



South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

Press Release

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Council Approves Electronic Reporting for Federally Permitted Charter Vessels *For-hire pilot project underway; measures approved for mutton snapper; scoping options for red snapper*

Federally permitted charter vessels in the snapper grouper, dolphin wahoo, and coastal migratory pelagic (mackerel and cobia) fisheries along the Atlantic Coast will have the opportunity to electronically report their fishing activities, including landings and discards, beginning in mid-2017. Mandatory reporting for the federally permitted charter vessels will begin in 2018. That's the intent of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council after it approved measures to implement the reporting program during its meeting this week in Atlantic Beach, North Carolina. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, the reporting requirements proposed in the For-Hire Electronic Reporting Amendment are expected to improve the accuracy and timeliness of data available for management and stock assessments, allow better monitoring of landings and discards, and allow managers to more accurately assess the impacts of regulations on the for-hire industry in federal waters.

Currently for-hire charter vessels, commonly referred to as "6-pack" vessels for the number of customers they are allowed to carry, are considered part of the recreational fishery for data collection purposes and there are no logbook reporting requirements. Getting a handle on the amount of fish harvested and sometimes even more importantly, the number of fish released by offshore recreational fishermen is a daunting task. Estimates are made using data collected through a combination of dockside intercepts, telephone surveys and most recently, mail surveys - all conducted through NOAA Fisheries' Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Data from federally permitted charter vessels are currently included as part of the MRIP along with data estimates for private recreational anglers.

The new reporting requirements are expected to affect approximately 2,000 charter vessels with Federal For-Hire Permits. Federally permitted headboats or "party boats" that carry more than six customers are currently required to submit weekly electronic reports through the Southeast Region Headboat Survey. The For-Hire Reporting Amendment would also change reporting deadlines for headboats to improve timeliness of reporting.

"We realize that implementing a reporting program affecting nearly 2,000 charter vessels will take time," said Mel Bell, Chair of the Council's Data Collection Committee and representative for the SC Department of Natural Resources' Marine Resources Division. "Having a voluntary program in place for next year will provide an opportunity for NOAA Fisheries to address any reporting system issues and allow charter captains the chance to become familiar with the reporting system," explained Bell. "We intend to keep reporting as simple as possible by providing a platform that will allow captains to complete electronic reports while offshore or at home on their computers and avoiding duplicative reporting requirements."

The Council received an update on a pilot electronic reporting project currently being conducted in partnership with the Atlantic Coast Cooperative Statistics Program and the States of SC, GA and FL. A total of 24 charter vessels from North Carolina to the Florida Keys are participating, using onboard tablets to test software and ease of reporting. The project also involves testing a dockside validation mobile app, an electronic measuring board, and a mobile app for law enforcement. The Council is pursuing additional program funding for outreach and training relative to implementation of the for-hire reporting requirement.

After reviewing public comment and much discussion, the Council requested that staff develop a white paper to begin outlining information on limited entry options for federal for-hire permits in the snapper grouper fishery. The Council's Snapper Grouper Committee will continue discussions during its 2017 meetings. The Council decided not to pursue limited entry for Dolphin Wahoo and Coastal Migratory Pelagic for-hire permits at this time.

Mutton Snapper, Red Snapper and Other Actions

The Council approved Snapper Grouper Amendment 41 for review by the Secretary of Commerce. The amendment addresses management measures for mutton snapper in the South Atlantic and includes regulations to

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Electronic Reporting *(Continued)*

designate April through June as spawning months, retain mutton snapper in the 10-snapper aggregate bag limit and set the mutton snapper bag limit at 5 per person/day year round, specify a commercial trip limit during the spawning months of 5 per person/day with a trip limit of 500 pounds during the “regular season” (non-spawning season months), and increase the minimum size limit for mutton snapper from 16 inches to 18 inches total length.

Discussions continued on options for the red snapper fishery. The fishery remains closed in federal waters. Additional management measures or modifications to current management measures are needed to reduce the large number of dead discards contributing to the stock’s overfishing status as the stock continues to rebuild. The Council will solicit public input during a series of in-person scoping meetings scheduled for January and February 2017.

Public hearings will be held in conjunction with the January/February scoping meetings on allocation measures for yellowtail snapper. The Council had initially included both yellowtail snapper and dolphin in a joint amendment to address allocations after the commercial fishery was closed for both species in 2015. The Council will continue to address allocation measures for dolphin during its March 2017 meeting. In addition, the Council approved Visioning Amendments for public scoping with measures for both commercial and recreational snapper grouper fisheries as a part of the Council Vision Blueprint for the Snapper Grouper Fishery. Scoping for the Visioning Amendments will be held via webinar. Schedules for the public hearings and scoping meetings will be publicized as they are finalized.

The Council decided not to move forward with a proposed change to the fishing year for Atlantic cobia, noting the efforts of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) to develop a complementary management plan to allow additional flexibility for state management considerations. The fishing year change may be addressed at a later date if necessary. The ASMFC is currently soliciting public input on proposed measures.

The next Council meeting is scheduled for March 6-10, 2017 at the Westin Jekyll Island, Jekyll Island, Georgia. Final committee reports and other materials from this week’s meeting are available from the Council’s website at <http://safmc.net/safmc-meetings/council-meetings/>. Read further details and see images and other related meeting links at the December 2016 Council Meeting Round-up Story Map: <http://arcg.is/2gUp616>. The December 2016 Meeting Report is also available at: http://safmc.net/download/SAFMC_Dec2016_MeetingSummary.pdf.