

This is a review and discussion of actions and discussions from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) Jan. 26-29 meeting in Point Clear, AL.

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## Red Snapper Stock Assessment Update



- Stock overfished but continues to rebuild
- Quota increase warranted – quota could increase by 2 to 2.9 million pounds
  - Quota currently 11 million pounds
- Council to hold webinar March 3 to finalize quota increase
- Goal is to have quota in place by June 1 for the federal season opening



Last week, the Council received the new red snapper stock assessment and learned that the stock is still overfished but continues to rebuild. Overfishing is no longer occurring and ended in 2012. Based on this information, a quota increase for red snapper of as much as 2 to 2.9 million pounds may be warranted. Currently, the overall red snapper quota is 11 million pounds whole weight. Based on the current 51:49 commercial and recreational sector allocation split, this results in a 5.61 million pound quota for the commercial sector and 5.390 million pound quota for the recreational sector.

The Council will hold a special webinar on March 3 to take final action the quota increase. This should allow the new quota to take effect by June 1 for the 2015 recreational season in federal waters. Any quota increase will also need to be approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce before going into effect.

## 2015 Gulf Federal Recreational Red Snapper Season



- Recreational harvest in 2014 did not exceed quota
  - Likely no negative impact on 2015 season
- Length of federal season will be based on:
  - Secretarial approval of sector separation
  - Quota approved by the Council
  - Gulf states' seasons
- Council maintained 2-fish bag limit for for-hire industry



Preliminary 2014 recreational harvest data indicates that the recreational sector did not exceed the quota. This is good news and means that harvest that occurred in 2014 will likely not have a negative impact on the 2015 season.

Looking ahead in 2015, the length of the recreational red snapper season in federal waters will depend on whether the U.S. Secretary of Commerce approves sector separation, how much the quota is increased, and the recreational red snapper seasons in Gulf states' waters. If there is no change in the quota and state waters regulations from 2014, sector separation is currently estimated to result in a 33-day season for the federally-permitted for-hire industry and a 1-day season for private anglers in federal waters.

The Council voted to maintain a two-fish bag limit for the federally-permitted for-hire industry for the 2015 season. Public testimony at the Council meeting was generally mixed in regards to this change, and the Council did not receive any online public comment supporting this change prior to the Council meeting.

## Gag Grouper Stock Assessment and Management Update



- Stock assessment indicates gag grouper are not overfished
  - 2014 red tide event not as harmful as originally suspected
  - Some fishermen have concerns about the health of the stock
- Council considering increasing gag grouper quota and lengthening the recreational season in federal waters



The Council discussed possible changes to management of gag grouper based on a recent stock assessment that indicated the stock is no longer overfished or undergoing overfishing. The Council's SSC recommended the Council increase the acceptable biological catch based on this assessment. Previously, there were concerns that the 2014 red tide had a significant negative impact on the stock, but more recent scientific information suggested that the red tide event had a minimal impact on the stock. However, several fishermen who spoke at the Council meeting stated that the gag stock is not as healthy as the new stock assessment indicated and suggested the Council be cautious when considering increasing the quota.

In addition to a quota increase, the Council will also consider lengthening the recreational season for gag grouper in federal waters. Currently, the season for gag grouper opens July 1 and closes Dec. 2. Lengthening the recreational season would provide additional fishing opportunities for anglers targeting gag grouper. The Council will consider options for increasing the quota and the recreational season at future Council meetings.

Currently in state waters off Taylor, Wakulla, Jefferson and Franklin counties, the recreational gag grouper season is Apr. 1 – June 30. In the rest of Gulf state waters, the current season runs from July 1 through December 3.

## Greater Amberjack Management Update



- Recent stock assessment indicated stock is in poor shape
- Council considering modifying both recreational and commercial management measures
  - Increasing the recreational minimum size limit from 30" FL to 32", 34", or 36" FL
    - Fishermen have been supportive of 34" FL
  - Modifying or extending the June – July recreational closed season
  - Reducing commercial trip limits from 2,000 pounds to 1,500; 1,000; 750; or 500 pounds
    - Fishermen have been supportive of a 1,000 pound trip limit



*Direction requested*



Also last week, the Council continued discussions of greater amberjack management. The most recent stock assessment indicates that the stock is overfished and undergoing overfishing. Previous assessments have also indicated that this stock needs rebuilding. The Council is considering modifying management of greater amberjack to help rebuild the stock. Changes to management being considered by the Council include increasing the recreational minimum size limit from 30" fork length (FL) to 32", 34", or 36" FL; modifying or extending the June through July recreational closed season; and reducing the commercial trip limit from 2,000 pounds whole weight (ww) to 1,500, 1,000, 750, or 500 pounds ww; and modifying annual catch limits. Recreational fishermen have generally been supportive of increasing the size limit to 34" FL but have mixed views on when the closed season should be. Commercial fishermen have generally been supportive of decreasing the commercial trip limit to 1,000 pounds ww because it would allow the commercial season to stay open longer.

