rules described above and returning for a final public hearing at the September Commission meeting.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Melissa Recks, Division of Marine Fisheries Management