



This is a review and discussion of actions and discussions at the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) March 4-8, 2012, meeting in St. Simon's Island, GA.

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Red Snapper – 2012 Recreational Season Harvest Update



- Mini-season held in fall 2012
 - Coast-wide recreational harvest estimates range from about 2,000 to 10,251 fish
 - Recreational annual catch limit was 9,399 fish
- 2013 season pending available quota and approval by Secretary of Commerce
 - Open weekends would start 2nd weekend in July



The Council received an update on harvest estimates from the 2012 recreational red snapper mini-season that was held in fall 2012. Recreational red snapper harvest was open in federal waters for two weekends (Sept. 14-16 and 21-23) with a bag limit of one fish per person per day and no minimum size limit. Red snapper has been otherwise closed in federal waters on the Atlantic coast since Jan. 4, 2010. Recreational harvest estimates from the 2012 mini-season range from about 2,000 fish (roughly the actual number of carcasses sampled) to 10,251 fish for the entire South Atlantic. The recreational annual catch limit (ACL) for 2012 was 9,399 fish. Researchers are working to refine these estimates, especially since data collection and harvest estimation methods were not uniform over the entire South Atlantic. In Florida, the FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute led the data collection effort over the 2012 mini-season by increasing recreational surveys and monitoring, and offering carcass drop-off sites.

In December, the Council took final action to create red snapper mini-seasons for 2013 and beyond. If quota is available and this action is approved by the Secretary of Commerce, recreational red snapper would open for three-day weekends (Friday through Sunday) starting the second weekend in July. The number of open weekends would depend on available quota and projected harvest rates. Recreational harvesters would keep the first fish (no minimum size limit) and have a one fish bag limit.

Commercial harvest would be scheduled to open the second Monday in July with a 75-pound trip limit until the commercial quota is projected to be met. The commercial and recreational allocations for red snapper are 28.07% and 71.93%, respectively. July was chosen for both the recreational and commercial harvest seasons because species that are caught with red snapper (i.e., black sea bass) are also open during this time. FWC and other state agencies would work with NOAA Fisheries to increase monitoring efforts during these season openings.

Vermilion Snapper and Red Porgy – Final Action



- New assessments indicate vermilion snapper stock healthy; red porgy is overfished
- Updated ACLs for both species
- Vermilion snapper
 - Eliminated Nov. – Mar. recreational closed season
 - Reduced commercial trip limit to extend season



Stock assessments for vermilion snapper and red porgy were recently completed. Vermilion snapper is no longer undergoing overfishing and is not overfished. Red porgy remains overfished (low stock abundance), but is not undergoing overfishing. The Council took final action to update ACLs and management targets for these species based on the new assessment results. ACLs were increased for vermilion snapper and lowered for red porgy. Because the vermilion snapper ACLs increased and the recreational sector has not met its ACL in recent years, the Council also took final action to eliminate the November through March recreational closed season for vermilion snapper. Staff will return to the Commission at a future meeting with a potential federal consistency action that would remove the recreational vermilion snapper closed season in Atlantic state waters.

Although the ACLs for vermilion snapper will increase, the Council also voted to reduce the commercial trip limit for vermilion snapper from 1,500 to 1,000 pounds gutted weight (lbs gw), with a reduction to 500 lbs gw when 75% of the commercial ACL is projected to be met. The goal of this reduction is to slow down the rate of commercial harvest so that the commercial seasons for vermilion snapper stay open longer. There are two commercial seasons for vermilion snapper – one from Jan. 1 – June 30 and the other from July 1 – Dec. 31. The season that opened Jan. 1, 2013, closed early on Feb. 13, 2013, because the commercial ACL was projected to be met for the year.

Snapper Grouper – Final Actions



- Extended emergency rule to increase commercial yellowtail snapper annual catch limit
 - Long-term increase awaiting approval by Secretary of Commerce
- Removed zero bag limit requirements for for-hire captain and crew
- Removed blue runner from federal management
 - FWC may consider extending management into federal waters



In September 2012, the Council approved an emergency rule to increase the commercial ACL for yellowtail snapper based on a recently-completed stock assessment that indicated that the yellowtail snapper stock is not stock is not undergoing overfishing nor overfished, and that harvest levels can be increased. The Council approved this emergency rule because of concern that the commercial ACL would be met before the end of the fishing season and that harvest would have closed early. This emergency rule was approved by the Secretary of Commerce but will expire in early May. In December 2012, the Council took action to approve long-term ACL increases for the yellowtail snapper fishery, but these increases have yet to be approved by the Secretary of Commerce. At its March 2013 meeting, the Council voted to extend the emergency rule for another 186 days or until the long-term ACL increase is approved by the Secretary of Commerce.

