



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

This is a review and discussion of issues that were discussed at the August 20-23, 2012, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) meeting in New Orleans.

Authors: Martha Bademan and Jessica McCawley

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Recreational Grouper Seasons – Approved for Public Hearings



- At Florida's request, the Council is reviewing options for the 2013 recreational gag grouper season including split seasons
 - Option added to look at split seasons with 1-fish bag limit
- Modification or elimination of the shallow-water grouper closure being considered
- Public hearings to be held; Final action in October
- Council to develop regional management options for gag

Commission direction requested



The Council approved options for modifying the 2013 gag grouper season for public hearings. This review was requested by Florida to accommodate different desired seasons in different regions of Florida. Council staff presented several season options including split seasons. The FWC representative to the Council also requested that an option be added that would allow for gag harvest during all of April, all of July, and from November 15 through the end of the year or whenever the recreational annual catch limit is projected to be met, whichever comes first. This would accommodate season requests from anglers in the Florida Big Bend, Panhandle, and southwest Florida. During public testimony, 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. Council and NOAA staff will recalculate season estimates assuming a one-fish bag limit for public hearings so that the public can give input on specific options.

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 February 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 closed 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 since 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 in subsequent years.

Public hearings on grouper will be held in conjunction with the triggerfish public hearings. Final action on gag grouper will be taken in October so that there is time to implement the new season(s) for 2013. Staff requests direction from the Commission on preferred season dates and whether or not a decrease in the gag grouper bag limit to one fish per person should be considered. Staff also requests direction on the shallow-water grouper closure options.

Gray Triggerfish –Approved for Public Hearings



- 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
- Public hearings to be held in the fall

Commission direction requested



Long-term management options to rebuild the gray triggerfish stock (Amendment 37) were approved for public hearings at the August 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 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 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. 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. The Commission staff representative supported the Council preferred alternatives. Public hearings will be held before the next Council meeting, which is in October, but exact dates and locations have not yet been chosen.

Staff requests direction from the Commission on the recreational bag limit and closed season and the commercial trip limit and closed season. The Council is scheduled to take final action on gray triggerfish at the next Council meeting.

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 State of Louisiana also discussed their recently approved resolution to extend their fisheries management jurisdiction in state waters out to 10.3 miles (nine nautical miles) from shore.

No action was taken specific to this proposed pilot program, but 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 2012 meeting. This regional plan could entail state-by-state quotas, or dividing the Gulf into two or three regions for red snapper management.

Other Reef Fish Action



- Emergency rule approved to increase vermilion snapper ACL for 2012
- Final action approved to remove overly restrictive grouper accountability measures
- Allocation and sector separation discussions for grouper and red snapper tabled until red snapper assessment is complete
- “Days at sea” scoping document to be developed for for-hire red snapper fishery



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 was 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.

The Council took final action to approve a framework action to remove overly restrictive recreational accountability measures for shallow-water grouper. Removal of these accountability measures (shortening seasons the year following ACL overages) should help shallow-water groupers achieve optimum yield and avoid unnecessary closures.

The Council continued review of reallocation options for the recreational and commercial sectors for gag, red, and black grouper as previously requested by the Commission. Actions for grouper reallocation, red snapper reallocation, and sector separation (private recreational, for-hire, and commercial) were merged into a single amendment at the June Council meeting, but the Council decided to put these discussions on hold until the new red snapper assessment is completed in June 2013.

Finally, the Council directed Council staff to develop a scoping document that would outline options for a “days at sea” management program for red snapper harvest by the for-hire industry. This would give for-hire vessels a set number of days to fish for red snapper each year, but would allow the vessels to choose their own fishing days rather than have an established season.

Other Discussions



- Final action approved on dealer reporting and permitting improvements
- King and Spanish mackerel and cobia: permits, recreational sale, and quotas discussed
 - Recreational sale to be considered as separate amendment
- Ad hoc panel to be formed to consider designation of fixed petroleum platforms and artificial reefs as essential fish habitat



The Council took final action on a joint amendment with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council that would 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. This amendment will now be forwarded to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council for final approval.

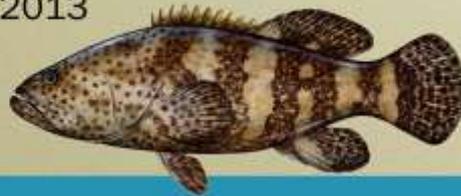
The Council also continued discussions of management measures (Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendment 19) for king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia that could modify permitting for king and Spanish mackerel and create a permit for cobia. State-by-state quotas have also been proposed as an option for these species. These are joint amendments with the South Atlantic Council. The Gulf Council voted to remove the action that would modify the requirements for or prohibit recreational sale for consideration in a separate amendment. The Council mackerel committee is expected to 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.

The Council also continued work on an amendment that would designate fixed petroleum platforms and artificial reefs as essential fish habitat. Because there are still a number of questions about the impacts and procedures for this designation, the Council voted to convene an ad hoc panel made up of members of the petroleum industry, state artificial reef biologists, and others as appropriate to assist the Council with this amendment.

