

Summary of Public Hearing Comments

Snapper Grouper Amendment 37 (Hogfish)

Public hearings for Snapper Grouper Amendment 37 were conducted the week of January 25, 2016 in Georgia and the Carolinas. Hearings in Florida took place the week of February 1, 2016. A Question & Answer webinar was held on January 21, 2016 but there were no members of the public in attendance. The South Atlantic Council also accepted written comments on Amendment 37 from January 22 through February 10, 2016.

Below is a summary of written comments received and those obtained during the hearings. Minutes for all the hearings and copies of all the written comments are also included herein.

Georgia & Carolinas:

- Since there is no stock assessment that can be used for the GA-NC stock of hogfish, the Council should not consider changes in management for that stock. At the proposed commercial ACL, the season will only last 9 months.
- Concern that the MRIP survey is not sampling dive boats adequately and, therefore, recreational estimates for the GA-NC stock do not reflect abundance of hogfish in that region.
- Hogfish have become a popular item in restaurants in Charlotte, Raleigh, and Myrtle Beach.
- Council should consider conservative management measures for hogfish in the Carolinas, especially for the commercial sector because Florida vessels fishing off the Carolinas are putting increased pressure on the resource.
- Concern that the 25-pound proposed commercial trip limit in Florida will cause effort shift to Carolinas.
- Council should consider a two-month spawning season (May-June) closure for hogfish in the Carolinas (for both sectors) and 500-pound commercial trip limit. OR no spawning closure and decrease the trip limit to 350 pounds.
- General support for preferred recreational management measures for the GA-NC stock.
- Keep 5-fish recreational bag limit for the GA-NC stock and no commercial trip limit or the largest possible. Increase minimum size to 16 inches.
- Consider implementing commercial trip limit similar to what is currently in place in NC (150 pounds first day and 100 pounds each additional day to a max of 750 pounds?). Otherwise, consider commercial trip limit of 700 pounds.
- Consider a head count trip limit for commercial sector in the Carolinas because there is a lot of variation in weight among hogfish in that region.

Florida:

- Most support for an increase in the minimum size limit to 16 inches FL.
- Some commenters supported a 17-inch minimum size limit for Florida hogfish.
- Support for the preferred 15-inch FL but even better would be increasing to 14” up to 16” over 3 years (based on the growth rates of healthier stocks like those in Dry Tortugas or the Gulf, hogfish will reach 16 inches in 2-3 years).
- Consider step-up increase in minimum size limit for Florida hogfish up to 18” or 20”.
- A large number of undersized hogfish are harvested during mini-season. An increase in minimum size limit without prohibiting harvest during mini-season could lead to massive discards. Suggest prohibiting recreational harvest of hogfish during August.
- Suggestion to close recreational harvest of hogfish during June through August.
- Consider a 3-fish bag limit or add to snapper aggregate.
- Commercial fishermen who target hogfish in the Keys stated that the proposed trip limit would impact them significantly because they engage in multi-day trips. At 25 pounds per trip, they would not be able to stay in business.
- If trip limit needs to go in place, consider daily trip limit for Florida hogfish.
- Consider no commercial trip limit in Florida, as the commercial sector has not hit its ACL.
- An increase in the minimum size limit may affect dockside value and price to consumers because restaurants want a certain size fillet.
- Commercial fishermen in the Keys who have both SA and Gulf permits want boundary between SA and Gulf stock to be a the jurisdictional boundary. Other commenters supported the Council’s preferred (line due west just south of Cape Sable).
- Support for bag limit of 2 per person per day or 2 per vessel per day, whichever is more restrictive.
- Some support for 1 hogfish per person per day. Also consider a possible slot limit or a soft slot limit where only one fish over 21-22 inches, for instance, can be taken per vessel so as to limit the number of large males that can be taken while still maintaining trophy fishing.

I just want comment, if you want to help the fish go back to grow we not need more regulation on fishing we need regulated the government dumped millions gallons of contaminated Water in the Biscayne bay famous stinking Hole from Miami Dade Water and sewer Department, if a private company act like this the government will shut down the private company but who control the Government ?

