

## South Atlantic Council Issues



Review and Discussion  
April 26, 2018



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 1

This is a review and discussion of actions from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) March 5-9 meeting in Jekyll Island, GA.

Division: Marine Fisheries Management

Authors: Erika Burgess, Jessica McCawley, and Martha Guyas

Contact Phone Number: 850-487-0554

Report date: March 22, 2018

## Yellowtail Snapper



### Issue

- Atlantic commercial ACL routinely being met, causing season to close early
  - Total Atlantic ACL is not fully harvested
- Considering changes to prevent early closures and create access to unused quota

### Short-term change: revise accountability measure

- Close the commercial fishery only after the total Atlantic ACL has been met
- Could be implemented before 2019 fishing year

### Potential long-term changes

- Implement a commercial trip limit at end of year to slow harvest
- Combine the Atlantic and Gulf ACLs
- Consider reallocation



Photo courtesy Don DeMaria



Yellowtail snapper is the most economically important finfish in the Florida Keys, with high importance to commercial and recreational fishermen. There is a single stock in the southeastern U.S., and a 2012 stock assessment showed the population is healthy and well-above minimum thresholds.

The Atlantic yellowtail snapper annual catch limit (ACL), or quota, is allocated between the commercial (52.56%) and recreational (47.44%) sectors. The commercial sector routinely catches its ACL, which triggers an accountability measure that closes the fishery early. The commercial fishery closed two months early in 2015 and 2017, and will likely close early in 2018. Estimates show the recreational sector does not catch all of its ACL, annually landing 65% or less of their ACL. The Council is considering changes to prevent early closures in the commercial fishery and to create access to unused quota and promote optimum yield.

For the short-term, the Council is considering changing accountability measures so that a commercial closure only occurs after both the commercial and recreational ACLs have been met. This may eliminate early commercial closures and allow more of the total Atlantic ACL to be harvested. This change could be implemented before the 2019 fishing year.

The Council has also identified three potential long-term changes to alleviate this issue. First, introducing commercial trip limits near the end of the fishing year to slow harvest and possibly lengthen the fishing season. Second, combining the Atlantic and Gulf ACLs to increase the amount of fish available to both Atlantic and Gulf harvesters. The Gulf ACL, similar to the Atlantic recreational ACL, is consistently under-harvested. Lastly, reallocating a portion of the recreational ACL to the commercial sector.

The Council will not take action on potential long-term changes until after recreational harvest estimates are recalibrated and the 2019 stock assessment is complete. Past recreational harvest estimates must be recalibrated because the effort survey methods were revised. This may result in higher estimates of past recreational harvest and affect the results of the stock assessment. Information from the recalibration and stock assessment will help inform the Council's long-term decisions. FWC staff have conducted and will continue outreach with commercial stakeholders to craft and promote solutions that meet the needs of Florida's yellowtail snapper fishery.

## Snapper Grouper For-hire Limited-entry Program



- Council is considering creation of a limited-entry program for federal snapper grouper for-hire permits
  - Would limit the number of vessels allowed to operate snapper grouper for-hire trips in federal waters
- 1,009 of the 1,639 permits are held by vessels homeported in Florida
- Florida's stakeholders have expressed mixed support for limited-entry
  - Staff has noted increased support over the past year
- Council members requested additional information before this issue goes out for public comment



The Council is considering creation of a limited-entry program (limited-entry) for snapper grouper for-hire permits. This would limit the number of vessels allowed to operate for-hire trips targeting snapper grouper species in federal waters. Limited-entry exists for the federal Gulf of Mexico reef fish and coastal migratory pelagic for-hire permits. Currently, there is no limit to the number of federal Atlantic snapper grouper for-hire permits NOAA Fisheries may issue. The Council has debated whether this is needed at several recent meetings.

As of January 30, 2018, there are 1,639 valid federal permits for snapper grouper for-hire vessels. Over 61% of these permits (1,009 permits) are issued to vessels homeported in Florida. The number of issued permits has been stable for many years, but slightly increased since the Council began limited-entry discussions.