The Council will take final action on this item in April; however, the earliest implementation for these changes will likely be in 2016. Staff requests direction on setting the recreational minimum size limit and closed season, and the commercial trip limit at the Council.

## 2015 Gulf Federal Recreational Gray Triggerfish Season



- Closing in federal waters beginning Feb. 7 (opens Jan. 1 each year)
- NOAA Fisheries requesting state waters close when federal waters close
- Early federal waters closures have occurred since 2012
  - 2012: June 11
  - 2013: Oct. 15
  - 2014: May 1
- Overruns of annual quota result in quota paybacks
- State waters harvest after federal closures contributing to quota overruns

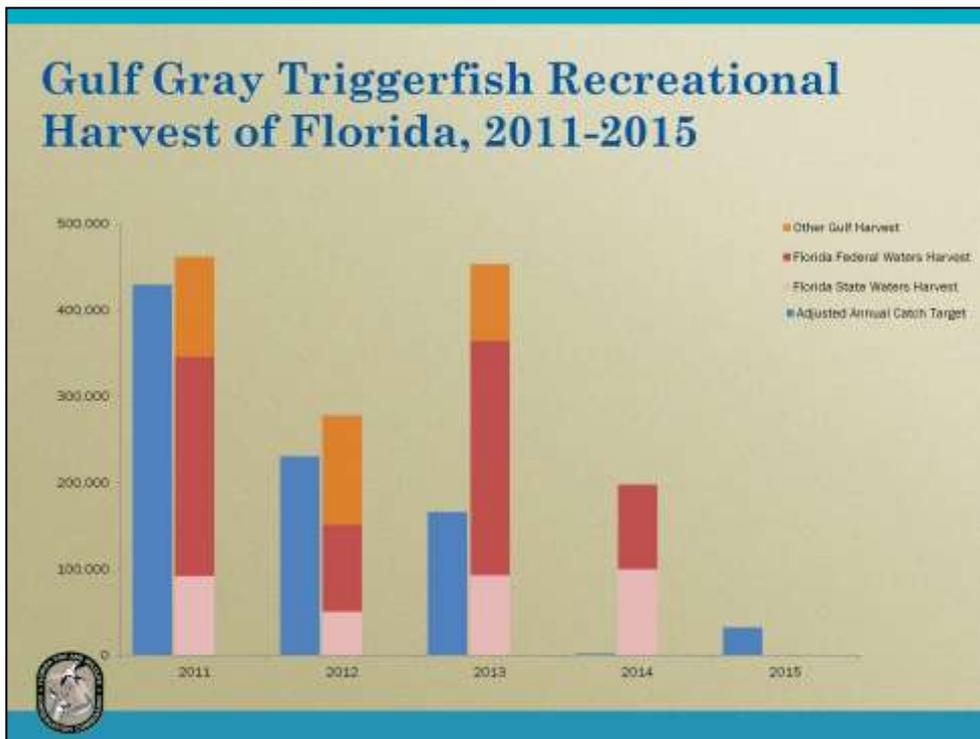
*Direction requested*




On January 26, NOAA Fisheries announced that the recreational harvest of gray triggerfish will close in federal waters for the remainder of the year beginning February 7. This early season closure is a result of accountability measures that require recreational sector quota overruns to be paid back the following year. In 2014, the recreational sector exceeded the annual catch target, resulting in a significantly reduced annual catch target for 2015 and a shortened recreational season.

Federal waters have closed early each year since 2012: June 11 in 2012, October 15 in 2013, and May 1 in 2014. The accountability measures that require quota overage paybacks were put in place in 2013. State waters have remained open during these federal closures (and remain open all months except May and June), which has contributed to the recreational quota being exceeded in 2012, 2013, and 2014. The following slide displays gray triggerfish landings and annual catch targets since 2011.

Staff requests direction on recreational management of gray triggerfish in Gulf state waters.



