

South Atlantic Council Issues



Review and Discussion
February 8, 2018



Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

Version 2

This is a review and discussion of actions from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Dec. 4-8, 2017, meeting in Atlantic Beach, NC.

Update: This presentation has been updated to include information on a pelagic longline Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) application that has been submitted to NOAA Fisheries and a request for direction.

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Photo courtesy Aiden Herzog

Atlantic Red Grouper



- Reminder: stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing
 - Low recruitment is a contributing factor
 - Unlikely to be rebuilt before 2030
- Council took final action to reduce the red grouper quota
 - May cause early recreational season closures
- Expect additional federal regulatory changes to promote rebuilding
 - Considering a recreational bag limit reduction from 3 to 1 fish per person
 - May extend spawning season closure off the Carolinas
 - Other changes may also be considered



New quota pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce

The Council discussed Atlantic red grouper management at their December meeting. The 2017 red grouper stock assessment determined the stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing. This echoes the findings of a 2010 stock assessment, which also said the stock was overfished and undergoing overfishing.

Following the 2010 assessment, the Council implemented management measures to end overfishing and rebuild the stock. Despite the Council's efforts, the stock continues to undergo overfishing and is not making adequate rebuilding progress. The 2017 assessment showed that unexpected, low recruitment, or too few young fish joining the population each year, is a major contributor to the stock's poor status. Due to low recruitment, the projections from the 2017 assessment show the stock is not expected to be rebuilt before 2030.

Federal law requires the Council to end overfishing immediately. Therefore, the Council took final action in December to reduce the red grouper quota. This quota reduction may result in early season closures and shortened fishing seasons for the recreational sector if landings exceed the quota. Based on recent commercial landings, the commercial sector is not likely to meet their new quota because harvest is low. The new quota awaits review and approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

The Council is considering additional management changes to promote rebuilding. This may include a reduction in the recreational bag limit from three to one red grouper per person within the three-grouper aggregate bag limit. Some Council members have suggested limiting recreational harvesters to one red grouper per vessel in federal waters north of Florida. The Council is also considering extending the seasonal January – April grouper closure off the Carolinas to protect spawning red grouper in May and June. Other federal rule changes to promote stock recovery are also possible and may be discussed in coming months.

Atlantic Red Snapper



2018 Season

- Quota awaiting approval by U.S. Secretary of Commerce

For 2019 and beyond

- Considering requirements for a recreational permit and recreational reporting to improve harvest estimates
- May regulate practices to reduce discard mortality
 - Requiring possession or use of descending devices
 - Limiting anglers to single-hook rigs
 - Modifying the circle-hook requirement
- Area closures no longer being considered



Photo courtesy Teri Bowman



In September 2017, the Council approved a quota for the 2018 Atlantic red snapper season which awaits approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce. If approved, NOAA Fisheries will announce the length of the weekends-only recreational fishing season prior to its anticipated start in mid-July. The recreational season is estimated to last between four and seven days. The commercial fishery is expected to open the second Monday in July and close when the quota is met. All other harvest regulations will remain the same as 2017 and all fishers will again be asked to employ practices to reduce discard mortality. For the 2018 season, recreational anglers will have the opportunity to report their catches via the iAngler mobile app.

At their December meeting, the Council discussed long-term management changes that could be considered while awaiting a 2019 quota. These changes could be implemented as early as 2019. The Council is interested in improving estimates of recreational effort and harvest. To improve effort estimates, the Council is considering a federal recreational bottom-fishing permit. To improve harvest estimates, the Council is considering mandating recreational reporting. As an alternative to the recreational snapper-grouper permit and mandatory reporting, the Gulf Reef Fish Survey could be expanded statewide. Improved estimates of recreational effort and harvest would improve stock assessments and better inform management.

The Council continued discussion on potential long-term management changes to reduce discard mortality for snapper grouper species, such as requiring bottom-fishers to possess or use descending devices and limiting them to single-hook rigs. The Council is also considering revising the circle hook requirement. Some Council members would like the circle hook requirement to allow non-offset circle hooks only. Others would like circle hooks to be optional so that anglers targeting small-mouthed species like vermilion snapper and triggerfish could use J-hooks.