In the past, Florida's Atlantic for-hire captains expressed mixed support for limited-entry. Over the past year, staff has noted increased support among Florida's federal snapper grouper for-hire permit holders. Those in support argue that limited-entry would result in a professionalized fishery, where full-time operators are more accountable, and provide stability for businesses. One counter argument is that this impedes free markets, which should allow individuals to make decisions that are best for their business.

Limited-entry may reduce overcapacity in the for-hire fleet if the number of vessels exceeds the demand for their services. It could also make a for-hire permit valuable, thereby creating an asset for the permit holder. However, some are concerned limited-entry could prevent new people from entering the for-hire business and reduce opportunities for charter passengers if permits are unavailable or the cost of permits is too high. Those opposed to limited-entry are also concerned that it will lead to a separation of the recreational sector into for-hire and private angler, which has happened for red snapper in the Gulf.

The Council is interested in gathering public opinions on this issue; however, they requested additional information from Council staff before the matter goes out for public comment. FWC will work with the Council to gather input from stakeholders on the matter when the Council begins formal public comment. The Council is expected to receive updated information at their June meeting.

## New Pelagic Longline EFP Application



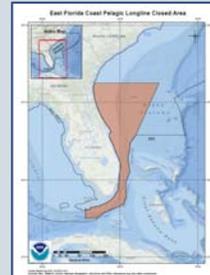
**2017:** University researcher awarded EFP to study pelagic longline catch and bycatch rates in federal waters closed to the gear off Florida's east coast

- FWC opposed EFP and comparable past requests
- Concerns about loss of conservation gains for billfish and swordfish
- **Sept. 2017:** University halted the research

**2018:** Same researcher submitted a request for similar EFP

- Council commented on the proposed research, but refused to take a position
- FWC sent U.S. Secretary of Commerce a letter opposing EFP

**Next steps:** NOAA Fisheries HMS Division will make final determination on issuing the EFP



In 2001, NOAA Fisheries prohibited pelagic longlining in federal waters off Florida's east coast to reduce bycatch of several overfished and protected species that are highly concentrated in this area, including swordfish (particularly juveniles), sailfish, and sea turtles. Swordfish, Atlantic blue marlin, white marlin, sailfish, and bluefin tuna were considered overfished at the time and protected sea turtles were bycatch in the pelagic longline fishery. Since the area's closure, swordfish have rebuilt and additional management measures have been applied to the pelagic longline fishery to address bycatch (e.g., gear restrictions to reduce sea turtle interactions and the individual bluefin tuna quota (IBQ) allocation program). However, several highly migratory species (HMS) occurring in the closed area remain overfished, including sailfish, blue marlin, white marlin, and multiple shark species.

In August 2017, NOAA Fisheries HMS Division awarded a Nova Southeastern University (NSU) researcher an exempted fishing permit (EFP) allowing pelagic longlining in federal waters off Florida's east coast to study catch and bycatch rates in the closed area. This EFP was met with strong opposition from FWC and others because of concern that it could rollback conservation gains made for billfish and swordfish. In September 2017, NSU halted the research project. In January 2018, the same researcher, independent of NSU, submitted a new EFP application for a similar study on pelagic longlining off east Florida. At their February meeting, the Commission directed staff to continue opposition to this research.

The Council did not directly oppose the 2017 EFP; however, they wrote to the HMS Division about concerns for negative interactions between the research and Council-managed fisheries, such as rock shrimp, dolphin, and golden tilefish. At their March 2018 meeting, the Council discussed the 2018 EFP request and agreed that their concerns remain the same; however, they refused to take a position on the new EFP.

The Commission wrote a letter to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce to oppose the 2018 EFP application, which is consistent with the Commission's opposition to similar EFP requests since 2005. The Commission cited concerns about expanding commercial longline harvest in this area and loss of conservation gains made since this area was closed, particularly given the economic and social importance of the recreational billfish and swordfish fisheries off Florida's east coast. NOAA Fisheries HMS Division will make the final determination on whether to issue another EFP. Staff will monitor this situation and provide updates.

## No Direction Requested



- Input on Council items is welcome
- Next Council meeting is June 11-15 in Ft. Lauderdale



No specific direction is requested at this time; however, input on Council items is always welcome.

The next Council meeting is June 11-15 in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, which is the week before the June FWC Commission meeting.