

Cobia Management Issues Summary

May 2016

Federal Management of Cobia – Agencies Involved

- Managed jointly in federal waters by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council under the joint Coastal Migratory Pelagics Fishery Management Plan. The plan includes king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia.
- Also managed in collaboration with the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council because of the migratory nature of cobia along the Atlantic coast.
- The South Atlantic Council’s committee responsible for cobia management has two Mid-Atlantic Council representatives who vote on the committee but not at during the full Council. NOAA Fisheries is the agency responsible for collecting recreational landings data for cobia through the Marine Recreational Information Program. Commercial data are collected from dealers and commercial logbooks. The agency also determines if and when accountability measures must be put into effect based on these data. (<http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/recreational-fisheries/index>)
- See presentation, “Council Overview” at: http://safmc.net/CobiaQandAMeeting_05092016.

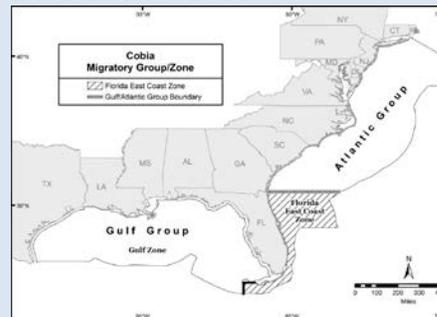
2016 Recreational Closure of Cobia – How did this happen?

- Annual catch limits are in place for cobia to prevent overfishing. Annual catch limits are the amount of fish in numbers or pounds that can be harvested in a single year. Typically, the annual catch limit is divided between the recreational and commercial sectors. Overfishing can happen when fish are harvested at a rate equal to or greater than the management goal put in place.
- Atlantic Migratory group cobia fishery: 92% of the annual catch limit allocated to the recreational fishery.
- The 2015 recreational annual catch limit for Atlantic migratory group cobia = 630,000 pounds.
- 2015 recreational catch = 1,540,775 pounds. This amount exceeded the recreational annual catch limit and the total annual catch limit (690,000 pounds) for the cobia fishery in 2015.
- Exceeding the 2015 catch limits triggered the accountability measure in place for cobia.
- Accountability measures are developed by the Council and put in place to ensure that the annual catch limits are not exceeded or allow for adjustments if the annual catch limits are exceeded.
- Current recreational accountability measure for cobia - if the recreational and total annual catch limits are exceeded, reduce the length of the following recreational fishing season, based on projections of when landings will reach the annual catch target. The annual catch limit changed in 2015 so the evaluation of the overage is based on the 2015 landings. Unless changed, in 2017 the average of 2015 and 2016 landings would be used. For 2018 onwards, the average of the most recent three years of landings would be used. If the annual catch limit is

QUICK FACTS:

Issue: Recreational closure of Atlantic migratory group cobia

Areas affected: Federal waters from the Florida/Georgia border northward through New York. Note: *The closure may also impact the fishery in state waters in these areas.*



People affected: Private recreational anglers and headboat/charter captains in federal waters.

Effective date: June 20, 2016 through December 31, 2016.

Additional Information: , Available from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s website at: http://safmc.net/CobiaQandAMeeting_05092016.

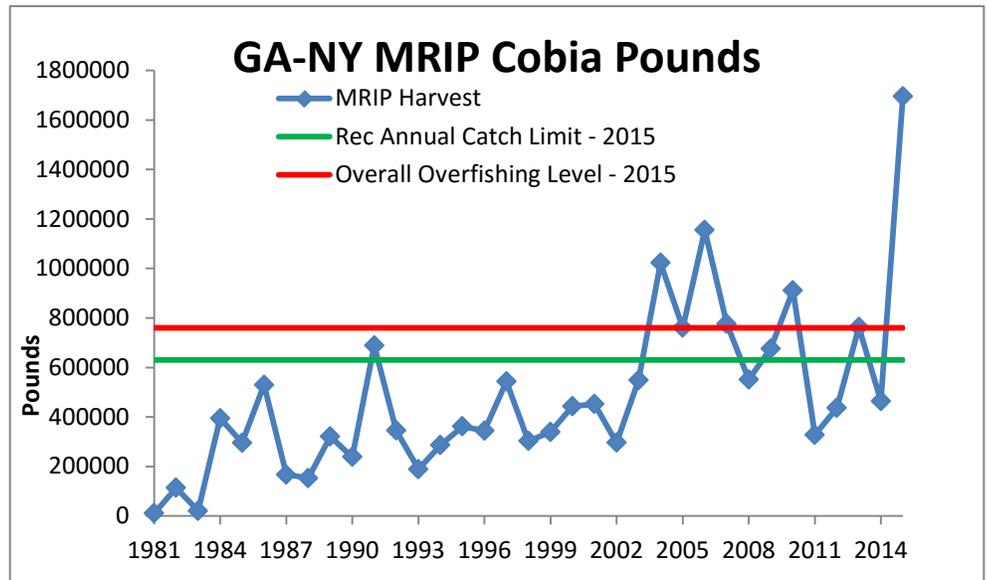
Background on the Fishery:

Cobia are a recreationally important species found in both coastal and offshore waters in the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic coast.

Cobia are targeted as the spawning stock migrates northward along the Atlantic coast in the spring and summer, with the majority of recreational landings occurring in state waters off the coasts of North Carolina and Virginia during the summer season.

changed, the process begins again with 1 year, 2 year, and then 3 year averages. The Council is proposing to modify the accountability measures to a different methodology for 2017 so this process would not be used in the future.

- For cobia, the recreational accountability measure does not include an in-season closure of the fishery to keep recreational landings from exceeding the recreational annual catch limit. Instead, the season is shortened the following year if the recreational and total annual catch limit is exceeded. This occurred in 2015. An in-season closure is the accountability measure for the commercial sector.



- Cobia caught in both state and federal waters count against the federal annual catch limit. Cobia caught and released **do not** count against the annual catch limit. Allowing the recreational fishery to remain open in state waters after the federal closure may have negative impacts for the 2017 fishing season and for the stock. Landings in 2015 exceeded the overfishing limit and suggests that overfishing occurred in 2015. See figure.

Recreational Harvest of Cobia – How has it changed?

- Recreational fishing for cobia (both private anglers and charter fishermen) has gained popularity - 2004-2014 landings were twice the level of those from 1993-2003.
- Although recreational landings for Atlantic migratory group (GA-NY) cobia in 2015 were substantially higher than in previous years, there is no evidence to show this is an anomaly. Landings for this migratory stock have always had high and low periods. (See presentation, “CMP Amendment 20B and Cobia Closure” at: http://safmc.net/CobiaQandAMeeting_05092016)
- The recreational annual catch limit of 620,000 pounds for the Atlantic migratory group of cobia was set in Amendment 20B, and effective for 2016 and subsequent fishing years. When compared to recreational landings over the last decade, landings exceeded this catch limit in 6 of the last 10 years. (See figure)
- Current federal regulations for Atlantic cobia: bag limit of 2 fish per person per day with a 33” fork length minimum size limit; must be landed heads and fins intact. Possession on a commercial vessel is limited to 2 cobia per person.

Stock Assessment and Changes to Stock Boundary

- 2013 Cobia Benchmark Stock Assessment for the Atlantic migratory group:
 - Completed in January 2013 through the Southeast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR) stock assessment program.
 - The assessment used data through 2011.
 - Stock assessment results:
 - The Atlantic cobia stock is not considered overfished or undergoing overfishing. Despite the assessment results, there is indication that the overall stock biomass is declining over time (See presentation, “Cobia SEDAR Stock Assessment” at: http://safmc.net/CobiaQandAMeeting_05092016).

- New genetic and tagging information used in the stock assessment indicated that the boundary between the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic cobia stocks was not in the Florida Keys, but further north on the Florida east coast. The stock assessment used the Georgia/Florida state boundary as the stock boundary.
- The South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico Councils had to update the cobia stock boundary to align with the stock assessment. (Previously, the Atlantic stock included the east coast of Florida/Florida Keys with a recreational annual catch limit of 1,445,687 pounds.)
- New boundaries were established through Amendment 20B (2014) beginning March 1, 2015:
 - Atlantic cobia annual catch limits now apply from Georgia through New York;
 - Cobia caught off the east coast of Florida are counted against the Florida East Coast allocation of the Gulf of Mexico cobia annual catch limit.
- In Amendment 20B, the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils also updated the annual catch limits for Gulf and Atlantic cobia based on the results of the stock assessment.

