

MEETING REPORT

South Atlantic Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel and Cobia Sub-Panel

April 19-20, 2017

N. Charleston, SC

The Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel (AP) and Cobia Sub-Panel met jointly to discuss topics supporting management of the coastal migratory pelagics fishery, including Atlantic (GA-NY) cobia, Florida east coast cobia, Atlantic Spanish mackerel, and Atlantic king mackerel. Below is a summary of the group's discussions and recommendations. The AP/Sub-Panel approved motions for recommendations to the Council, but a summary of all viewpoints relevant to each motion/recommendation are included.

AP Members

Ira Laks, AP Chair- *FL/Charter*
 Stephen Swann, AP Vice Chair- *FL/Rec*
 Stephen Donalson- *FL/Rec*
 Steve English- *FL/Commercial*
 Skip Feller- *VA/Charter/Mid-Atlantic Liaison*
 Manuel Herrera - *FL/Commercial*
 Ryan Howard- *GA/Charter*
 Bill Kelly- *FL/Commercial*
 Robert Olsen- *SC/Charter*
 Greg Peralta- *SC/Rec*
 Gary Robinson- *FL/Commercial*
 Tom Roller- *NC/Charter*

Cobia Sub-Panel Members

Wes Blow- *VA*
 Bill Gorham- *NC*
 Howard Ellis, Jr- *SC*
 Bill Weeks- *GA*

AP Members not in attendance

Selby Lewis- *NC/Commercial*
 David Forcinito- *NC/Dealer*

Council Members

Michelle Duval, SAFMC Chair
 Ben Hartig, Mackerel Cobia Committee Chair
 Mel Bell
 Zack Bowen
 Mark Brown
 Chris Conklin

South Atlantic Council and SEDAR Staff

Kari MacLauchlin, CMP Lead
 Julia Byrd
 John Carmichael
 Kimberly Cole
 Chip Collier
 Mike Errigo
 John Hadley
 Kim Iverson
 Cameron Rhodes
 Amber Von Harten
 Gregg Waugh, Executive Director

SC DNR

Mike Denson

NOAA General Counsel

Shepherd Grimes

Approval of Agenda and 2016 Meeting Minutes

The agenda was approved, along with the minutes from the February 2016 AP meeting.

Recent CMP Actions

Council staff provided a status update on recent amendments that the AP had discussed at previous meetings. The proposed rule for CMP Framework Amendment 4 includes actions to revise management for Atlantic cobia and was published on February 21, 2017, with a comment period that closed March 23, 2017. CMP Framework Amendment 5 rule published on March 1, 2017, and the comment period closed March 31, 2017. Last, the revised king mackerel boundary, ACLs and Atlantic southern zone management measures in CMP Amendment 26 will go into effect on May 11, 2017.

1) Cobia

Following an overview of Atlantic and Florida east coast cobia management, with a focus on recreational Atlantic cobia, the AP/Sub-Panel discussed several topics related to cobia.

Discussion on Emergency Action

Following the shortened recreational seasons for Atlantic cobia in 2016 and 2017, there have been substantial requests from the public for the Council to request that NMFS take emergency action to change the stock boundary for Atlantic and Gulf cobia back to the boundary before CMP Amendment 20B (at the Councils' boundary). Council staff reviewed the NOAA's criteria and guidance for emergency action, and Shepherd Grimes of NOAA General Counsel was in attendance to provide input and answer questions from AP/Sub-Panel members.

Mr. Grimes outlined several reasons that the situation would likely not meet the criteria for emergency action. Policy guidelines for implementing the statute, the only legal requirement in the statute is that NMFS finds that there is an emergency. The guidelines specify how NMFS will carry out the process if NMFS determines that there is an emergency.

Emergency action can be used to prevent significant economic loss or to preserve economic opportunities, and changing the boundary and ACL back to those in place before Amendment 20B may meet that guideline. However, there is a requirement that the event be recent and unforeseen, and the situation with cobia may not meet that requirement. The stock assessment was completed in 2012 and the changes from Amendment 20B were implemented in 2015. There have been two years with early closures. This detracts from the argument that the event is recent and unforeseen, because emergency action is not applicable if there has been a long-standing problem that just has not been addressed by administrative action.

