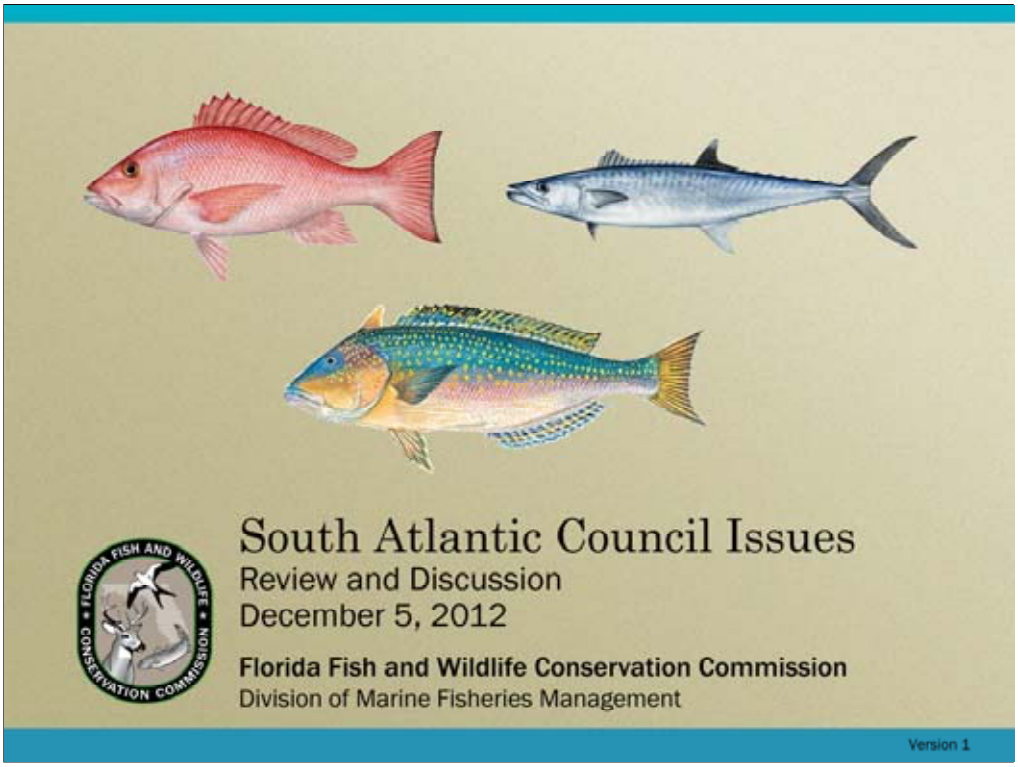

This is a review and discussion of issues that were discussed at the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Sept. 10-14 meeting in Charleston, SC. This document will be updated prior to the Commission meeting to include items that are expected to be discussed at the Council's Dec. 3-7, 2012, meeting in Wilmington, NC.

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Red snapper has been closed in federal waters on the Atlantic coast since Jan. 4, 2010. In June, the Council reviewed total removals of red snapper (dead discards) that occurred during 2010 and 2011 under the current moratorium and determined that harvest of 13,067 red snapper in 2012 was feasible. In response, the Council voted to approve an emergency rule that opened red snapper for a limited harvest. This rule was approved and allowed for recreational harvest during the weekends of Sept. 14-17 and Sept. 21-24, 2012, and commercial harvest from Sept. 17-24, 2012. Recreational harvesters were allowed one fish per person per day with no minimum size limit (first fish caught was harvested). The commercial trip limit was 50 pounds gutted weight with no minimum size limit.

FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute staff made a tremendous effort to collect life history information from harvested fish during the season opening. Anglers contributed to this data through carcass drop-offs and dockside surveys, and by reporting their catches through online surveys. Over 2,000 fish were sampled in Florida and data from these fish could be used in future red snapper stock assessments.

In December, the Council will discuss red snapper harvest options for 2013 and beyond. The Council is considering a harvest tag program for red snapper and deepwater snapper-grouper species (snowy grouper, golden tilefish, and wreckfish), but this program would not take effect until 2014 at the earliest. This tag program would be administered by NOAA Fisheries Service.

The Council delayed final action at its June meeting to create a catch shares program for golden crab. Golden crab is an exclusively commercial fishery that is limited to deep areas of federal waters, including areas off Florida. This fishery requires a high level of experience and has a relatively low number of participants (11 permits total in the entire South Atlantic). The purpose of the catch share program is to facilitate maximum harvest while 1) ensuring participants are well-qualified and experienced in the golden crab fishery, and 2) protecting the sensitive coral habitats near which the fishery occurs.

Industry opinion on the proposed catch shares program has been divided. Council staff held a meeting of the golden crab endorsement holders in August so that fishery participants could discuss if and how to move forward with development of the catch shares program. After hearing the results of the meeting, the Council decided that the Golden Crab Advisory Panel, which is composed of industry representatives, should meet to choose their preferred options for the fishery before the Council makes a decision. Thus, Council action on golden crab has been delayed until March 2013.

The annual catch limit (ACL) for yellowtail snapper was set in the Comprehensive ACL amendment that took effect on April 16, 2012. In late August, NOAA Fisheries Service announced that the commercial ACL for yellowtail snapper was projected to be reached and that commercial harvest would close on September 11, 2012. However, NOAA Fisheries Service later announced that the closure was not yet necessary because there was additional uncaught quota. Although the fishery did not close, there is still concern that the ACL will be met before the end of 2012 and that fishing will be disrupted by a closure.

