



This is a review and discussion of actions and discussions from the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Gulf Council) and South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (South Atlantic Council) June 8-12 meetings in Key West.

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Gulf Red Snapper Updates



- **2015 Federal Recreational Season**
 - Private anglers: June 1 – 10
 - Federally-permitted for-hire vessels: June 1 – July 14
- **Regional Management** – More public hearings to be held in fall
- **Sector Reallocation** – Council-preferred alternative would reallocate based on MRIP calibration (48.5% commercial; 51.5% recreational)
 - Current allocation: 49% recreational; 51% commercial
 - Final action in August
- **Commercial IFQ Program** – Possible updates being considered
- **For-hire Industry** – Council considering managing charter boats and headboats separate from each other



When the Commission last met in April, the 2015 recreational red snapper season in federal waters had not yet been announced. The season for private anglers was open June 1-10. The season for federally-permitted for-hire vessels also began June 1 and runs through July 14.

In June, the Gulf Council continued discussions on several red snapper management options. The Gulf Council voted to hold additional public hearings on regional management of the recreational red snapper fishery because management alternatives for regional management have changed significantly since public hearings were last held in August 2013. Public hearings will be held in the fall in Destin and the St. Petersburg area.

The Gulf Council's preferred alternative for sector reallocation, which was selected at the March Council meeting, would reallocate based on the recent calibration of Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) catch estimates and would result in allocations of 48.5% for commercial and 51.5% for recreational (current sector allocations are 51% commercial and 49% recreational). The Commission expressed support for this option at its April meeting. Final action on sector reallocation is scheduled for August.

The Gulf Council is also considering updates to the commercial red snapper IFQ program based on public input and the results of the five-year IFQ program review and will consider management options for the for-hire industry that could further split the for-hire component of the red snapper fishery into charter boats and headboats. These options will be developed at future Gulf Council meetings.

Gulf Gag Grouper



- Updated data indicates last stock assessment was overly optimistic
- Council preferred management options
 - Do not increase annual catch limit (ACL)
 - Remove Dec. 3 through Dec. 31 recreational closed season
- Council also to consider recreational minimum size limit increase from 22 to 24 inches total length
 - Council may also apply size limit change to black grouper, which is commonly misidentified as gag grouper
- Final action scheduled for October
- Once approved, federal rule changes would be effective in 2016



Direction requested on management options

A recent stock assessment indicates that gag grouper is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, but updated catch-per-unit-effort data indicates that the assessment results are overly optimistic. Fishermen have also been expressing concern about the state of the gag grouper stock. In response, the Gulf Council is taking a conservative approach to gag grouper management. Previously, the Gulf Council had been considering large increases to the annual catch limit (ACL) for gag grouper. The Gulf Council's current preferred alternatives for gag grouper would not increase the ACL, but would remove the December 3 through 31 portion of the recreational closed season, which would result in a federal recreational season open July 1 through Dec. 31. This change would provide a modest increase in recreational fishing opportunities for gag grouper at a time of year that is particularly important for southwest Florida, with minimal impact to the stock. Other options being considered by the Gulf Council include opening the season each year January 1 until the quota is projected to be reached, or setting an opening date each year such that the quota is projected to be met after Dec. 31.

At its June meeting, the Gulf Council also decided to consider an increase to the recreational minimum size limit for gag grouper as part of this amendment. Specifically, the Gulf Council will consider raising the minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches total length (TL). The Gulf Council will also consider raising the minimum size limit for black grouper, which currently also has a minimum size limit of 22 inches TL, and is commonly confused with gag grouper by anglers. Because size limit changes will also now be considered, final action on gag grouper has been delayed until the October Council meeting. Assuming the Gulf Council's changes are approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, they would take effect in 2016.

Staff requests direction on supporting the Council's preferred management options for gag grouper in federal waters and increasing the minimum size limit for gag and black groupers.