It was pointed out that public comment recommending that the Council request emergency action was received after the 2016 early closure, and that the 2016 overage indicates that administrative action taken (state actions, federal closure, Framework Amendment 4) did not help to address the overage. There is also concern that there will always be an overage due to MRIP estimates being used to evaluate if the ACL has been exceeded.

Mr. Grimes also noted that there are legal concerns for an emergency rule due to the administrative record built for the stock assessment and CMP Amendment 20B. All federal rule-making under MSA is evaluated by the standards of the Administrative Procedures Act and this allows for on-the-record rule-making. When considering National Standard 2, the stock assessment went through a review process and was determined to be the best scientific information available. Additionally, the regulations in Amendment 20B were reviewed and approved by the Council with the decisions on the record, and evaluated and determine to be in compliance with the federal mandates. To change reverse those regulations (back to the boundary/ACL prior to Amendment 20B) would require that the Council build the record again demonstrating that the decision was wrong or there is new information available. This will take time and there is not as strong administrative record supporting emergency action as the administrative record supporting the decisions made in Amendment 20B. If the Council developed an amendment to make those changes, there would be a strong record of the decision in addition to review of the scientific information used to make the decision.

In response to a question about setting the boundary in SEDAR 28 based on ease of management, Mr. Grimes clarified that management units can be set based on factors other than scientific information about stock structure, including geographic and political factors (e.g., at a state line). Additionally, if the management boundary is moved south, the ACL for Atlantic cobia would not change from the ACL set in Amendment 20B based on the ABC from the stock assessment and SSC. All landings from this area would count towards the current Atlantic ACL in place. There are record issues with changing the management unit because a record has already been built for the current boundary and ACL, which have been determined to be the appropriate management unit and ACL to prevent overfishing.

Some AP members did not feel that there was good reason to request emergency action to change the boundary/ ACL. There was concern voiced about the MRIP data, because of some data outliers that do not seem feasible (an example would be a very high landings estimate for one week that is likely not possible). Mr. Grimes pointed out the MRIP has limitations but is the only data available and meets the requirement for best available scientific information, although he noted that Texas does not participate in MRIP and the state provides their recreational estimates to NMFS. If states have recreational data, NMFS will evaluate the data and if the information is compatible with the MRIP program, and the states' data can be used in place of MRIP estimates.

Mr. Grimes specified that National Standard 1 is the highest priority, and the current ACL in place has a record that it is appropriate to prevent overfishing. An emergency action changing the current ACL may compromise the ability to meet National Standard 1.

Because of the negative economic impacts on businesses associated with the recreational cobia fishery in North Carolina and Virginia, there should be some documentation of the reasons that an emergency action would not apply to Atlantic cobia, such as an official NMFS responses to a Council request for emergency action.

The following motion was approved although not with majority support:

MOTION # 1: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL REQUEST NMFS TAKE EMERGENCY ACTION TO RESET THE STOCK BOUNDARY AND ACLS TO AMENDMENT 18.
APPROVED. (6 in favor; 5 opposed; 4 abstained)

Ongoing Cobia Research

Dr. Mike Denson of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SC DNR) will present about ongoing cobia research, including work on distinct population segments in South Carolina along with additional studies around the region. The information will be incorporated into the research track assessment, which will evaluate the stock structure for cobia.

SEDAR Activities for Cobia

Julia Byrd, SEDAR staff, provided an overview to the AP/Sub-Panel on upcoming SEDAR activities for cobia, which include the research track assessment scheduled for 2018 and the operational assessment scheduled for 2020. AP and Sub-Panel members also indicated if they are interested in serving as commercial and recreational fishing representatives for the assessments.

Commercial Permit Requirement for Cobia

The Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Councils have considered a permit requirement for cobia in past amendments, with the most recent being CMP Amendment 20A. The AP and Sub-Panel discussed a potential commercial permit requirement for harvest of cobia in the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic (including Florida east coast). Currently there is no commercial permit requirement to harvest cobia that are sold, but there is a possession limit of 2/person/day.

With the recreational closure for Atlantic cobia, there has been increased interest in participating in the commercial sector of Atlantic cobia fishery. Additionally there is confusion about how federal dealer requirements apply to cobia caught in federal waters and/or on vessels with other federal permits, because there is no commercial permit requirement for cobia.