Ps: I do not have any information of Broward county or Palm Beach but will Fantastic to find out what are they doing with the contaminated wasted water maybe they do the same. that alone will bring the fish back

Sincerely

MAGIN HERNANDEZ

- 1) Jared Guess (951 Caroline St., Key West, FL 33040; jguess26@hotmail.com)
Comment: I do not want Western Dry Rocks closed for fishing. I do not want hogfish restrictions raised or trip limits altered. I do not want mutton snapper regulations changed.
- 2) Griffin Helwig (951 Carolin St. Key West, FL 33040; captain@flatsfishingkeywest.com)
Comment: I do not want Western Dry Rocks closed for fishing. I do not want hogfish restrictions raised or trip limits altered. I do not want mutton snapper regulations changed.
- 3) Eric Evans (22 B 8th Ave., Key West, FL 33040; eevans2836@yahoo.com)
Comment: Closure of Western Dry Rocks (not needed). No trip limit on hogfish or muttons. Hogfish should not be limited but bigger than 15 inches.
- 4) Caul Massaulo (1325 Simonton St, Key West, FL 33040)
Comment: Closure to have limit of hogfish bad. "Have good data."

Myself and fellow group of Spearfishing friends would like to voice our opinion in regards to harvest of both species. I for one, am out Spearfishing one to two days a week in the Miami area. We as spear fishermen are very picky as to size and quality of fish we shoot. In regards to Mutton snapper I do feel that over the years I've seen less and less large mutton mostly in the 25"-35" range they are very scarce. We are for AM 41 being regulated and possibly seasoned to help regenerate larger populations of bigger mutton. Now in regards to Hogfish, I strongly agree that the population of hogfish is endangered at least the larger males for that matter. We do feel as a group that new regulations are very important for this species to thrive. We also feel tho that introducing a seasonal closure will hurt local captains businesses and commercial spearfisherman such as myself who target large hogfish for resale and customers during winter months, but instead it would be much more reasonable while still affective to bring size limits up from 12" to 16" or 17" with a 3 fish bag limit or maybe even adding hogfish to the snapper aggregate limit (even tho it isn't in the same species). Allowing for guys such as myself who make a living off of chartering Spearos during winter months who specifically dream of shooting large hogfish. Thank you very much for taking the time to read our message.

Cpt. William L Yuque
Sharkys Entertainment Corp.
Hialeah, Fl, 33015
(786) 486-2278
Yuquel@gmail.com

Regarding Amendment 37 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region - Hogfish, I recently attended the session in Key West this past week and have the following comments:

Regarding the Boundary Line, I am in favor of Sub-alternative 2c - a line just south of Cape Sable.

I would support increasing the minimum legal size for Hogfish for South Florida and the Florida Keys to 16 inches.

I would support a commercial trip limit for Hogfish for South Florida and the Florida Keys of 25 lbs per trip.

I would support recreational bag limits of Hogfish for South Florida and the Florida Keys of 2 fish per person per day or 2 fish per vessel per trip per day (whichever is less).

I would support a season closing (both commercial and recreational) for Hogfish for South Florida and the Florida Keys of July and August.

In the implementation of whatever rules are decided on for Hogfish, I would suggest encouraging recreational and commercial anglers to take Lionfish instead. Lionfish have a very similar flavor, have no bag, size or season limits, and overfishing is not a concern. In my opinion, this would also be a viable alternative to restaurants as a substitute for there special Hogfish sandwiches if marketed properly (I.e. As the daily special and helping rid the area of an invasive species at the same time).

Please let me know if you have any questions about any of my statements. Thank you for all the work you are doing to protect our fisheries; it is very much appreciated.

Respectfully Yours,
Mr. Stefan C Blache
Industrial Sector Portfolio Leader
IBM Global Technology Infrastructure Services
Phone: 313-407-7208
E-Mail: sblache@us.ibm.com

We dive often in the Keys and have found Hogfish to be very plentiful. But there is not much meat on a 12 inch fish 15 inches might be better suited. Overfished I don't believe that is accurate.

