This is a review and discussion of actions and discussions from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (Council) Dec. 1-5, 2014, meeting in New Bern, NC.

Authors: Martha Bademan, Jessica McCawley, and Erika Burgess

Report Date: January 5, 2015
The Council took final action on an amendment that would allow anglers fishing in The Bahamas to bring lawfully-harvested dolphin and wahoo fillets back to the U.S. through federal waters. The Council received input from Captain Rama Shuster of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s (FWC) Division of Law Enforcement regarding the enforcement of these new regulations.

Current regulations require that most federally-regulated species, including dolphin and wahoo, be maintained in whole condition until landed. However, federal regulations provide an exception that allows anglers to bring lawfully-harvested snapper and grouper back from The Bahamas through U.S. waters as fillets instead of whole fish. Recreational anglers who fish in Bahamian waters requested to be allowed to bring back filleted dolphin and wahoo in addition to snapper and grouper.

The action taken by the Council will allow anglers to transport fillets of dolphin and wahoo legally caught in Bahamian waters through U.S. federal waters as long as they do not exceed the U.S. bag limit. The bag limit for dolphin in federal waters is 10 fish per person per day or 60 fish per vessel per day, and the bag limit for wahoo is two fish per person per day. The amendment also clarifies that two fillets will count towards the bag limit as one fish and that the skin of the fish must be left intact on the fillets. The latter two provisions are also new requirements for the transport of snapper and grouper from The Bahamas to the U.S.

The Council has forwarded the amendment to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce for review and approval.
The Council took final action on an amendment to adjust the annual catch limits (ACLs) for gag grouper and wreckfish in response to recent stock assessments for the two species. The assessments indicated gag grouper is not overfished yet overfishing had been occurring, and that wreckfish is neither overfished nor undergoing overfishing. The new, lower ACL for gag grouper will benefit the stock by reducing the commercial and recreational quotas, and is anticipated to benefit fishermen in the long-term as the previous limit may not be sustainable. The Council also considered increasing the recreational bag limit for gag grouper, but that motion failed. The ACL for wreckfish was increased in response to the stock assessment. The Council has forwarded the gag grouper and wreckfish amendment to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce for review and approval.

The Council will be holding public hearings on an amendment that would remove black snapper, dog snapper, mahogany snapper, and schoolmaster from federal management. Many of these species have very low or no reported landings, or are rarely landed anywhere but Florida. Following the Commission’s guidance, staff has sent a letter to the Council informing them that the State of Florida intends to extend state rules into federal waters if the species are removed from federal management. This amendment also includes an action concerning the golden tilefish longline endorsement program. The public hearings will take place in Florida on Jan. 13 in Key West and on Jan. 21 in Cocoa Beach.

The Council further discussed changing the current closed season and closed area for the commercial black sea bass pot fishery. Currently, fishing for black sea bass with pots is prohibited from Nov. 1 through April 30 throughout the South Atlantic. The closure is in place to protect endangered right whales from risk of entanglement in pot gear. The alternatives being considered include variations in the size of the closed area and the time period of the closure that would allow fishermen more access to the fishery in current closed months. The Council added several new alternatives for the black sea bass commercial pot fishery closure and delayed public hearings until further biological and economic analyses are completed. The Council will review the action again in March and potentially hold public hearings in August 2015.
A stock assessment was completed for king mackerel in 2014 and found that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. The assessment also determined that the current defined location for the mixing zone where Gulf and South Atlantic migratory groups of king mackerel overlap in winter months is not appropriate. The actual mixing zone is a smaller area off South Florida between the Dry Tortugas and Miami. Based on these findings, the Council approved development of a joint amendment with the Gulf Council for public scoping that considers options to revise the annual catch limits (ACLs) by increasing the overall Atlantic migratory group ACL by over two million pounds. The king mackerel public scoping document will include provisions to revise the definition of the stock mixing zone as described by the 2014 stock assessment and establish a sub-quota specific to the new mixing zone. An additional consideration in the scoping document will include legalizing the sale of king mackerel bycatch by the shark gillnet fishery. Scoping meetings for this potential action will be held concurrently with the public hearings for the black sea bass potential action.

The Council also reviewed their Science and Statistical Committee’s recommendations on the findings of the 2014 Florida Wildlife Research Institute hogfish assessment. The assessment identified two distinct stocks in the South Atlantic: the Georgia to North Carolina stock and the Southeast Florida/Florida Keys stock. The Southeast Florida/Florida Keys stock was determined to be overfished and overfishing is occurring. In light of these findings, the Council directed their staff to develop management options for rebuilding the Southeast Florida/Florida Keys stock. There is the potential for the development of a joint plan with the Gulf Council as the western boundary of the Southeast Florida/Florida Keys stock extends into the Gulf of Mexico.
The Joint South Florida Committee will meet in Key West on Jan. 12-15. This committee is comprised of representatives from both the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils and is chaired by the FWC staff representatives on the Councils.

An update on this meeting will be provided following the conclusion of the meeting.
No specific direction is requested at this time, but staff welcomes Commission input on any Council issues. The next Council meeting will be held in St. Simon’s Island, GA, from March 2-6, 2015.