The AP and Sub-Panel discussed the costs and benefits of a commercial permit requirement, including:

- Without a commercial permit, cobia may not be being counted, or may be counted twice.
- Because cobia may not be sold to federal dealers, some landings may not be captured as quickly as with the weekly electronic reports from federal dealers. State dealers may not be required to report weekly and this may affect the ability of NMFS to monitor the quotas effectively, and implement an in-season closure to prevent landings from exceeding the ACL or quota.
- Cobia has typically been a bycatch for commercial trips because of the 2/person possession limit, but in recent years is a directed fishery in some areas for certain parts of the year.
- The permit requirement could be satisfied by holding another commercial permit or with a commercial landings requirement, so that fishermen do not have to purchase another permit.
- A permit requirement could result in fish being discarded, because they cannot be kept and sold without the permit.
- A federal permit requirement may negatively affect fishermen working only in state waters, if they were excluding from the commercial fishery or were required to purchase a federal permit and comply with federal reporting requirements.
- A permit requirement may help reduce illegal sales and loopholes, and benefit legitimate fishermen who commercially fish for cobia.

The AP and Sub-Panel approved the following motion:

MOTION # 2: ASK FOR A LIMITED ACCESS COBIA FEDERAL COMMERCIAL PERMIT, WITH REQUIREMENTS TO HAVE A HISTORY OF COMMERCIAL SALES (COBIA) OR HAVE A FEDERAL COMMERCIAL PERMIT (ANY SPECIES) TO QUALIFY.
APPROVED. (12 in support, 2 abstained)

Bag limit for cobia from federal waters off the Florida east coast

In federal waters off the Florida east coast, the commercial and recreational possession limit for cobia is 2 fish per person per day. Cobia caught in Florida state waters is limited to 1 fish per person per day. The AP and Sub-panel discussed modifying the recreational limit for cobia from federal waters off the Florida east coast, including considering a bag limit of 1/person for cobia from federal waters, and possible boat limits. Main points in the discussion included:

- A 1/person limit would be consistent with regulations in Florida state waters, and with the rest of the Atlantic coast.
- There is no reason to change the bag limit because Florida east coast quota has not been met in recent years.
- Although a trip in federal waters does not always result in reaching the bag limit, it is good to have the option to catch 2/person.

The AP approved the following motion:

MOTION #3: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL LOOK INTO POTENTIAL OPTIONS FOR A RECREATIONAL BOAT LIMIT FOR FEDERAL WATERS OFF THE FLORIDA EAST COAST.
APPROVED. (9 in support, 4 abstained)

Cobia Fishery Performance Review

The Council has requested the AP and Sub-panel discuss the current status of the fishery from their experiences and knowledge. The Cobia Fishery Performance Report (FPR) includes input from AP and Sub-Panel members about availability, abundance, sizes, changes in effort, changes in demand for commercial and for-hire services, and other factors characterizing the cobia fishery. The Cobia FPR is included at the end of this meeting report, and will also be made available on the SAFMC website.

2) Spanish Mackerel

Gillnet mesh size

The minimum mesh size for Spanish mackerel gillnets is 3.5 inches (8.9 cm), stretched mesh. The AP and Sub-Panel discussed revising the minimum mesh size, and also ways to clarify and standardize how mesh size is measured. AP members noted that the mesh size specification was put into place when there were no trip limits and no quotas in place, and that there is a minimum size limit of 12 inches. Because there have been changes in the fishery over the years, the way that mesh size is measured requires a tool that may or may not be available. Clarification of the mesh size requirements and standardization of how mesh is measured will help in enforcement and compliance.

The AP and Sub-Panel approved the following motion:

MOTION #4: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER CHANGING THE MESH SIZE REQUIREMENTS FOR SPANISH MACKEREL GILLNETS TO BE:

- 3 INCH MINIMUM SIZE MESH – MEASURE BY STRETCH TILL CENTER NOTCH TOUCHES, UP TO .277 MM.
- ANYTHING GREATER THAN .277 MM WILL NEED TO BE 3.5 INCH MINIMUM MESH SIZE.

APPROVED. (All in support)

Commercial Spanish mackerel permits

The federal commercial permit for Spanish mackerel is open access and is required for commercial harvest of Spanish mackerel in the Gulf, South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic. Limited entry for the Spanish mackerel commercial permit has been considered by the Council but never included in an amendment. The Council has also considered an action to establish a Spanish mackerel gillnet endorsement but removed the action due to lack of public support.

