



## Gulf Council Issues

Review and Discussion

December 5, 2012

**Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission**  
Division of Marine Fisheries Management

Version 1

This is a review and discussion of issues that are scheduled to be discussed at the Oct. 29 through Nov. 1, 2012, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting in Gulfport, MS. This document will be updated following the Council meeting.

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## Recreational Grouper Seasons – Final Action Expected



- At Florida's request, the Council is reviewing options for the 2013 recreational gag grouper season, including split seasons and 1-fish bag limit
- Modification or elimination of the shallow-water grouper closure is being considered



The Council is scheduled to take final action to set the 2013 recreational gag grouper season. A review of the 2013 recreational gag grouper season was requested by Florida to accommodate different desired seasons in different regions of Florida. During public testimony at the August Council meeting, several people asked that the Council also consider a one fish bag limit for gag grouper in an effort to make the gag grouper season longer. Several season options, including split seasons, are being considered by the Council.

The Council is also considering modifying or eliminating the annual February through March shallow-water grouper closure (includes red, black, yellowfin, yellowmouth, and scamp). This spawning season closure was originally intended to help rebuild gag grouper and red grouper populations, but now red grouper is fully rebuilt and gag grouper has its own closed season. Fishermen from Southwest Florida requested removal of this closure during public comment at the April Council meeting. At the August Council meeting, four options were presented as potential changes to this season: 1) shorten the season to Feb. 15 to March 15 (close during peak gag spawning), 2) shift the closed season to be March through April in order to include spawning seasons for more species, 3) eliminate the current closed season, or 4) eliminate the current closed season in federal waters shoreward of the 20 fathom boundary (the closure would remain effective seaward of this boundary to protect spawning gag grouper). Shortening or eliminating the closed season could result in the recreational ACL for red grouper to be exceeded because the bag limit for this species was just raised from two to four fish and this would allow additional opportunities to harvest. If the red grouper recreational ACL is exceeded, the bag limit for red grouper would be reduced from four to three fish in subsequent years.

## Gray Triggerfish – Final Action Expected



- Stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing
- Council preferred alternatives:
  - Establish 2-fish recreational bag limit
  - Establish recreational and commercial closed season during peak spawning (June - July)
  - Establish commercial trip limit of 50 pounds



Final action to approve long-term management options to rebuild the gray triggerfish stock (Amendment 37) is also expected at the upcoming Council meeting. The 2011 stock assessment update for gray triggerfish indicates that the stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing. Possible management changes that are being considered for the recreational sector include establishment of a recreational bag limit and closed season. Currently, there is no specific bag limit for gray triggerfish in state or federal waters, but it is included in the 20-reef fish aggregate bag limit in federal waters.

For the recreational sector, the Council's preferred alternatives would establish a two fish bag limit for gray triggerfish, which would be included in the 20-reef fish aggregate bag limit. Additionally, a recreational closed season during June and July (peak spawning months) was selected as a preferred alternative by the Council. The Council previously considered a four fish bag limit and a closure during peak harvest (May and June), but changed their preferred alternatives to protect spawning triggerfish. Gray triggerfish have unique spawning behavior where males establish territories and build nests in the sediment. Males form harems with one to five females around reefs. Females defend the nest for 24-48 hours and aerate the eggs.

For the commercial sector, the Council's preferred alternatives are to establish a 50 pound trip limit and a harvest closure during peak spawning (June – July). The Council also added an alternative that would reduce the commercial trip limit to 25 pounds so that this lower trip limit could be discussed at public hearings. Public hearings were held during mid-October in Destin, St. Petersburg, and Naples. An increase in the minimum size limit from 14 inches fork length (FL) to either 16 or 18 inches FL for both recreational and commercial harvesters was considered but rejected by the Council because triggerfish that are larger than 14 inches FL are uncommon. Based on Commission direction, the Commission staff representative supports the Council preferred alternatives.

## Red Snapper – Discussions



- Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) 5-year review
- 2013 recreational season and inconsistency by states
- Regional management of recreational harvest
- Economic evaluation of allocation



There are several red snapper items that are scheduled to be discussed at the October Council meeting. First, the Council will discuss the individual fishing quota (IFQ) program for commercial red snapper. This program is currently under a scheduled five-year review.

The Council will also discuss the upcoming 2013 recreational red snapper season. Both Texas and Louisiana have indicated that they will not go consistent with the federal season for 2013 in their state waters. The Council is expected to discuss how this inconsistency will affect the federal season (which has not yet been set), annual catch limit, and season length in other states.

In August, the Council approved a motion to develop a scoping document for a regional management system in the Gulf of Mexico for recreational red snapper. This document will be discussed at the October meeting. This regional plan could entail state-by-state quotas, or dividing the Gulf into two or three regions for red snapper management.

Finally, the Council will receive a presentation that provides an economic evaluation of the red snapper allocation. Discussions on red snapper allocation have been tabled until after the new red snapper stock assessment is completed next summer.

## Other Scheduled Discussions



- Vermilion snapper annual catch limit and bag limits
- Yellowtail snapper stock assessment
- Aquaculture proposed rule
- Electronic reporting by for-hire vessels



In August, the Council took action to request an emergency rule to raise the 2012 annual catch limit (ACL) for vermilion snapper from 3.42 million pounds (mp) to 4.19 mp. This increase was originally requested by the Council's Reef Fish Advisory Panel because the current ACL will likely be reached before the end of the year and the Science and Statistical Committee had previously recommended that the acceptable biological catch for 2012 could be increased. In October, the Council will review a draft regulatory amendment to amend annual catch limits and bag limits for vermilion snapper for the long term.

A stock assessment for yellowtail snapper was recently completed and will be reviewed by the Council. This assessment was completed by the FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute staff and indicates that yellowtail snapper stocks are healthy (not overfished or undergoing overfishing).

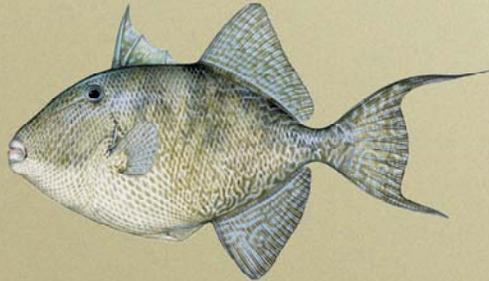
The Council is expected to review a proposed rule for aquaculture. The Council approved a fishery management plan for aquaculture in the Gulf of Mexico in 2009, but it has not yet been implemented. The purpose of this plan is to maximize benefits to the Nation by establishing a regional permitting process to manage the development of an environmentally sound and economically sustainable aquaculture industry in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The primary goal of the plan is to increase maximum sustainable yield and optimum yield of federal fisheries by supplementing the supply of wild-caught species with cultured product.

Finally, the Council will review a scoping document on electronic reporting requirements by for-hire vessels. Currently, for-hire vessels are not required to report catch or effort electronically, but some vessels have been submitting data to NOAA Fisheries Service electronically as part of a pilot program to test the feasibility of this idea.

## No Direction Requested



- Input on Council items is welcome
- Council meeting is Oct. 29 – Nov. 2 in Gulfport, MS



No Commission direction is requested at this time; however, staff welcomes Commission direction on any Council issues. The Council meeting will be held Oct. 29 through Nov. 2 in Gulfport, MS.