A stock assessment for yellowtail snapper was recently completed. This assessment was led by FWC scientists and indicates that the stock is not overfished or undergoing overfishing. The assessment was reviewed by the Councils' Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC). The SSCs felt that an increase of the acceptable biological catch (ABC) from 2.9 to 4.1 million pounds for yellowtail snapper was warranted. At the last Council meeting, the Council approved an emergency rule to increase the ACL for 2012 to minimize the time the fishery may be closed in 2012. Because yellowtail snapper is an important Florida fishery, the FWC Council representative was supportive of this action.

In an effort to avoid similar closures in the future, the Council is looking into taking over management of yellowtail snapper in the Gulf of Mexico if permitting and jurisdictional issues can be resolved. Currently, yellowtail snapper is managed by both Councils, and the amount of yellowtail snapper that can be harvested is divided between the Atlantic and Gulf. The Council will also begin development of long-term rules to increase the ACL beyond 2012.

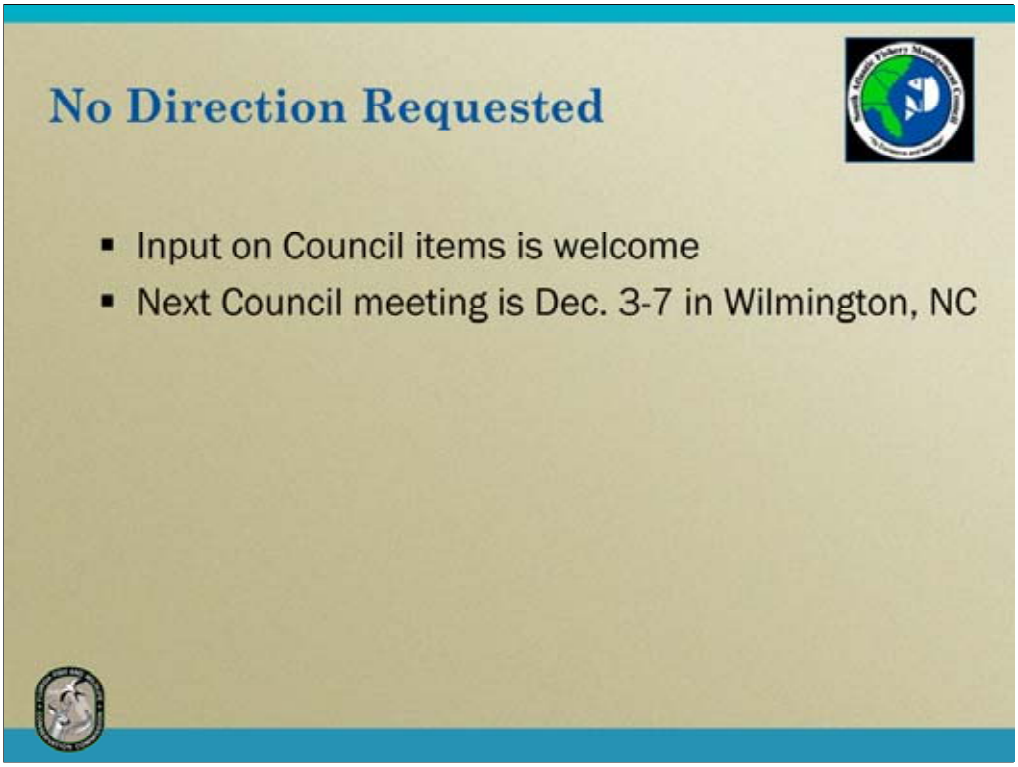
Harvest of warsaw grouper and speckled hind is prohibited in South Atlantic federal waters. Both species have been considered to be undergoing overfishing, but it is unclear whether overfishing is still occurring or if either species is also overfished.

The Council is proposing the creation of closed areas to protect these species and replace the 240-foot depth closure that was eliminated effective May 10, 2012. Council staff convened a workgroup of experts and knowledgeable representatives from the industry to compile available information and discuss possible options for closure locations and seasons to ensure continued protection of these species. Council staff also held public workshops to gather input from the public. The Council is working to determine if existing closed areas are adequate to protect these species, existing areas should be reconfigured, or new closed areas should be created. Discussions about how to best protect these species will continue in December.

The Council took final action to approve a joint amendment with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council that could require federal wholesale dealers to report their transactions electronically and could reduce the number of federal permits wholesale dealers would need to sell various federally-managed species. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, these changes could allow for more timely data, which could allow for more accurate tracking of commercial quotas and annual catch limits.

The Council mackerel committee will hold a meeting with the Gulf Council's mackerel committee to discuss potential joint-Council management measures (Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendments 19 and 20) for king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia. Management changes that are under consideration include modified permitting for king and Spanish mackerel, creating a permit for cobia, and prohibiting recreational and tournament sales of these species. State-by-state quotas have also been proposed as an option for these species. After this joint meeting is held, the Council will consider scheduling public hearings for Amendments 19 and 20.

Finally, the Council is scheduled to take final action to adjust annual catch limits (ACLs) for unassessed species based on the new Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) harvest estimates.



No Commission direction is requested at this time; however, staff welcomes Commission direction on any Council issues. The next Council meeting will be held in Wilmington, NC the week of the Commission meeting, which is Dec. 3-7, 2012.