Off the east coast of Florida, there are a small number of vessels (~20) that participate every year in the Spanish mackerel gillnet fishery. These are full-time commercial fishermen who participate in several fisheries throughout the year. AP members report that there has been an increase in the number of part-time boats in the Spanish mackerel gillnet fishery at certain times during the season that drive the price of fish down.

Points raised during the discussion on limited entry Spanish mackerel commercial permits and gillnet endorsements included:

- There cannot be a limited amount of fish (ACL/quota) but an unlimited amount of permits.
- Part-time participants on the Florida east coast gillnet fishery may impact the environment because they are not skilled using the gear and may impact habitat.
- Limitation on the number of participants for the Florida east coast would help protect the overwintering stock that are targeted.
- Limited entry would at least require more investment, which would weed out some part-time participants.
- For Keys fishermen, the Gulf Spanish mackerel quota has not been met in recent years and there is no reason to restrict the Spanish mackerel commercial permit or have a gillnet endorsement.
- AP members felt that the issue with effort may be specific to the Florida east coast.
- It is possible to have a limited entry endorsement (for gillnets on the Florida east coast) on an open access permit (per NOAA GC).

The AP and Sub-Panel approved the following motion:

MOTION #5: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL EXAMINE A POTENTIAL LIMITED ACCESS FOR THE SPANISH MACKEREL COMMERCIAL FISHERY IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC, BASED ON CONTROL DATES AND/OR LANDINGS.

APPROVED. (11 in support, 2 abstained)

3) King Mackerel

Latent effort/permits in the king mackerel commercial fishery

The federal commercial permit for king mackerel is a limited entry permit and is required for commercial harvest of king mackerel in the Gulf, South Atlantic, and Mid-Atlantic. In a previous amendment, the Councils considered removing king mackerel commercial permits that did not meet a minimum landings requirements but did not move forward on that action due to public opposition.

Points raised during the discussion include:

- Low trip limits for the Gulf Southern Zone have deterred some fishermen from making trips because trips are not profitable. This could result in some permits being designated ‘latent’.
- The Council needs to explore the different reasons why a permit has low or no landings—some permit holders may keep the permit in their portfolio for when they need the permit.
- A 2-for-1 requirement would require more of an investment and would result in a reduction of permits over time.
- The Councils could create a non-transferable permit to reduce the number of permits over time without taking away permits.
- Allow one vessel to have two permits, and allow two trip limits (or maybe 1.5x the trip limit). This would consolidate the effort, allow vessels to maximize trip revenue, and reduce the number of permits with no or low landings.

The AP and Sub-Panel approved the following motion:

MOTION #6: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL DEVELOP OPTIONS TO ADDRESS LATENT KING MACKEREL PERMITS:

- ALLOW TWO KING MACKEREL PERMITS ON A VESSEL FOR A HIGHER TRIP LIMIT
- 2-FOR-1 REQUIREMENT TO GET A KING MACKEREL PERMIT

APPROVED. (10 in support, 2 opposed, 1 abstained)

Trip limit for hook-and-line Atlantic king mackerel on Spanish mackerel gillnet trips

The AP and Sub-Panel discussed allowing a trip limit of hook-and-line caught Atlantic king mackerel on Spanish mackerel gillnet trips. Currently a small number of vessels on the Florida east coast who participate in the Spanish mackerel gillnet and the hook and line king mackerel fisheries have to remove gillnets from the boat in order to hook and line for king mackerel, because gillnet is not an authorized gear for king mackerel in that zone. This requirement increases trip costs due to the time to return to the dock to leave the gillnets, and then go back out to fish for king mackerel. There was some concern about an increase in the number of boats if this is allowed, but the AP and Sub-Panel approved the following:

MOTION #7: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER AN ALLOWANCE OF KING MACKEREL HOOK AND LINE LIMIT ON SPANISH MACKEREL GILLNET TRIPS WITH GILLNET MESH OF 3.5” OR SMALLER, AND .277 OR LESS.

APPROVED. (All supported)

4) Chair and Vice Chair; Term Limits; Cobia Sub-Panel

The AP decided to specify that chair and vice chair elections will occur every three years. The AP selected Ira Laks as Chair and Stephen Swann as Vice Chair for the next three years. Additionally, the AP recommended that the Cobia Sub-Panel members be designated as regular AP members.