South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Discussions



- No federal red snapper season in 2015 ★ NEW
- Able to conduct golden tilefish assessment in 2015 ★ NEW
- Approved for public hearing or scoping:
 - ★ NEW ▪ Hogfish rebuilding plan for Florida Keys/East Florida stock
 - Modifications to the time-area closure for the black sea bass commercial pot fishery
 - Consideration of Spawning Special Management Zones off Florida at Daytona Steeples and Warsaw Hole
 - Strategic visioning for snapper-grouper fishery





Image source: NOAA Fisheries

In the week preceding the South Atlantic Council meeting, NOAA Fisheries announced that there will be no Atlantic red snapper season in 2015. The rules for setting the red snapper season prohibit a fishing season if the previous year's quota was exceeded. The estimated landings and discard mortality from 2014 were almost double the quota. As the population of red snapper grows, the number of discards is anticipated to continue to increase and negatively impact the fishing season each year. A stock assessment is underway for red snapper and results are expected this winter. Until then, the South Atlantic Council has directed their staff to explore alternatives that would allow anglers access to this fishery.

On a positive note, NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center received additional funding to conduct an additional stock assessment in 2015. The South Atlantic Council elected to move the golden tilefish update stock assessment ahead of schedule. Results from this assessment will be available in 2016.

The South Atlantic Council approved several items for public hearing or scoping meetings this summer, including management changes for hogfish. The 2015 hogfish assessment determined that there are two stocks of hogfish within the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction: a Florida Keys/East Florida (FLK/EFL) stock and a Georgia-North Carolina (GA-NC) stock. The FLK/EFL stock is overfished with overfishing occurring, so the South Atlantic Council needs to establish a rebuilding plan. The rebuilding plan includes proposed changes to commercial and recreational limits. Similar changes have been proposed for the GA-NC stock to prevent the stock from becoming overfished.

Other items, which are going out for a second or third round of public comment, include:

- Reducing the length and area of the commercial black sea bass pot fishery closure to increase access for fishermen while maintaining protections for the endangered north Atlantic right whale.
- Considering designation of Spawning Special Management Zones, which are intended to protect snapper grouper spawning aggregations and spawning sites by prohibiting bottom fishing and anchoring. There are two proposed areas off Florida that were suggested by fishermen: Daytona Steeples, which is located about 50 miles offshore of Ponce Inlet, and Warsaw Hole, which is approximately 20 miles southwest of the Marquesas.
- Creating a strategic Vision Blueprint for future management of the snapper-grouper fishery.

Other South Atlantic Items



- Barracuda
 - Council has no plans to manage fishery
 - Florida can extend regulations into federal waters
- Staghorn and Elkhorn Coral Recovery Plan
 - ESA status: Threatened
 - 400-year timeline
 - \$255 million expense
- Sponsoring Citizen Science Workshop
- Executive Director Bob Mahood retiring end of 2015




At the request of FWC staff, the South Atlantic Council agreed to issue a letter to the State of Florida that indicates they have no intention to manage the barracuda fishery in federal waters. This paves the way for FWC to extend any regulations they may implement for barracuda in state waters out into federal waters adjacent to Florida.

NOAA Fisheries staff presented the Recovery Plan for elkhorn and staghorn corals to the South Atlantic Council. These coral species are listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Recovery Plan promotes the conservation of elkhorn and staghorn corals by providing guidance for natural resource managers and others whose activities may promote, inhibit, or delay elkhorn and staghorn coral recovery (i.e., removal from the endangered species list). According to Recovery Plan, it is anticipated that it will take 400 years and cost \$255 million dollars for these species to recover and be delisted.

Like all marine fisheries managers, the South Atlantic Council is always seeking to improve the quality and availability of scientific data. To this end, the South Atlantic Council will sponsor a Citizen Science Workshop in January to develop guidance for and a plan to partner with fishermen to collect scientific information that can be used in stock assessments.

At the June meeting, Bob Mahood, the South Atlantic Council executive director, formally announced his plan to retire at the end of December 2015. Bob is only the third person to have held this position, and he will be retiring after 30 years of service. The South Atlantic Council will conduct a nation-wide search to find an appropriate replacement.