The above graph shows recreational harvest of gray triggerfish in the Gulf since 2011. Florida state waters harvest is shown in pink and Florida federal waters is shown in red. Harvest from the rest of the Gulf is shown in orange. The adjusted annual catch target (ACT), shown in blue, is the amount (in pounds) of gray triggerfish that Gulf anglers are allowed to harvest from the Gulf each year and accounts for overruns during the previous years' season. Once NOAA Fisheries projects the recreational ACT to be met, recreational harvest in federal waters is closed for the remainder of the year. Without overages, the ACT would be 217,100 pounds each year.

In 2012, NOAA Fisheries reduced the ACT for gray triggerfish to reduce harvest and help rebuild the stock. The recreational fishery closed for the remainder of the year on June 11. In 2013, new accountability measures were put in place requiring any overage by the recreational fishery be deducted from the following year's recreational catch limit. Since the ACT was exceeded in 2012, NOAA Fisheries reduced the ACT in 2013 to compensate for the overage. The recreational fishery closed for the remainder of the year on October 15. Harvest in 2013 far exceeded the 2013 ACT, and as a result, NOAA Fisheries reduced the 2014 ACT to 1,658 pounds. Once the 2013 landings data was finalized and the overage discovered, NOAA fisheries closed gray triggerfish for the remainder of the year on May 1. Since the 2014 annual catch target was so low, nearly all harvest in 2014 contributed to an overage resulting in a reduced ACT in 2015. The 2015 ACT is 30,107 pounds. In late January, NOAA Fisheries announced that the 2015 ACT would be reached on February 7 and the recreational fishery in federal waters would close for the remainder of the year.

## Recreational Gray Triggerfish State Season Considerations

### Benefits of keeping state waters open

- Maintaining state waters fishing opportunities

### Benefits of closing state waters

- Allowing for federal waters fishing opportunities in future years
  - Federally permitted for-hire vessels must follow federal rules even when fishing in state waters
- Contributes to stock rebuilding



There are several factors to consider when addressing the season for recreational gray triggerfish in Gulf state waters. One benefit of state waters remaining open is opportunities for Florida anglers to fish for gray triggerfish, even when federal waters close.

One benefit of closing state waters is allowing anglers more opportunities to fish for gray triggerfish in federal waters in future years due to the reduced chance of recreational overages. Federally-permitted for-hire vessels must follow the federal season, even in state waters, so closing state waters would limit the chances of the recreational ACT being exceeded and allow for fishing opportunities for tourists and anglers fishing from federally-permitted for-hire vessels in future years.

If the Commission chooses to proceed with closing state waters, staff recommends authorizing the Executive Director, in consultation with the Chairman, to close Gulf state waters to the recreational harvest of gray triggerfish via Executive Order for the remainder of 2015. This closure for state waters could be consistent with the federal closure that will begin February 7, 2015.

## Direction Requested



### Greater amberjack

- Direction requested on management options for federal waters
  - Increase 30" FL recreational minimum size limit to 34" FL
  - Maintain current June – July recreational closed season
  - Reduce the 2,000 pound commercial trip limit to 1,000 pounds

### Gray triggerfish

- Consider closing Gulf state waters to recreational harvest effective Feb. 7 via an Executive Order for 2015 only
- Input on other Council items is welcome
- Next Council meeting is March 30 – Apr. 2 in Biloxi, MS



Staff requests direction on recreational management of greater amberjack and gray triggerfish. For greater amberjack, staff requests direction on modifying the 30" fork length recreational size limit to 34" fork length, maintaining the current June 1 through July 31 recreational closed season, and reducing the 2,000 pound whole weight commercial trip limit to 1,000 pounds whole weight. Based on Council public testimony, these options seem to be supported by Florida fishermen. The Council is expected to take final action on modifying greater amberjack management measures at their next meeting.

For gray triggerfish, NOAA Fisheries has requested that the State of Florida adopt state regulations for gray triggerfish that would close the recreational season in state waters when federal waters close. If the Commission chooses to proceed with closing state waters, staff recommends authorizing the Executive Director, in consultation with the Chairman, to close Gulf state waters to the recreational harvest of gray triggerfish via Executive Order for 2015 only. This closure for state waters could be consistent with the federal closure that will begin February 7, 2015. Staff welcomes Commission direction on any other Council issues. The next Council meeting will be held in Biloxi, MS on March 30 through Apr. 3.