

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

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

Date: April 26, 2018

Subject: Goliath grouper review and discussion

Purpose:

Provide a review and discussion of the management history, biology and current status of goliath grouper, as well as updates from recent workshops and stakeholder feedback. Staff will seek Commission direction on next steps for goliath, which may include limited harvest.

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 over multiple decades as a result of overfishing and harvest has been prohibited in both state and federal waters since 1990. In recent years, goliath grouper encounters and reports of high abundance in some areas have become more frequent in south Florida. Population rebuilding has allowed for a goliath grouper catch-and-release fishery and dive-viewing industry to develop in south Florida, but has also caused frustration among some fishermen who feel the species has become a nuisance in some areas. Multiple studies have indicated higher densities of goliath grouper on wrecks and artificial reefs with relatively few on natural reefs. Outside of south Florida, goliath grouper remain rare to absent within their historic range.

Given the data-poor nature of this fishery (e.g., 28 years of no landings, high uncertainty in historical landings, many unknowns in life history), it is difficult to assess the status of the stock and objectively evaluate whether recovery has been achieved. In 2016, FWC staff completed a new stock assessment with data through 2014, and while the results are highly uncertain (i.e., there is a large margin of error), this new assessment indicates goliath grouper abundance in south Florida has increased since the closure although a large number of goliath were killed during an extreme cold winter in 2009/2010. However, the results of this assessment were not accepted by scientific peer reviewers because of several data limitations and indications that stock recovery outside Florida has likely not been achieved.

At the February 2017 meeting, the Commission directed staff to gather public input on goliath grouper management and report updates at a later Commission meeting. During July, August, and October 2017, staff held 16 public workshops throughout the state to obtain stakeholder feedback. At each workshop, staff gave a presentation about goliath grouper, including information on stock status and options for future management, and collected public input about goliath grouper management. Those who could not attend an in-person workshop were given the opportunity to attend a virtual workshop and answer a survey online. Stakeholders also had the opportunity to submit comments online as well as through email, phone calls, and letters. The survey and submitted comments were divided between those who supported a limited harvest and those who supported maintaining a catch-and-release-only fishery.

Staff will review goliath grouper management history, biology, and stock status, as well as provide an overview of stakeholder feedback from recent workshops and submitted comments. Staff is seeking

Commission direction on next steps for goliath grouper. If the Commission is interested in pursuing limited harvest, staff would return with a draft rule at a future Commission meeting.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff requests Commission direction on next steps for goliath grouper. If directed, staff would develop specific management actions for Commission consideration and return for a draft rule hearing at a future Commission meeting.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

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Gil McRae, Director, Fish and Wildlife Research Institute