Ed Gocher

To the SAMFC,

Hello, my name is Tony Hancock, I am a commercial and recreational spearfisherman from Jacksonville FL. I attend as many of the fisheries meetings in person as I can and am a board member of the Council For Sustainable Fishing, an advocacy group interested in protecting fish, fishing and fishermen.

I made my first recreational and commercial dives in 1988 off Jacksonville on the FV Suzy Q.

I have the following experience

4000+ commercial dives off NE FL, GA, SC and NC

2000+ recreational dives from Daytona to Brunswick

1500+ recreational dives from the Marquesas to Key Largo

100+ recreational dives from Vero south to Fort Pierce

100+ recreational dives in the Gulf

Over the last nearly 30 years I have seen the S. Florida and Keys stocks decline and am happy the council is taking action, but do not accept the total catch numbers, I believe they are lower but still warrant action.

In that same time my experience as crew or captain of the FV Reef Raider II and as captain of the FV Number 1 as well as my recreational experience has given me the opinion that the GA-NC stock is vibrant and healthy but does deserve some protection to ensure sustainable catches. Following are my suggestions.

1. Separate the FL/Keys stock and the GA-NC stock
2. Institute a 16 inch minimum in all fisheries
3. Institute commercial trip limits in the FL-Keys stock
4. No commercial trip limit or the largest possible in the GA-NC stock
5. Reduce the recreational bag limit in the FL-Keys stock
6. Keep the 5 fish recreational limit in the GA-NC stock

The issues in S. Florida are population density, run-off, habitat destruction and poaching (illegal commercial fishing). The Council needs to be more proactive in addressing these where it can. There are fish houses and restaurants openly buying poached fish. There are people taking too many fish and small fish as well. Beach renourishment, sewage, residential and agricultural runoff aren't helping either.

Thank you for taking my comments. Tony Hancock

My name is Steve Mechling. I live in Wilmington NC and enjoy fishing and diving for hogfish. I am pleased with the preferred options the council have recommended with regard to season, fork length, and daily limits. The commercial trip limit (500 lb) does have me worried though. Given that the Florida trip limit will be reduced to 25 lbs per trip concerns me that this may make it irresistible to more commercial dive operations to come to the GA-NC region to conduct business, thus putting a greater stress on this stock of fish.

Steve Mechling

Just weighing in my two cents on the hogfish issue. I am a physician here in Tampa and I frequently spearfish in the Florida keys. Personally I have only speared 5 hogfish or so in the past 5 or 6 years because I simply refuse to spear a 12 inch hogfish. The meat is simply not worth it. In essence I am in support of any increase in size on hogfish as well as closures if indicated. I think 15 should be the minimum with the eventual increase to 18 or 20 in the future. I think most spearfishermen like myself are more than just pure meat hunters and truly enjoy trophy fish. In regards to hogfish in the keys I haven't seen a trophy in many years and I know the habitat is there to support it if we simply reduce the pressure. Thank you.

Ross Simon MD

The following summarizes my comments for Snapper/Grouper Amendment 37 Hogfish. I am only commenting on the GA-NC portion of the proposed amendment.

I want to thank the council and staff for making a good decision on selecting the preferred alternatives of 2 fish on the bag limit and 17 inches for the length limit for the GA-NC recreational fishery. These preferred alternatives are scientifically sound while providing long term management of the species in the event that a stock assessment does not occur. I would also like to say thank you and good job of selecting the preferred alternative of no harvest season for the recreation fisherman. Spear-fishermen and hook/line fishermen experience their best catches during different times of the year. No harvest season addresses these concerns.

The commercial preferred alternatives, in my opinion, do not adequately account for the future management of the species. Currently, there is not a stock assessment scheduled for the GA-NC hogfish stock and there has not been a proposal to schedule an assessment. Therefore, I respectfully request the council to reconsider the preferred alternative selection for the commercial trip limit of 500lbs. Of the alternatives to select from, almost all (80-90%) commercial hogfish trips in the GA-NC sector are 250lbs or under. This data is represented on page 86 of the Amendment Document.