South Florida Fisheries Management




- Considering ways to create consistent regulations for:
 - Yellowtail snapper
 - Mutton snapper
 - Black grouper
 - Shallow-water groupers
- Management strategies discussed include:
 - Delegation of management authority to State of Florida:
 - Size limits
 - Bag and trip limits
 - Seasons
 - Shared quotas and accountability measures
- Councils requests FWC conduct outreach






The Gulf Council and South Atlantic Council met in a rare, joint session to discuss changes for jointly-managed species, as well as issues that have arisen at the jurisdictional boundary between the councils. For the last several years, both councils have been working together to address the complex regulatory environment that exists in the Florida Keys. In south Florida, fish from the same stock may be managed under the authority of the Gulf Council, South Atlantic Council, and the State of Florida. This can lead to inconsistent rules and confusion for fishermen.

The councils reviewed a draft plan designed to create uniform fishing regulations in the waters off South Florida, particularly in the Keys, in order to decrease the burdens for fishermen that may have to follow multiple jurisdictional regulations on a single fishing trip. The councils are focusing their efforts on creating consistent regulations for yellowtail snapper, mutton snapper, black grouper, and other shallow-water groupers, such as gag and red grouper. Management approaches being explored include delegating management authority to the State of Florida to set seasons, bag and trip limits, and size limits in federal waters for yellowtail snapper, mutton snapper, and black grouper. These species are infrequently seen or harvested outside of Florida. The councils are also considering managing the three species under a single quota with uniform accountability measures. While they did not agree on every approach, the councils will continue development of this amendment as they attempt to improve the regulatory environment for fisheries in south Florida.

During public comment, fishermen expressed concern about delegating management authority to the State of Florida and some of the other alternatives being considered. Based on public comment, it was clear to council members that fishermen held many misconceptions about what delegation meant and how the options under consideration would affect the fisheries. The councils requested that FWC conduct outreach on south Florida management options before the councils take up the issue again. This outreach can occur during FWC's scheduled state-wide workshops in July.

Joint Coastal Migratory Pelagic Management




- Continuing development of a joint amendment for king mackerel that would:
 - Redefine the location of the stock mixing zone
 - Set new ACLs
 - Modify subzone management and subquotas
 - Allow sale of bycatch by federal shark gill net fishery
- Separate management of coastal migratory pelagic species not likely to move forward




The other highlight of the Joint Council session was a discussion on proposed management changes to the coastal migratory pelagic fishery, which includes king mackerel, Spanish mackerel and cobia.

Results from the 2014 king mackerel stock assessment found that the boundaries used to manage the Gulf and Atlantic stocks need to be revised, and changes to catch limits are necessary. Based on the findings of the assessment, the councils are proposing to set a new, year-round boundary between the Gulf and Atlantic stocks at the Councils' jurisdictional boundary, which is at 83 degrees west longitude off the Florida Keys. There is some mixing that occurs between the stocks, but the assessment found that the area where mixing occurs is smaller than previously believed and in waters south of Monroe County. Other management changes proposed for king mackerel include new ACLs for each stock, subzone trip limits, and subquotas. There is also a proposal to restore the ability of fishermen in the Atlantic shark gill net fishery to sell king mackerel that are incidentally caught in their nets.

There has been some interest in the Councils managing the coastal migratory pelagic fishery separately. This would mean that each Council would create its own fishery management plan for coastal migratory pelagic species and separate permits. The Gulf Council favors this action, but the South Atlantic Council does not. The South Atlantic Council is concerned this action will result in South Atlantic fishermen that traditionally fish in the Gulf losing access to the Gulf fishery. Because of the difference of opinion, this separation of the fishery management plan will not likely move forward.

Direction Requested



- Direction requested on Gulf gag grouper
 - Do not increase ACL
 - Remove Dec. 3-31 recreational closure
 - Raise recreational minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches TL (for gag and black groupers)
- Input on other Council items is welcome
- Next Gulf Council meeting is Aug. 10-14 in New Orleans, LA
- Next South Atlantic Council meeting is Sept. 14-18 in Hilton Head, SC



Staff requests direction on Gulf gag grouper management and whether to support the Council's preferred alternatives, which would not increase the ACL, but would remove the Dec. 3-31 portion of the recreational season closure. Staff also requests direction on potentially raising the recreational minimum size limit from 22 to 24 inches TL for both gag and black groupers.

As always, input on other Council items is welcome. The next Gulf Council meeting is Aug. 10-14 in New Orleans, LA, and the next South Atlantic Council meeting is Sept. 14-18 in Hilton Head, SC.