MOTION #8: BRING THE CHAIR/VICE CHAIR TO A VOTE EVERY 3 YEARS. MOTION APPROVED. (All supported)

MOTION #9: NOMINATE IRA LAKS AS CHAIR AND STEPHEN SWANN AS VICE CHAIR FOR NEXT 3 YEARS. APPROVED. (All supported)

MOTION #10: RECOMMEND THAT THE SUB-PANEL MEMBERS BECOME MEMBERS OF THE MACKEREL COBIA AP, WITH ONE CHAIR/VICE CHAIR. APPROVED. (All supported)

5) Other Business

Under Other Business, the AP/Sub-Panel discussed Atlantic king mackerel trip limits in the Atlantic Southern Zone. Revised trip limits (established through Amendment 26) go into effect on May 11, 2017. However, some fishermen on the Florida east coast have expressed concern about the new trip limits, especially the 50-fish limit for March 1-31 from the Flagler/Volusia line to the Miami-Dade/Monroe line. Some Florida fishermen want the trip limit for north of the Volusia/Brevard line to be changed back to 3,500 lbs after April 1, or the trip limit for Season 1 could be changed to 75 fish all season.

RECOMMENDATION: Florida representatives on the AP recommended that the Council review the Atlantic king mackerel trip limits.

The AP/Sub-Panel also brought up mandatory reporting for recreational cobia, with points including:

- Better data will help show the real levels of catch in the different areas.
- Several states already have recreational reporting requirements or voluntary programs, but there needs to be some consistency across the board (and all states should have reporting requirements).
- Headboats and charter boats are already required or will soon be required to report electronically each week, and private recreational fishermen should have to do the same.
- There was some concern expressed about a requirement instead of voluntary for private recreational.
- The Snapper Grouper AP and the Council have been discussing required reporting for red snapper to get better data on private recreational catch.
- Improved recreational reporting could provide an alternative to MRIP.
- which had also been discussed during the Cobia discussions:

MOTION #11: MOTION: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL EXPLORE RECREATIONAL REPORTING REQUIREMENTS FOR COBIA. APPROVED. (All supported)

**South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel and Cobia Sub-Panel
Cobia Fishery Performance Report
April 2017**

At their April 2017 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel (AP) and Cobia Sub-Panel reviewed fishery information for cobia and developed a Fishery Performance Report (FPR). The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR for cobia is the first CMP FPR, and will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP). The format of future FPRs may change based on input from the AP, SSC, SEP, and the South Atlantic Council.

Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel

Ira Laks, Chair (*Charter/FL*)
 Stephen Swann, Vice Chair (*Recreational/FL*)
 Stephen Donalson (*Recreational/FL*)
 Steve English (*Commercial/FL*)
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 David Forcinito (*Dealer/NC*)*
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 Bill Kelly (*Commercial/FL*)
 Selby Lewis (*Commercial/NC*)*
 Robert Olsen (*Charter/SC*)
 Greg Peralta (*Recreational/SC*)
 Gary Robinson (*Commercial/FL*)
 Tom Roller (*Charter/NC*)

*unable to attend

Cobia Sub-Panel

Wes Blow (*VA*)
 Bill Gorham (*NC*)
 Howard Ellis, Jr (*SC*)
 Bill Weeks (*GA*)

Fishery Overview

Based on data through 2011, the SEDAR 28 (2013) stock assessment concluded that Atlantic cobia and Gulf cobia were not overfished (SSB>MSST) and overfishing was not occurring (F>MFMT). SEDAR 28 also incorporated genetic and tagging data, and the stock boundary was set at the Georgia/Florida line. The Councils modified the stock boundary and updated the annual catch limits for Atlantic (GA-NY) cobia and Florida east coast cobia through CMP Amendment 20B. The changes were implemented in March 2015.

In 2015 and 2016, Atlantic cobia landings exceeded the ACL and the overfishing level (OFL) recommended by the SSC after SEDAR 28. As defined by the Council, landings > OFL indicate that overfishing occurred in 2015 and 2016. NMFS reduced the recreational season length of Atlantic cobia in 2016 and 2017. Additional detailed information about Atlantic cobia is available in [Attachment 2](#) in the AP/Sub-Panel April 2017 briefing book.