The concern of the liberal trip limit is born from the effects of an increase in fishery participation and long term management of the stock. With high trip limits and no scheduled stock assessment scheduled, the fishery could be wiped out and the council never know about until stock collapse. With the proposed regulations in the FLA stock, and the increase of FLA boats participating in the GA-NC fishery (specifically the FLA boats in the Frying Pan Shoals area), we have a recipe for trouble and stock decline.

To adequately address the hogfish commercial trip limit. I propose two solutions:

1 - A spawning closure (applicable to both rec and comm) of May through June and retain the 500lb trip limit.

or

2 - No spawning closure and decrease the trip limit to 350 lbs. According to page 86, figure 4.9.2 of the Amendment Document, 350lbs would encompass 95% or more off all commercial trips.

I feel these solutions represent an excellent compromise of commercial interest, territorial spawning pressures, and stock conservation.

The GA-NC hogfish stock is a unique and special fishery. In a rare circumstance, the council has the opportunity to maintain a stock that is in good condition as opposed to instituting severe restrictions needed for stock rebuilding needed for other fisheries. I trust the council will make a good decision based upon the interest of all parties, and most importantly, for the hogfish.

Thank you

Pete Stafford

I recently attended the Key West meeting , which ran late ,due to overwhelming comments regarding mutton snapper issues. For years our fishermen have fought the Western dry rock proposed closed area on many different levels , mainly from self serving interests such as the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. As a result the meeting ran late. I must commend your staff for their patience as the meeting went over an hour past schedule.

Hogfish 37

First let me say I find little confidence in the study done. Many locations chosen were obvious spots that had few if any hogfish present due to terrain which would not support a school of fish , even a migratory one such as hogfish. The choice of these locations skew the results , showing a lower population , and creating an inaccurate study.

Hogfish are migratory ,they are not resident fish and constantly move from area to another for food , to try and count a moving population is difficult , as they do not always stay on structure, but also graze grassy areas when the current is lighter, and return to structure when the current increases to draft behind it , reducing the amount of energy used or to rest. Structure can vary from a sea fan, a depression on the bottom, or an actual coral head . This is another factor making an accurate population count difficult .

Hogfish are not as dumb as they seem , the reason they "turn sideways" and give you an easy shot placement with spear gear, is because their eyes are located on the side of the head and they are trying to get a better view of you. Once educated to predation and harvest Hogfish do know to avoid spear fishermen , and many do leave a location as soon as harvesters enter a location . More fish not counted.

Jokingly , west of Key West fish are referred to as "country fish " as they have never encountered divers before , and are easier to shoot. East of Key West they are referred to as "City fish " as they have met divers before and generally avoid them , swimming out into the grass or mud off the structure as they have learned to avoid harvesters . Most of these fish tend to be larger and older and leave their smaller companions to learn the hard way . More fish not counted.

Most researchers and fish counters lack the skills necessary to get accurate fish counts. Loud , clunky , breathing excessively ,elevated heart rate ,no camouflage . and the number one mistake ; splashing in , giant stride entries, rolling in backwards , making a ton of noise scares off more fish than you can imagine . The fish already know you are there , they heard your boat , chances are you anchored , and you have been stomping around on the deck , which broadcast into the water through the hull of the boat like a loudspeaker. Then you drop in , this is equivalent to ringing the doorbell and banging on the door of their house. Many fish leave or hide immediately. More fish not counted.

Even experienced harvesters experienced in stalking have alert fish that leave immediately upon arrival. Fish are Smart.

When is harvest highest ? Accurately , your study showed July /August . Why ? Mini season . I have worked at Lost Reef Adventures since 1989 , where I also do scuba air fills, especially during the 2 weeks before mini season until 2 weeks after regular season . There is a huge spike in air fills due to the many visitors in the Keys . I fill most 1x day , Many 2x day . I have learned much from these visitors regarding their habits while filling their tanks as most are repeat customers and while waiting for the tanks to fill are quite talkative.

They are here for extended stays , most 2 weeks at least . They "scout " everyday prior to mini season and during this activity they harvest hogfish . Most are eager to show or tell of their catches and they limit out regularly . Most have at least 4 people on their vessel.