At past meetings, the Council discussed closing areas to reduce red snapper discard mortality. In December, however, the Council concluded area closures are not necessary at this time. Although dead discards contributed to past overfishing, NOAA Fisheries determined that current regulations adequately address the problem and closed areas are not needed to end overfishing. Also, current bag limits, trip limits, and seasons are likely adequate to constrain harvest to the 2018 and future quotas, meaning closed areas are not necessary.

Golden Tilefish



- 2016 stock assessment update indicated stock is undergoing overfishing
 - 40% reduction in quota needed to end overfishing
 - NOAA Fisheries implemented an emergency rule to reduce the 2018 quota
- Council considering long-term quota reduction to end overfishing and smaller commercial trip limits
 - Smaller trip limits have been requested by some commercial harvesters to keep the fishery open longer



A stock assessment update was completed for golden tilefish in 2016. The assessment update indicated that overfishing was occurring. To end overfishing, a 40% reduction in the quota is required. At the Council's request, NOAA Fisheries implemented an interim rule to set the 2018 quota and immediately address overfishing while the Council developed long-term quotas.

In December, the Council reviewed long-term quota recommendations to end overfishing from the Council's Science and Statistical Committee. The Council will review the options for quota reduction in March and is expected to take final action in June.

The Council will also consider reducing commercial trip limits for the longline fleet and the hook-and-line fleet. For golden tilefish, the commercial quota is allocated 75% to longline endorsement holders and 25% to hook-and-line harvesters. Each group has a different commercial trip limit: 4,000 pounds for longline and 400 pounds for hook-and-line. In previous years before the quota was reduced, the longline fleet would catch its quota within 6 to 18 weeks and the hook-and-line harvesters would catch their quota before the year ended. Lower trip limits could help extend the fishing season for both groups of harvesters. Some commercial harvesters requested lower trip limits under the higher quotas. There may now be greater support for lower trip limits under lower quotas. The Council is expected to make a final decision on trip limits in June.

New Pelagic Longline EFP Application



- **Aug. 2017:** NSU researcher awarded EFP to study pelagic longline catch and bycatch rates in federal waters closed to the gear off Florida's east coast
 - **Sept. 2017:** NSU halted the research
- **Jan. 2018:** Same researcher submitted a request for similar EFP
 - Will be open for public comment soon
- Council wrote letter expressing concern for 2017 EFP
- FWC opposed 2017 EFP and comparable past EFP requests
 - Concerns about loss of conservation gains for billfish and swordfish
- Staff proposes to continue opposing EFP



Commission direction requested

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 has been rebuilt and additional management measures have been applied to the pelagic longline fishery to address bycatch (ex. gear restrictions to reduce sea turtle interactions and implementation of the individual bluefin tuna quota (IBQ) allocation program). However, several highly migratory species occurring in the closed area, including sailfish, blue marlin, white marlin, and several shark species, remain overfished.

In August 2017, NOAA Fisheries Highly Migratory Species (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. In August 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. The application will be made available for public comment soon.

The South Atlantic Council did not directly oppose the 2017 EFP; however, they wrote to the HMS Division about concerns for potential negative interactions between the research and fisheries managed by the Council, such as rock shrimp, dolphin, and golden tilefish.

The Commission wrote a letter opposing the 2017 EFP and has opposed similar EFP requests since 2005. The Commission cited concerns about expanding commercial longline harvest in this area and loss of swordfish and billfish 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. FWC staff proposes continuing opposition to this EFP. Staff will monitor this EFP application and provide updates to the Commission as warranted.

Direction Requested



- Staff seeks Commission direction on whether to continue opposing the 2018 pelagic longline EFP application
- Input on Council items is welcome
- Next Council meeting is March 5-9 in Jekyll Island, GA



Staff is seeking direction on whether to continue opposing the 2018 pelagic longline EFP application. Input on other Council items is always welcome.

The next Council meeting is March 5-9 in Jekyll Island, GA.