



Update: This document has been updated following the Gulf Council meeting.

This is a review and discussion of issues that were discussed at the June 18-22, 2012, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting in Tampa.

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## Gray Triggerfish – Long-term Options Under Consideration

**Council Preferred Alternatives**

- Establish recreational bag limit
  - Four fish bag limit
- Establish recreational closed season
  - Peak harvest (May – June)
- Options to increase minimum size limit removed
- Establish commercial trip limit of 50 pounds
- Establish commercial closed season
  - April – August closure





Development of long-term management options to rebuild the gray triggerfish stock (Amendment 37) continued at the June 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. The closures being considered include either peak spawning (June – July) or peak harvest (May – June). 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 recreational sector, the Council preferred alternatives would establish a four fish bag limit for gray triggerfish, which would be included in the 20-reef fish aggregate bag limit. Additionally, a recreational closed season during May and June (peak harvest months) was selected as a preferred alternative by the Council. 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. For the commercial sector, the Council preferred alternatives are to establish a 50 pounds trip limit and an April through August harvest closure. The Commission staff representative supports the Council preferred alternatives. Further development of management actions for triggerfish will continue at the next Council meeting in August.

## Red Snapper – Development of Regional Management



- Proposal by Louisiana for pilot regional management program
  - Catch limits would be set by the Council
  - LA would set bag limits and seasons for state and federal waters off LA
  - LA passed resolution to extend state waters fisheries management out to 10.3 miles
- Council will develop alternatives for regional management of recreational harvest



A representative from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries presented the reef fish committee with a proposal for a three-year pilot regional management program that would allow Louisiana to manage recreational red snapper harvest in both state and federal waters off Louisiana. Under this proposal, the Council would continue to set annual catch limits, but would also allocate a portion of the fishery to Louisiana. The State of Louisiana would be responsible for setting bag limits and seasons, and would track harvest in state and federal waters off Louisiana. The Council asked Louisiana to return to the Council with more details about their proposed regional management plan at the August Council meeting. The Council also requested that Louisiana send appropriate staff (legal and others) to explain the State's recent resolution to extend their fisheries management jurisdiction in state waters out to 10.3 miles from shore.

While this program was not endorsed by the Council, it prompted discussion of regional management throughout the Gulf. The Council has been discussing regional management for several years, and felt that a two-region, three-region, or even state by state regional plan for red snapper could be considered. In response, the Council requested that Council staff develop alternatives for regional management of red snapper recreational harvest.

## Recreational Grouper Seasons for 2013 and Accountability Measures



- At Florida's request, the Council is reviewing options for the 2013 recreational gag grouper season including split seasons
- Modification or elimination of the shallow-water grouper closure being considered
- Removal of overly restrictive accountability measures for shallow-water grouper



Potential changes to grouper management measures were also discussed by the Council. The Council began review of options for modifying the 2013 gag grouper season at Florida's request. Discussions of this issue will continue in August when detailed estimates of season lengths under different options are available.

As a part of this review, the Council is considering modifying or eliminating the annual February through March shallow-water grouper closure (includes red, black, yellowfish, yellowmouth, rock hind, red hind, 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, so this closure may not be necessary. Fishermen from Southwest Florida requested removal of this closure during Council public comment at the April Council meeting.

The Council is also considering a framework action to remove overly restrictive recreational accountability measures for shallow-water grouper. Removal of these accountability measures (shortening seasons the following year if overages occur the previous year) should help shallow-water groupers achieve optimum yield and avoid unnecessary closures.

## Allocation and Sector Separation - Discussion



- Red snapper and gag, red, and black grouper re-allocation and sector separation to be considered
- Discussion of options for shifting allocation for gag grouper as the stock rebuilds through 2015



The Council examined re-allocation options for the recreational and commercial sectors for gag, red, and black grouper as previously requested by the Commission. Allocations should be set by considering economic, social, and conservation criteria used in specifying optimum yield and the goals of the respective fishery management plan. The Council also discussed potential sector separation (managing commercial, private recreational angler, and for-hire sectors with separate quotas and management measures) for several reef fish species including grouper and red snapper. The Council also begin drafting options for reallocation of gag grouper as the stock rebuilds through 2015, including yearly allocation shifts from one sector to the other.

The Council approved a motion that would merge actions for grouper reallocation, red snapper reallocation, and sector separation into a single amendment. The rationale for combining these documents is that new allocations will need to be set for any species that are managed via sector separation.

This is a contentious issue, and development of this amendment will continue at the next Council meeting.

## Dealers and Data Collection Amendments – Approved for Public Hearings

- Requirement for electronic reporting
- Consolidation of dealer permits
- Public hearings to be held in later this summer



The Council is also working on a joint amendment with the South Atlantic 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. These changes could allow for more timely data, which could allow for more accurate tracking of commercial quotas and annual catch limits.

Public hearings on the dealer amendment will be held in the Panama City area, Tampa, and Key West later this summer. Additionally, Council staff will post the meeting materials and presentation online so that members of the public that cannot attend the hearings have an opportunity to comment.

## Mackerel and Cobia – Continued Development



- Permits, recreational sale, and quotas
- Management boundary and transit provisions
- South Atlantic and Gulf Council mackerel committees to hold a joint meeting



The Council continued discussions of management measures (Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendments 19 and 20) for king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia that could modify permitting for king and Spanish mackerel, create a permit for cobia, and prohibit recreational and tournament sales of these species. State-by-state quotas, management boundary changes, and transit provisions have also been proposed for these species. These are joint amendments with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council.

The Council mackerel committee will hold a joint meeting with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's mackerel committee so that the committees can discuss these issues and work together to select preferred alternatives. After this meeting is held, the Council will consider scheduling public hearings for Amendments 19 and 20.

## Other Discussions



- Designate fixed petroleum platforms and artificial reefs as essential fish habitat
- Vermilion snapper stock status concerns; benchmark assessment moved to 2014



The Council decided to move forward with an amendment that would designate fixed petroleum platforms and artificial reefs as essential fish habitat. There are still a number of questions about the impacts and procedures for this designation, so the process will likely be slow.

At its October 2011 meeting, the Council received a report on the latest stock assessment update for vermilion snapper. This update indicated that vermilion snapper stocks are not overfished nor undergoing overfishing and catch limits can be increased. However, several members of the public expressed concern that fishing pressure for vermilion snapper has increased and that the stock is in trouble. In light of these comments, the Council approved a motion to conduct a benchmark stock assessment for vermilion snapper in 2014.

## No Direction Requested



- Input on Council items is welcome
- Next Council meeting is August 20-24 in New Orleans



No Commission direction is requested at this time; however, staff welcomes any input on Council items from the Commission. The next Council meeting will be August 20-24 in New Orleans.