



# South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

## News Release

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CONTACT: Kim Iverson  
Public Information Officer  
Toll Free: 866/SAFMC-10 or 843/571-4366  
kim.iverson@safmc.net

### **Council Delays Changes to Atlantic Cobia Management**

*Fishery managers to wait for Stock ID Workshop preliminary results available in June*

After reviewing public comment and considering various management alternatives and timing, members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council decided to delay approval of an amendment to remove Atlantic cobia from the current federal management plan. The amendment is designed to reduce complicated regulations and improve flexibility in the management of Atlantic cobia from Georgia to New York. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, the move would allow for the fishery to be managed solely by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC).

The decision came after Council members discussed the need to wait for preliminary results from a Cobia Stock ID Workshop scheduled for April. The current management boundary between Florida and Georgia was established following a 2013 stock assessment. Fishermen and others have expressed concerns about the boundary change since that time. The Council decided to wait until their June 11-15, 2018 meeting, when preliminary results from the Stock ID workshop and Advisory Panel recommendations would be available for consideration before moving forward. Council members also heard concerns from legal counsel that the document should further specify what will happen to regulations in federal waters before the amendment's approval.

Prized for their delicious taste and relatively large size, the recreational harvest of Atlantic cobia has increased in recent years. The recreational fishery closed in federal waters in June 2016 after landings estimates exceeded the annual catch limit the previous year and closed again in January 2017, as state landings were expected to exceed the federal catch limits. The recreational fishery is currently open in federal waters, but subject to closure by NOAA Fisheries should catch estimates exceed the annual catch limit currently in place. Fish harvested in state waters count against the annual catch limit.

The majority of Atlantic cobia are harvested in state waters, within 3 miles of shore in North Carolina and Virginia. They can also be found offshore and occur more readily in federal waters off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina as they migrate northward to spawn. Cobia harvested along the east coast of Florida are considered part of the Gulf of Mexico stock and are managed separately.

At the request of the Council, the ASMFC began developing an interstate management plan for Atlantic cobia last year. That plan will become effective in state waters from Georgia to New York in April 2018 and aligns with current federal regulations for Atlantic cobia. Under the ASMFC Interstate Plan, state-specific allocations are established based on the current federal annual catch limit of 620,000 pounds, with North Carolina and Virginia receiving the majority of the allocation based on previous landings.

Individual states have submitted plans for Atlantic cobia (including regulations for a minimum size limit, vessel limit, and season) to the ASMFC based on those allocations. The state regulations are designed to keep harvest levels below the allocated state-specific pounds of Atlantic cobia. Under federal law, the states may also request that state regulations for Atlantic cobia be extended into federal waters.

Comments from fishermen and others received during public hearings held in January and as part of the March Council meeting primarily supported removing Atlantic cobia from the federal management plan and providing the states more latitude in setting regulations based on the ASMFC Interstate Plan. Once fully removed from the federal management plan, Atlantic Group Cobia would be regulated in both state and federal waters under ASMFC. The Cobia Stock ID Workshop is scheduled for April 10-12, 2018 in Charleston, SC and a benchmark stock assessment will be conducted in 2019. For additional information, visit: <http://sedarweb.org/sedar-58>.

## **Council Delays Changes for Atlantic Cobia *(continued)***

### **Other Business**

The Council considered over 600 written comments and heard public testimony this week, before voting to send a letter to NOAA Fisheries expressing their concerns on an Exempted Fishery Permit request to conduct research and evaluate pelagic longline catch rates in a portion of an area off the east coast of Florida currently closed to longline fishing. The majority of the comments received, including those from recreational fishing organizations, were in opposition to the permit, citing concerns about discards of recreational and commercially important species, impacts to protected resources, increased landings of dolphin fish, and other concerns. The Council will submit its formal recommendations and a copy of comments received on the Exempted Fishery Permit to NOAA Fisheries, the agency responsible for making the final decision on issuance of the permit.

The Council also continued work on Snapper Grouper Amendment 46 to improve recreational data collection. The amendment includes options for a private recreational snapper grouper permit designed to improve effort estimates that may eventually be used to improve landings estimates. The amendment also includes options for recreational reporting requirements. A separate framework amendment will also be developed to address best fishing practices. The Council provided guidance on actions and alternatives.

Two amendments are being developed as part of the Council's Vision Blueprint for the snapper grouper fishery, a long-term approach to management developed with stakeholder input. Vision Blueprint Regulatory Amendment 26 addresses recreational measures including modifications to aggregate species composition, removal of size limits, changes to bag limits and gear requirements for certain deepwater species, and modifications to shallow water species. Regulatory Amendment 26 would also reduce the recreational minimum size limit for gray triggerfish off the east coast of Florida for consistency with state regulations. Vision Blueprint Regulatory Amendment 27 addresses commercial measures, including alternatives for split seasons for blueline tilefish, snowy grouper, greater amberjack and red porgy. Changes to the trip limit for vermilion snapper, jacks, and modification to the seasonal prohibition on red grouper are also being considered. The Council approved both amendments for public hearings to be held later this spring.

Charter fishermen targeting snapper grouper species in federal waters off the South Atlantic are required to have a federal South Atlantic For-Hire Snapper Grouper permit. At the request of the Council's Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel and considering public input, the Council reviewed an options paper for public scoping to get input on establishing a moratorium on the issuance of these permits. The moratorium is being considered to help improve logbook reporting compliance, recreational data quality, business planning, professionalize the for-hire fleet, address localized overcapacity, and other concerns. The Council provided recommendations for the scoping document and will review it again during its June 2018 meeting.

The Council bid an emotional farewell to Dr. Michelle Duval, the Council representative for the NC Division of Marine Fisheries and former Council Chair. Dr. Duval also served as Chair as the Council's Snapper Grouper Committee for several years and was commended for her leadership and guidance during her service on the Council. She joins her husband Scott as they move to Pennsylvania.

Final Committee Reports, a meeting Story Map, Meeting Report and other materials from this week's Council meeting are available from the Council's website at: <http://safmc.net/safmc-meetings/council-meetings/>. The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council is scheduled for June 11-15, 2018 in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

**The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.**