



This is a review and discussion of actions and discussions at the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) February 3-6 meeting in Houston, TX.

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## Reef Fish “30B” Rule – Final Action



- Council voted to remove requirement for federally-permitted for-hire boats to follow federal reef fish rules regardless of where they are fishing (“30B”)
- FWC staff supported removal of 30B based on Commission direction
- Pending approval by the Secretary of Commerce
- Could take effect as early as 2014 red snapper season
  - If effective by June 1, federal season would be shortened



Last week, the Council took final action on an amendment that would remove the requirement for federally-permitted for-hire vessels to follow federal reef fish rules when fishing in state waters. Based on past Commission direction, the Commission’s representative on the Council supported this action. The requirement for federally-permitted for-hire vessels to follow federal rules was originally approved by the Council in 2008 (as part of Amendment 30B to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan) and was a response to Florida approving inconsistent red snapper regulations in state waters. This provision has been viewed as unfair to the for-hire industry because it prevents federally-permitted for-hire vessels from fishing in open state waters if federal waters are closed.

This final action is pending approval by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce (Secretary). NOAA Fisheries staff indicated at the Council meeting that the Secretary may reject this action. However, if the Secretary approves the Council’s action, the requirement that federally-permitted for-hire boats follow federal reef fish rules in state waters could be removed before the 2014 federal recreational red snapper season begins on June 1. If that occurs, the federal recreational red snapper season would be shortened to account for additional harvest of red snapper by federally-permitted for-hire vessels during inconsistent state waters seasons. Currently, Texas and Louisiana have state waters red snapper seasons that differ from the federal season. If the Commission also chooses an inconsistent season for Florida state waters, that would also be considered by NOAA Fisheries.

## Red Snapper Actions



- **Regional Management** – No further action until states agree on state-by-state allocations
- **Sector Reallocation** – Approved for public hearings
  - Council preferred alternative would allocate 75% of quota increases to the recreational sector if the total red snapper quota is greater than 9.12 million pounds
  - Current allocation: 49% recreational and 51% commercial
  - Final action anticipated at special Council meeting in May
- **Sector Separation** – Council discussing splitting recreational sector into private anglers and for-hire
- **Recreational Slot Limit** – Options to be developed
  - NOAA analysis indicates slot limit could result in longer recreational season



The Council discussed several red snapper management items at its October meeting. The Council had been discussing regional management of recreational red snapper harvest, but decided to take no further action on this item unless the five Gulf states decide how the recreational red snapper quota would be divided among the states. Selection of state-by-state allocations has been complicated by 1) landings shifting toward the eastern Gulf of Mexico as the red snapper stock rebuilds and expands off West Florida and 2) uncertainty in the 2013 MRIP landings estimates and the validity of historical landings estimates.

The Council continued discussions on red snapper sector reallocation and will hold public hearings on this issue. Florida hearings will be held in Panama City and Saint Petersburg, and there will also be a public hearing via teleconference/webinar. The Council is considering sector reallocation for the red snapper fishery because shifting allocation from the commercial sector to the recreational sector could stabilize or lengthen the recreational season. Currently, 51% of the annual catch limit is allocated to the commercial sector, with the remaining 49% allocated to the recreational sector. The Council selected a preferred alternative that would reallocate 75% or 100% of quota increases to the recreational sector if the total red snapper quota is 9.12 mp or greater. The Council is planning a special Council meeting at the end of May to take final action on sector reallocation.

The Council is also considering sector separation for the recreational red snapper fishery and discussions on this issue will continue at the April Council meeting. If sector separation occurs, the recreational red snapper quota would be subdivided into for-hire and private angler quotas. Past Commission direction has been to stay neutral on this issue.

Finally, the Council decided to consider setting a slot limit for the recreational red snapper fishery. An analysis by NOAA Fisheries indicates that slot limits may extend the recreational season. A slot limit of 16-24 inches appears to yield the longest recreational season (53-58 days vs. the 40 days estimated for this year). This could be a promising management option, but additional analysis is needed.

## King Mackerel, Spanish Mackerel, and Cobia – Final Action



- Joint amendment with South Atlantic Council
- Councils disagree on fishing year start date for king mackerel in Western Gulf of Mexico
- South Atlantic Council scheduled to take final action in March
- Joint-Council mackerel committee meeting possible if differences are not resolved



The Council took final action approving Amendment 20B concerning king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia. This amendment has been developed jointly with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (South Atlantic Council). The preferred alternatives and the resulting final amendment must be approved by the South Atlantic Council before being sent to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce for final approval.

The councils have agreed on all preferred alternatives in the amendment except for one that deals with the fishing year start date in the Western Zone (federal waters off Texas – Alabama). In December, the South Atlantic Council decided to keep the status quo start date, which is July 1, based on public testimony. Atlantic commercial king mackerel fishermen opposed modifying the start date of the season in the Western zone due to economic impacts on Atlantic king mackerel fishermen who travel to the Gulf to fish. Last week, the Gulf Council affirmed their preferred fishing year start date for this zone, which is September 1. The South Atlantic Council will review this amendment again at their March meeting and could take final action. If the councils cannot agree on all preferred alternatives, the councils' mackerel committees may hold a joint meeting to resolve differences in the preferred alternatives.

## No Direction Requested



- Input on other Council items is welcome
- Next meeting is Apr. 7-11 in Baton Rouge, LA



No direction on Gulf Council items is requested at this time. However, Commission input on other Council items is always welcome. The next Council meeting will be April 7-11 in Baton Rouge, LA. This is the week before the April Commission meeting.