Detailed landings and economic information was provided to the AP and Sub-Panel. This document is attached at the end of the FPR

Atlantic (GA-NY) Cobia

Stock observations

Chesapeake Bay-

The cobia in the Chesapeake Bay seem to be moving to the northern part of the Bay, further north than they have ever been found. Historically, the cobia have been concentrated in the southern part of the Bay. There has been an increase in availability 40-50 miles north of where the fish are usually found, and there was a tournament there in Maryland recent years¹. AP members pointed out that the increased availability in the northern Bay was in addition to the increased numbers of fish in the southern part of the Bay. There are also more fish available on the ocean front.

AP members report that there have been an increase in the catch in the past 3-4 years, even up to 18 fish in one day, for both private recreational and charter. Some members pointed out that the menhaden stock has increased in recent years due to success in the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC)'s rebuilding plan, and this may be why there are more cobia in the Chesapeake Bay. The increase in catch is due to a combination of more cobia available plus more effective gear and techniques.

Some AP members report a decrease in the larger sized fish of Chesapeake cobia, and the numbers of trophy fish caught have decreased. Some reported that there are still large fish (90-100 lbs) but they are harder to catch because they are not interested in bait. There may be fewer trophy fish because many cobia are caught before they reach the trophy size. Other AP members did not observe the same issue and felt that there were still abundant large fish, and that the number of average size fish has been steady or increasing.

Females with eggs are caught all summer long and the fish may spawn more when they first arrive in the Bay, but will spawn throughout the summer. This may create challenges in developing management measures specific to spawning seasons.

Northeastern North Carolina-

The past years have been great years for catching lots of fish and catching large cobia. The pier fishermen have had good catches. Historically, the cobia show up in this area (Oregon Inlet) when the water temperature hits 68 degrees—this has always been the key water temperature to start seeing cobia. The catch is high for a few weeks each year and then starts to decrease as the cobia move northward. However, in recent years, the cobia are showing up even when the water is still at 61-62 degrees, which is a notable difference that the fishermen have observed.

¹ The Maryland record for largest cobia occurred during an Ocean City tournament in 2016, at 94.6 lbs.

Southeastern North Carolina-

Larger fish of 70-80 lbs were more common several years ago, but they are still catching fish at 50-60 lbs. The menhaden stock has increased, which may contribute to the numbers of cobia. However, larger cobia are less common. A lot of the catch is smaller fish and even some of those populations are decreasing.

Southern South Carolina-

There are cobia that come into Port Royal sound to spawn every year, and there used to be three general areas where fishermen could easily find the cobia. However, those areas are not producing anymore. There seems to be a shift of the cobia from Port Royal to Calibogue Sound (which is further south, between Hilton Head Island and Dafuskie Island), and that area is becoming a more popular fishing area. The size of the fish has drastically reduced, with 80% of cobia caught being at the minimum size limit (33"FL) or slightly above. The historically productive reefs have dropped off in the last few years, and seems to correlate the release of the Waddell stock. Whenever there is Waddell² stock first released, cobia catch will be great for a few years and then drop off abruptly. Fishermen there also notice during the season, cobia may be available in abundance for 1-2 days, and the drop off again.

Effort

Chesapeake and Northeastern North Carolina-

Recreational catch estimates in recent years for North Carolina and Virginia have been much higher, which may indicate an increase in available fish and/or an increase in recreational anglers' success. There has been an increase in popularity of the sight cast fishery, in which recreational boats with towers (or skiffs with step ladders) will spot the cobia and throw a jig or bait. Sight cast fishing is increasingly popular in the Chesapeake and also in areas of North Carolina. AP members report that clear water and calm winds are necessary for a good sight cast trip, so not all trips are successful. However, some sight cast fishery participants will go on trips in higher winds.

Previously popular species such as spadefish and flounder are not as available, and there has been a shift to cobia in recent years.

The Chesapeake is larger than Port Royal and it is easier for boats to spread out, but some fishermen feel that effort has increased significantly, especially on the weekends. Cobia fishing is easy to learn and to be successful, and this has contributed to the increase in effort.

Southeastern North Carolina-

In Beaufort Inlet (NC), the number of recreational fishermen has significantly increased, especially on the weekends. Even just a few years ago, seeing 10-15 boats on a weekend was considered 'busy', but in the past few years it is common to see 100+ boats within the same area.