Additionally, the Council took final action to allow captains and crew of for-hire vessels to retain their bag limits of legally-harvested snapper grouper species. Since 2009, federally-permitted for-hire captains and crew have been prohibited from keeping their bag limit of vermilion snapper, gag grouper, and shallow water groupers (black grouper, red grouper, scamp, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney). This measure was originally intended to end overfishing of gag grouper and vermilion snapper. Because vermilion snapper is no longer undergoing overfishing and the recreational ACL for gag grouper has not been met in recent years, the Council decided to again allow retention of these species by for-hire captains and crew.

The Council also voted to remove blue runner, which is a member of the jack family, from federal management in the South Atlantic. This species is largely harvested in state waters, mostly for bait, but is harvested in federal waters as bycatch in the Spanish mackerel fishery. If this removal is approved by the Secretary of Commerce, the Commission may want to consider managing this fishery in federal waters off Florida, as allowed by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Currently, the FWC does not have specific regulations for blue runner in Atlantic state waters, but there are many general fishing regulations that apply to harvest of blue runner in Florida waters.

Headboat Data Collection – Final Action



- Weekly electronic reporting will be required
 - Paper reporting will be allowed during catastrophes
- More timely data could reduce the chances of recreational annual catch limit overages
- South Atlantic and Gulf Councils will jointly consider similar action for charter boats



The Council also took final action to approve data collection improvements for the headboat industry in the South Atlantic that could reduce the chances of recreational ACL overages. If these measures are approved by the Secretary of Commerce, headboats would be required to electronically report harvest data on a weekly basis. Paper reporting would still be allowed during catastrophes such as hurricanes.

The South Atlantic and Gulf Councils have agreed to jointly develop an amendment that would consider similar electronic reporting requirements for the charter industry.

Black Sea Bass – Special Council Meeting to be Held



- Assessment update results expected to warrant an increase in harvest
- Special Council meeting to be held in May via phone call/webinar to increase the ACL prior to June season opening



A new stock assessment for Atlantic black sea bass is underway and is expected to allow for an increase in harvest. Black sea bass has been in a rebuilding plan since 2006. The last stock assessment for this species, which was completed in 2011, indicated that black sea bass was undergoing overfishing and not fully rebuilt, but no longer overfished. In anticipation of the assessment results, the Council is planning to convene a special Council meeting via phone call/webinar on May 13. The purpose of this meeting would be to increase the ACL for black sea bass via a framework action prior to the June 1 harvest season opening.

Possible Closed Areas for Warsaw Grouper and Speckled Hind



- Harvest prohibited in federal waters
- Closed areas would replace the recently-eliminated 240-ft depth closure
- Council to consider options for reconfiguration and expansion of existing closed areas as well as new closed areas in Sept.
 - Could include additional closed areas off Florida



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 on 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. In December, NOAA Fisheries staff presented an analysis of the distribution of speckled hind and warsaw grouper in the South Atlantic and how existing marine protected areas (MPAs) could be reconfigured to provide more protection for these species. One of the current closed areas that was identified is the St. Lucie Hump MPA, which could be expanded to include known speckled hind and warsaw grouper aggregation sites and speckled hind habitat. The Council is working to determine if existing closed areas are adequate to protect these species, if existing areas should be reconfigured, or if new closed areas should be created. Some of these potential new closed areas could be created in federal waters off east Florida and the Florida Keys. The Council will continue to discuss alternatives during its September meeting.

Joint-Council South Florida Committee



- Webinar held to discuss issues to be addressed
 - Yellowtail and mutton snapper management
 - Grouper harvest in Monroe County
 - Special management unit in South Florida
- FWC to take the lead
 - Public workshops to be held this summer



The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council recently convened their joint-committee to address South Florida fishery management issues. This meeting was held via webinar in February to discuss issues that could be addressed by the committee and next steps. Some of the topics identified include yellowtail and mutton snapper management, grouper harvest in Monroe County and the Florida Keys, and potentially creating a special management unit or process for South Florida fisheries. The FWC will take a leading role on this committee, and is planning to hold several public workshops over the summer in South Florida to get input from the public on South Florida fisheries management issues and approaches.

Possible Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) for Commercial Snapper Grouper – Discussions



- Council considering requiring VMS on commercial snapper grouper vessels
 - Already required in the Gulf of Mexico
 - Highly controversial
- More discussion in June, public hearings anticipated in August



The Council is considering requiring commercial snapper grouper vessels to have a vessel monitoring system (VMS) onboard when fishing. The goal of this action would be to improve enforcement of regulations, including closed areas, as well as improve fisheries dependent data, which could in turn improve management of the snapper grouper fishery. Commercial vessels fishing for snapper and grouper species in the Gulf of Mexico are already required to use VMS, so many Florida boats that fish for these species on both coasts would already meet this requirement. The Council will continue discussions of this highly controversial issue at its next meeting in June, and is expected hold public hearings on the potential VMS requirement in August.