Proposed Atlantic Cobia Management: *Changes for 2017 and Beyond*

- Management goal: To ensure longer recreational seasons for the cobia fishery and consistent and equitable access for all states.
- Management approach: South Atlantic Council is developing a framework amendment to implement changes to management measures beginning in 2017. (See presentation, “*Development of Cobia Framework 4*” at: http://safmc.net/CobiaQandAMeeting_05092016)
- Proposed measures in the framework amendment include:
 - Modifying the current recreational accountability measure in order to eliminate using a 3-year running average for landings (with 2015 as the starting point) when evaluating an overage, which will allow for more flexibility in avoiding a seasonal closure in the future.
 - Options to reduce the bag limit, implement vessel limits, and increase the size limits;
 - Changes to the recreational fishing year; and
 - In-season reduction in the 2 fish possession limit for the commercial fishery.
 - *Note:* Options for allocating cobia on a state-by-state basis cannot be addressed in a framework amendment. The framework process is being used to expedite changes in time for the 2017 fishing season.
- The Council is accepting public comment on options until **5 p.m. on May 20, 2016**. See the Cobia Q&A Public Meeting web page for information on how to submit comment: http://safmc.net/CobiaQandAMeeting_05092016
- The Council will review options during its June 13-17, 2016 meeting and public hearings on the proposed measures are scheduled for early August of 2016 with the intent to have changes implemented by Spring 2017.
- To address options for future state-by-state allocations, the Council has requested the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission consider joint/complementary management of cobia. On May 4, 2016, the ASMFC directed the South Atlantic Board (a component of the ASMFC) to develop options for a joint and complementary plan, and for the ASMFC to have exclusive jurisdiction of Atlantic cobia. The ASMFC will review options at their next meeting in October 2016.
- **State Actions:** The VA Marine Resources Commission, NC Marine Fisheries Commission, and the SC Department of Natural Resources (under SC Congressional ratification and approval by the governor) are considering complementary closures in state waters in conjunction with the federal closure for 2016 and additional measures to reduce harvest in state waters. SC has implemented new legislation that will affect cobia in South Carolina state waters (out to 3 nautical miles offshore) south of Jeremy Inlet, Edisto Island:
 - *Possession of cobia in this area will be limited to one person per day and no more than three per boat per day, with a 33-inch fork length size limit. Previously, the bag limit for cobia in this area was two fish per day, with no boat limit.*

- From May 1 to May 31, 2016, this cobia fishery will be limited to catch and release only. It will be unlawful to take and possess cobia from this area during the month of May, and at any time federal regulations provide for the closure of recreational cobia fishing in federal waters.

Upcoming Meetings Addressing Cobia Management

May 4, 2016

*Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Meeting
(Alexandria, VA)*

- Discussion during the ISFMP Policy Board meeting
- <http://www.asmfc.org/home/2016-spring-meeting>

May 9, 2016

*SAFMC Q&A Public Meeting
(Kitty Hawk, NC)*

- 6:00- 8:00 PM (meeting also available via webinar)
- http://safmc.net/CobiaQandAMeeting_05092016

May 18-20, 2016

*NC Marine Fisheries Commission Meeting
(Morehead City, NC)*

- <http://portal.ncdenr.org/web/mf/mfc-meetings>

May 24, 2016

*VA Marine Resources Commission Public Hearing
(Newport News, VA)*

- <http://www.mrc.virginia.gov/index.shtm>

June 16, 2016

*SAFMC Mackerel Committee Meeting
(Cocoa Beach, FL)*

- <http://safmc.net/meetings/council-meetings>

August 8-11, 2016

*Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meeting
(Virginia Beach, VA)*

- <http://www.mafmc.org/meetings>

August 2016

*SAFMC Public Hearings -
Framework Amendment 4 (Cobia)
(VA, NC, SC, and GA)*

- <http://safmc.net/meetings/public-hearing-and-scoping-meeting-schedule>
- *Details will be posted as they become available*