Goliath Grouper – Update



- Joint-Council Ad Hoc Goliath Grouper Steering Committee formed to move beyond the moratorium
- Met earlier this year to discuss goliath grouper data needs and management approaches
- Stakeholder survey and workshop, and science workshop to be held in early 2013
- FWC staff would brief Commission in April 2013
- Council direction in June 2013



Earlier this year, the ad hoc goliath grouper steering committee, which is comprised of Gulf Council, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, NOAA Fisheries Service, and FWC representatives, met to discuss goliath grouper data needs and potential management approaches. The charge of the committee is to explore approaches to move the goliath grouper fishery beyond the moratorium and collect information to support an informative assessment that will allow determination of stock status and possible recovery.

The committee decided to develop a stakeholder survey to determine stakeholder expectations regarding goliath grouper management. This survey would include Florida stakeholders as well as stakeholders in the four other Gulf states (Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas) and the three other South Atlantic states (Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina). This survey is projected to be completed in January 2013. Subsequently, a science workshop will be held in February 2013 to allow goliath grouper experts the opportunity to offer suggestions for research, analyses, modeling, and other data needs. A stakeholder workshop would also be held in March 2013 to offer an opportunity for a group interaction, education, and problem solving regarding goliath grouper management expectations. A list of desired goals will be prepared based on stakeholder input and presented to each Council in April 2013, along with the results of the stakeholder survey and workshop and the science workshop. FWC staff will brief the Commission at the April 2013 FWC Meeting on the information presented to the Councils. Finally, the Councils will give Council staff direction on next steps for goliath grouper in June 2013.

Direction Requested – Gag Grouper Season



- FWC motion: April, July, and Nov. 15 to Dec. 31
 - If ACL is reached before end of season, harvest would close until the following year
- Other Options
 - 1-fish bag limit could give longer season
 - Fishing season length depends on expected harvest in months selected



There are several factors that the Commission should consider in selecting a Gulf recreational gag grouper season. Based on previous Commission direction, FWC staff has requested that the Council consider a split season for gag grouper. A split season with multiple openings could accommodate different regions in Florida. Based on previous input from Panhandle, Big Bend, and southwest Florida anglers, the FWC Council representative made a motion to consider a season that would allow grouper harvest during April 1-30, July 1-31, and November 15 through December 31, or whenever the ACL is met, whichever comes first. If the ACL is reached before the end of the season, harvest would close until the following year. This could mean that the parts of the season that occur later in the year may be shortened or may not open at all. Another important consideration is that the number of fishing days in the season depends on expected harvest during selected months. Harvest tends to be high in late fall, winter, and spring months. Finally, decreasing the bag limit to one fish per person per day could result in a longer recreational season. Several anglers at the Council meeting commented that lowering the bag limit to one fish per person would be acceptable if it resulted in a longer season.

Summary of Public Input – Season Dates for Recreational Gag Grouper



This slide shows a summary of public comments received by the FWC regarding dates for the state recreational gag grouper season before the 2012 season dates were set. Please note that this is generalization of comments received from each region and does not represent all comments. For instance, some for-hire federal permit holders from southwest Florida asked for consistency with the July 1 through October 31 federal season.

Direction Requested – Shallow-water Grouper Closure Options



- Current closure is Feb. 1 – Mar. 31
- Options:
 - Close Feb. 15 – Mar. 15 (peak gag spawning)
 - Shift closure to Mar. 1 – Apr. 30 (includes spawning season for other grouper species)
 - Eliminate closure
 - Eliminate closure shoreward of 20 fathom boundary (protects gag spawning aggregations)
- Shortening, limiting area, or eliminating closure could result in red grouper ACL overrun
- Staff recommends no action unless Commission is willing to accept a lower red grouper bag limit



The Council has not yet selected a preferred alternative for 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 February 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 closed 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 since 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 in subsequent years. At this time, staff recommends no action on the shallow-water grouper closure unless the Commission is willing to accept a decrease in the recreational red grouper bag limit.

Direction Requested – Gray Triggerfish



- Recreational Bag Limit
 - 1 fish, *2 fish*, or 4 fish
- Recreational Closed Season
 - *Peak spawning (June – July)*
 - Peak harvest (May – June)
- Commercial Trip Limit
 - 25 lbs. or *50 lbs.*
- Commercial Closed Season
 - *Peak spawning (June – July)*
 - Peak harvest (Aug. – Dec.)
 - Apr. – Aug.





The Council is considering the management options shown on the slide above for gray triggerfish. The Council’s current preferred alternatives are shown in red italics. FWC staff support the Council’s preferred alternatives. Most members of the public that commented on recreational triggerfish options were also supportive of the Council’s preferred alternatives because they favored a lower bag limit so that the season could be longer and preferred that triggerfish be closed while red snapper is open.

Direction Requested



- Next Council meeting is Oct. 29 – Nov. 2 in Gulfport, MS



Staff also welcomes Commission direction on any other Council issues. The next Council meeting will be held October 29 through November 2 in Gulfport, MS.