Possible Snapper Grouper Changes – Discussions



- Modify fishing year start dates for amberjack and black sea bass
- Set triggerfish size limit in fork length to match Florida regulations
- Increase hogfish minimum size limit
- Increase recreational bag limit for gag grouper



The Council also discussed several potential changes to management of several snapper grouper species. Many of these potential changes are requests from anglers or the commercial industry. The Council is considering modifying the fishing year start dates for amberjack and black sea bass to better align fishing seasons with availability of fish. The Council is also considering changing the size limit for triggerfish so that it is set in fork length instead of total length, and would match Florida's state waters minimum size limit requirement. At the request of fishermen, the Council is also considering an increase in the minimum size limit for hogfish. A recreational bag limit increase for gag grouper is being considered and may be warranted because the recreational sector has not reached its ACL in recent years.

Other Council Discussions and Actions



- Joint-Council mackerel committee meeting held
- Council ceased all action on golden crab catch shares program and management changes



The South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Councils have been working on joint fishery management plan amendments for the king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia fisheries. The mackerel committees from each council met jointly at the South Atlantic Council's March meeting to discuss management options such as sale requirements, transit provisions, and management zones for these fisheries. Discussions of these issues will continue at each Council's future meetings.

Finally, the Council voted to stop work on the potential golden crab catch shares program and other golden crab management issues at the recommendation of the Golden Crab Advisory Panel, which is composed of industry representatives. Golden crab is an exclusively commercial fishery that is limited to deep areas of federal waters, including areas off Florida. Industry opinion on the proposed catch shares program has been divided.

Other Council Updates



- Public comments on possible dolphin and wahoo management changes reviewed
- Possible expansion of deepwater coral protection areas with allowance for deepwater shrimpers to transit
 - Rock shrimp VMS and trawl data analysis available in June
- Golden tilefish management



The Council discussed dolphin-wahoo management options for scoping including updating ACLs and other management targets for these species based on the new Marine Recreational Information Program data, adjusting dolphin allocation, and revisions to accountability measures. Scoping meetings on these issues were held in Jacksonville on Jan. 28, Cocoa Beach on Jan. 29, and Key Largo on Jan. 30. The Council will review these options again in June and is anticipated to hold public hearings on dolphin and wahoo in August.

The Council discussed possible expansion of the Oculina Bank and Stetson-Miami Terrace Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (CHAPCs) off East Florida to protect newly-documented deepwater coral outside of the current areas. Trawling, as well as harvest and possession of rock shrimp, is prohibited in the current CHAPCs. Council staff has been working with the deepwater shrimp industry on this issue, and the Council is considering alternatives based on these discussions that would allow shrimpers to transit the closed area and reduce the size of the proposed CHAPC expansions. Council staff is currently analyzing vessel monitoring system (VMS) and trawl data from this fishery, and will present an analysis of this information at the June Council meeting.

Finally, the Council reviewed an options paper for golden tilefish that would address derby fishing conditions, lengthen the commercial longline fishing season and prevent market flooding. The Council requested that Council staff organize a meeting of the golden tilefish commercial endorsement holders to discuss desired long-term management options for the commercial golden tilefish fishery.

No Direction Requested



- Input on Council items is welcome
- Next Council meeting is June 10-14 in Stuart, FL



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 Stuart, FL, on June 10-14.

The following slides are considered back up material and are not anticipated to be part of the Commission meeting presentation



Red Snapper 2013 Season – Final Action



- Recreational
 - If quota is available, open 3-day weekends starting 2nd weekend in July until quota projected to be met
 - Keep 1st fish (no minimum size limit)
 - 1-fish bag limit
- Commercial
 - Harvest opens 2nd Monday in July until quota projected to be met
 - 75-pound trip limit



Red snapper has been closed in federal waters on the Atlantic coast since Jan. 4, 2010, with the exception of a short red snapper harvest season that was allowed by emergency rule in 2012. In December, the Council took final action to create red snapper mini-seasons for 2013 and beyond. The commercial and recreational allocations for red snapper are 28.07% and 71.93%, respectively. If quota is available and this action is approved by the Secretary of Commerce, recreational red snapper will open for three-day weekends (Fri.-Sun.) starting the second weekend in July. The number of open weekends will depend on available quota and projected harvest rates. Recreational harvesters would keep the first fish (no minimum size limit) and have a one-fish bag limit. Commercial harvest would open the second Monday in July with a 75-pound trip limit until the commercial quota is projected to be met. July was chosen for both the recreational and commercial harvest seasons because species that are caught with red snapper (i.e., black sea bass) are also open during this time. FWC and other state agencies will work with NOAA Fisheries to increase monitoring efforts during these season openings.

At future meetings, the Council will also consider a harvest tag program for red snapper and deepwater snapper grouper species that have very limited recreational quotas. The purpose of this program would be to allow harvest of these species while staying within the catch limits established by law.