The areas they are "scouting" lobster are generally shallow 12ft or less with little current and have large populations of juvenile hogfish.

While scouting , they disturb the lobsters and here come the hogs lured in by the sound of squealing lobsters. They shoot the first fish they see , undersize or not , shoot , then measure , 10 inch hogs are discarded by the thousands by our visitors and their children, friends, on vacation are "learning" to spear .Hogfish travel in schools are similar age and size Hogfish are not the only species to incur large

juvenile population losses during this time, red grouper, blacks and an assortment of other species suffer the "slings and arrows" of being a target during this period.
The amount of discards incurred during learning to spearfish is huge on the Keys wide scale.

Spearfishing's current popularity is at a all time high and the industry is expanding and has equipment for all skill levels.

Enter the pole spear, the entry level tool of choice for vacation . Simple , cheap, and yellow ; yet deceptively difficult to use . This tool produces more discards than any other piece of equipment . Why ? Paralyzer tips , the majority of tips on pole spears, require that after striking a fish you need to push , not pull the spear on ascent . Other wise a large amount of fish come off and are lost / not recovered.

Most pole spears flex to the side the band is pulled to. This results in the an arc in the flight and an inaccurate shot, wounding the fish , rather than a kill shot. Not knowing to twist the bad around the shaft while you pull it back to counteract the arc isn't something you are going to learn yourself in a few weeks unless told. The point is the learning curve contributes to discards .

I would support no spearing hogfish during the pre mini-season through 2 weeks after regular season start . Or a reduced bag limit as an alternative .

Raising the size limit would only extrapolate the amount of discards during this and others times thereby negating any perceived gains.

Biologically ; the 12 inch limit has been the norm for FWCC management , going to a larger size limit is only something that is psychologically satisfying that most would "feel" better about shooting having gotten past the initial "learning curve". Chance are this harvester has upgraded to a trigger speargun.

What does the restaurant/ fish market industry want ? Portion size , a 12 inch hog is a 6 oz. portion on each fillet. 14 inch hog is 8 oz.

That is the serving size on most servings , much bigger and there can be "trimmings" that must be used in other dishes . My (Half Shell ,and Dante's)seafood /restaurant wants a 14 inch hogfish. The "Hogfish Grill and Bar " prefers a 12 inch. Portion control.

Local commercial harvest does not provide the majority of hogfish to restaurants , but imports from South America provide the bulk of hogfish sold.

Regulations regarding imports; imports from other Countries need to adhere to the size limits of the receiving State. That being the case , the box after box of 12 inch hogs I see coming from "Cisco" " (a fish importer from Miami) would need to be the new limit also.

This could have unforeseen impacts regarding availability and price also.

I also prefer the current boundaries between the Gulf and South Atlantic aka "the blue line" Already possessing a VMS and Gulf permit for the right to fish those waters , changing possession regulations for another species in the Gulf devalues the Permit in a system already complicated by the IFQ system . I am being tracked already .

No change in trip limit for commercial vessels : the commercial sector has not exceeded its allowable catch limit . Therefore does not need limits placed upon it. Also a crew limit is 3, for a South Atlantic permitted vessel thereby already limiting catch by effort and crew size. Scuba also places constraints on time / depth / and visibility, also equaling effort .

A reduction in the recreational bag limit could make a big difference is only reducing the limit by one. That would be 20% reduction overall.

Hope I hit all the nails on the head , I'm sure missed something .

Lee Starling 305 942 9177
F/V Green Turtle

My name is Chase Tole. I live in Fort Lauderdale, FL born and raised and I am also a local spearfisherman. I completely support lowering daily bag limits on Hogfish to a maximum of 2 per harvester per day max. I also completely support increasing minimum size limits from 12 inches up to 16 inches minimum. I have personally witnessed the decrease in Hogfish populations both juvenile and especially adults in the areas that I dive. I dive in Palm Beach all the way down to Key West.