² South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Waddell Mariculture Research and Development Center includes a program to mariculture cobia stock. <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/marine/mrri/waddell/>

The “old school” method is to chum the cobia, and then use hook and line to catch cobia. With the increase in menhaden and the cobia availability, the sight cast fishery is popular in this area. Because cobia fishing is relatively easy with no requirement for special equipment or a big boat, this has resulting in more small part-time for-hire businesses, which can have negative effects on the long-term for-hire businesses. Spring fishing has been bad for the past few years but cobia fishing has been good, and it is easy to fish.

Commercial market observations

The commercial portion of the Atlantic cobia fishery is primarily a bycatch fishery, because the possession limit is 2/person/day. There has been some increased interest and effort in the commercial portion of the fishery. The demand for wild caught cobia has been steady but there appears to be more demand for farmed cobia.

Demand in the Charter/Headboat sector

In Virginia, charter captains reported that there has been a significant increase in demand for trips targeting cobia, with some captains experiencing increases several times over in the last 5-10 years. There has been an increase in the number of charter boats overall.

In North Carolina there is demand for cobia specifically, which may be due to clients’ desire to post a photo on social media of a large fish like cobia and the increase in sight cast fishing popularity.

In South Carolina, there is not necessarily a demand for cobia specifically for charter trips, but when cobia are available they will target them.

Florida East Coast Cobia

Stock observations

In Northeast Florida, the availability has been consistent and are available year-round. The cobia follow the large rays, and are available near shore when the rays are close to shore, and then move to deeper waters with the rays. Sight cast fishing peaks in the early spring but it is only for a short period each year. The rest of the year the cobia are available offshore but primarily as incidental catch. There are no problems with abundance and there are plenty of fish. AP members reported that sizes are the same, although one AP member noted that it did not seem fishermen see the big fish that they used to see (60-70 lbs).

In south Florida, the cobia are starting to occur with bull sharks on the edge of the reef, and it is not uncommon for a shark to eat a large cobia. Females with eggs are seen February through July. The average size of cobia is 18-40 lbs and that has been consistent, although sometimes there are very large cobia caught occasionally.

In the Florida Keys, cobia are found in 25-35 ft. on mostly sand bottom. Cobia may be following mud rays because they stir up the crabs and small fish on the bottom, and the cobia eat those. The size has been consistent but there do not seem to be as many cobia (or rays). There seem to be more cobia on the bay side but water quality issues affect fishing conditions. Cobia can be

caught at any time of the year but are not encountered on every trip, so are primarily incidental catch. Cobia do not aggregate like they do in other areas, and are always on the move.

Effort

The population in NE Florida is growing quickly and the number of private recreational anglers has increased, with boat ramps crowded every weekend. There has been a shift from red snapper to cobia, because they are easy to catch and do not require bottom fishing.

There is less sight fishing in south Florida than there used to be, even though the conditions are ideal. There has been an increase in free divers, who shoot cobia off the backs of bull sharks on the edge of the reef. Recreational fishing overall has increased with the growth of social media.

In the Florida Keys, most cobia fishing is sight fishing in the channels between reef lines and islands on boats with tuna towers. The conditions for sight fishing are not as good on the bayside, and there are water quality issues in Florida Bay. Recreational anglers target cobia on trips targeting tuna, sailfish and other species when the current allows.

Commercial market observations

There is demand for cobia even though there are farm-raised cobia on the market, because wild caught is superior. The price is good because it is a 'boutique product' for local restaurants. When the cobia are in the area for south Florida, commercial vessels will purposely target cobia because there is a good price for them. In the Florida Keys, there is no directed commercial fishery but vessels will catch and sell cobia when they are available.

Demand for Charter/Headboats

Demand for cobia specifically on for-hire trips is consistent, but it is not the only species that people specifically ask for. For some captains, there are clients that return every year when cobia are available in the spring in northeast Florida.

BOTH STOCKS

Management measures

The pending increase for the recreational minimum size limit to 36" FL will allow for an additional year of spawning and this will be beneficial for the stock. The limit for cobia in Virginia state waters to only take one cobia per boat per day over 50" total length should be considered, because it will help protect the spawning stock biomass and is supported by the public. Gaffing should not be allowed because cobia can be netted safely, and there are too many inexperienced cobia anglers that do not know how to gaff without losing the fish.

The AP raised concerns about the inconsistency with units for tracking ACLs and landings ('as reported' and 'whole weight').

Research Recommendations

Additional research on the Chesapeake Bay being a unique group (like Port Royal) and could be negatively affecting by current effort and harvest levels. The AP also recommended more research on spawning.