Best Regards,

Chase Tole

My name is Ian Towne I am a Graduate Student at Nova Southeastern University. I have been spearfishing down here for 6 years now and am very familiar with the Hogfish (*Lachnolaimus maximus*) fishery. I have done extensive literature review on this species and I am very familiar with the subject partly because it is what I am doing my thesis on. I am very ecstatic that this proposal has finally come to light, it is long over due. Why it has taken 15 years since the study done by McBride 95-01 was completed for this proposal is beyond me. But at last here we are, I would like to put forth my thoughts to be taken into consideration for this regulation change. I think the separation of the NC-GA and FL stock is correct the genetic evidence supports it and the ecosystems are very different. As for the regulations on the South Florida Hogfish for the increase in minimum size I think the recommended 15in FL is good, though even better in alternative 3e. The 14 to 16 over 3 years makes perfect sense based on the growth rates of healthier stocks like Dry Tortugas or the Gulf they will reach 16 in 2-3 years. This has three benefits, one it will minimize the effect the recreational fishing over time and maintain the fisherman's ability to still catch legal hogfish for the first couple years as the whole stock which is mostly 12-13in currently grow to a more sustainable sizes. Secondly the end result is a larger size limit for hogfish which will strengthen both the stock (more intact harems, increase in reproduction) and the fishery (bigger fillets, more trophy fish) more so than 15. This concept was discussed in McBride 2007 paper on reproduction where he shows the increased output for an 18 in FL. Also another factor to be taken into consideration is that this unique fishery is dominated by spearfishing, which means the fishing is highly selective and few undersized fish are accidentally killed in the fishing process relative to hook and line fishing generally. This also means that the spear fishermen has to effectively estimate the size of the fish before deciding to take it because there is no real catch and release in this sport, generally to compensate for this disadvantage fish are only taken if they are at the very least an inch over, most avid spear fishermen only shoot fish 2+ over legal, because nobody wants to kill and almost legal fish let go. On top of this for the first couple years spear fishermen will not be used to the size increase and will over estimate the size even more, and the bigger the fish the harder it is to determine its size. This means that a smaller size limit will achieve the same result, so for example if the reg is 14 in most fish taken will be 15+ inches same with 16 in most fish will be 17+. So for the first three years 14 will still be an adequate change. For the Bag limit I think 1 per person is reasonable especially considering most dive in with buddies for safety so they can have two per pair. That is a reasonable amount of meat especially at 16in. Making a season regulation of hog fish I don't think is necessary at this point because the main spawning season for hogs in south Florida is also the coldest and roughest time of year and so there are usually not many divers going out during this time, so fishing pressure is reduced anyways. And there doesn't seem to be an issue with reproduction since juvenile hogfish are plentiful especially in the keys. and there are also large MPAs there protecting the nursery and juvenile areas of hog fish. One suggestion I will make to be considered is a possible slot limit or a soft slot limit where only one over lets just say 21-22 inches can be taken per vessel. The reason for this is to protect the harem structure for hogfish which is essential for reproduction success. Hog fish are protogynous hermaphrodites meaning female first, and there is evidence supporting that hogfish are sperm limited, which is an oddity in nature. what this means is the larger the male the more females it can maintain its harem. large male can maintain a harem of 10 to 15 females whereas the current 12-13 inch can only maintain 2-3 females. Basically the bigger males = more females = more reproductive output. Also the females will go bigger rather than transition to male because the male role is filled. Having a slot where only one over 21-22in can be taken limits the amount of highly important reproductive large males can be taken while still maintaining trophy fishing, because there is no catch and release in spearfishing. Regardless of the details I highly recommend that a slot limit be considered in this and other future changes to the regulations on hogfish. I write this as both a marine biologist well educated in this species as well as fisheries management and an avid spear fisherman with a great deal of local knowledge of the south Florida reefs and Hogfish. I hope my comments are taken into serious consideration, as I have put a lot of thought and time into this matter. I apologize for submitting my comments so late I have been tight on time for that last month. I really wish I could have attended the meeting in Dania Beach FL, but I was unable to attend. Please keep me updated on the progress of this and let me know if there are any questions or anything I can do to help.

Sincerely,
Ian Towne

