

**Scoping Document for  
Coastal Migratory Pelagics (Mackerel)  
Amendment 20 to the  
Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic  
Fishery Management Council's  
Fishery Management Plans**

**(Boundaries and Transit Provisions)**

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Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management  
Council  
2203 North Lois Avenue, Suite 1100  
Tampa, Florida 33607  
813-348-1630  
813-348-1711 (fax)  
888-833-1844 Toll Free  
[gulfcouncil@gulfcouncil.org](mailto:gulfcouncil@gulfcouncil.org)  
<http://www.gulfcouncil.org>



South Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
4055 Faber Place Drive  
Suite 201  
North Charleston, SC 29405  
843-571-4366 Phone  
843-769-4520 Fax  
[www.safmc.net](http://www.safmc.net)



National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
Southeast Regional Office  
263 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue South  
St. Petersburg, Florida 33701  
727-824-5305  
727-824-5308 (fax)  
<http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov>

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Amendment 1 to the Coastal Migratory Fisheries Management plan established separate commercial allocations for an eastern and western zone divided at the Alabama/Florida border. It also established a mixing zone from the Monroe/Collier County line to the Volusia/Flagler County line wherein all fish in the zone from November 1 through March 31 of each year were considered Gulf group king mackerel, and from April 1 through October 31, they were considered to be Atlantic group fish. Amendment 9 further subdivided the commercial hook-and-line king mackerel allocation for the Gulf migratory group, eastern zone, south/west area (Florida west coast) by establishing two subzones with a dividing line between the two subzones at the Collier/Lee County line. These zones and subzones were established to ensure that fishermen throughout the Gulf had an opportunity to fish in their homeport area and that some of the allowable quota was available for those areas. Furthermore, the Gulf group king mackerel season was determined to be from July 1 through June 30 of each year.

## **PURPOSE OF THE PROPOSED ACTIONS**

The South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico Councils have established or are considering establishing a number of zones and subzones for coastal migratory pelagic fishes in the Gulf and Atlantic. These zones and subzones are intended to ensure that a fair and equitable portion of the allowable harvest is available throughout the migratory range of these stocks. The Councils are considering whether the current and proposed zones along with their current or future allocations and commercial trip limits are necessary and appropriate and provide the greatest benefit to the commercial industry. The Gulf Council is also considering changes to the season as a whole or by zone to potentially increase fishing efficiency and perhaps extend the season in some areas. Likewise, both Councils are considering potential requirements for vessels to declare fishing zones or to establish endorsements for zones to reduce effort in some areas and perhaps lengthen the season. Finally, the Gulf Council is considering a measure to allow transit through closed areas by vessels that have caught and possess fish legally in another area.

**Action 1. Consider modifications to the existing commercial fishery boundary line between the Gulf group king mackerel eastern zone and western zone (currently set at the Alabama - Florida border [87°31'06"]), with potential corresponding changes to the commercial allocations and trip limits**

**Option 1. Retain the current boundary between the eastern and western zones remains at the Alabama/Florida border**

**Option a. Retain the northern and southern subzones as constituted; retain the existing allocations, and retain the current trip limits with the step down.**

**Option b. Retain the northern and southern subzones as constituted; retain the existing allocations; and set the trip limit at 1,500 pounds with no step down**

**Option c. Eliminate the northern and southern subzones; combine the allocation from the northern subzone with the southern subzone to**

achieve one eastern zone allocation; and maintain the existing trip limit with the step down or set the trip limit at 1,500 pounds with no step down.

**Option d.** Eliminate the northern and southern subzones; combine the allocation from the northern subzone of the eastern zone with the western zone; and set the trip limit at either 1,500 pounds or the existing 3,000 pounds.

**Option 2.** Move the current boundary line between the eastern zone and western zone from the Alabama/Florida border to Cape San Blas, Florida (85°30' w. longitude).

**Option a.** eliminate the northern subzone of the eastern zone and reestablish the eastern zone as extending from Cape San Blas, Florida (85°30' w. longitude) and throughout its existing range.

**Option b.** combine the commercial TAC allocation for the existing northern subzone of the eastern zone with the western zone.

**Option c.** establish a trip limit for the newly defined western zone at 1,250 pounds until 75% of the allocation is taken, then reduce the trip limit to 500 pounds until the allocation is taken, or set the trip limit at 1,500 pounds with no step down, or maintain the current 3,000-pound trip limit.

**Option 3.** Move the current boundary line between the eastern zone and western zone from the Alabama/Florida border to 89°30' w. longitude near the mouth of the Mississippi river.

**Option a.** eliminate the northern subzone of the eastern zone and reestablish the eastern zone as extending from 89°30' w. longitude and throughout its existing range.

**Option b.** combine the commercial TAC allocation for the existing northern subzone of the eastern zone with the new western zone.

**Option c.** establish a trip limit for the newly defined western zone at 1,250 pounds until 75% of the allocation is taken, then reduce the trip limit to 500 pounds until the allocation is taken, or set the trip limit at 1,500 pounds with no step down, or maintain the current 3,000-pound trip limit.

**Option 4.** Move the current boundary line between the eastern zone and western zone from the Alabama/Florida border to 89°30' w. longitude near the mouth of the Mississippi river.

**Option a. subtract average annual landings for the past 5 years from the Alabama/Florida border to 89°30' w. longitude and add them to the allocation for the newly defined eastern zone.**

**Option b. subtract average annual landings for the past 5 years from the Alabama/Florida border to 89°30' w. longitude and add them to the allocation for the newly defined eastern zone.**

**Option c. establish a trip limit for the newly defined western zone at 1,250 pounds until 75% of the allocation is taken, then reduce the trip limit to 500 pounds until the allocation is taken, set the trip limit at 1,500 pounds with no step down, or maintain the current 3,000-pound trip limit.**

### **Discussion:**

The current boundary between the eastern and western zones at the Alabama/Florida border was set in 1985 with the implementation of Amendment 1 to the Coastal Migratory Pelagics Fishery Management Plan (Figure 1). This line was chosen because existing scientific information at that time recognized a western migratory group of king mackerel that moved northward up the Texas and Louisiana coasts in spring and summer and southward in fall and winter. Another migratory group moved northward from the Florida Keys area to the Panhandle area of Florida in the spring and summer and back southward in fall and winter. Although these groups were known to mix, such mixing was believed to be small, and the Mississippi River outfall appeared to be somewhat of a barrier. In considering the boundary, the councils also took into consideration the need to allow all areas of the Gulf some degree of access to the stock which was managed under a commercial allocation of total allowable catch (TAC) to a unit stock, and the TAC was very low at only approximately 2.9 mp as compared to 10.2 mp over the past few years. With a set season and TAC, it was believed that without a zone/separate TAC allocation, the entire TAC would be taken before fish migrated into some areas. The Councils also considered that there was very little participation in the commercial fishery from Alabama and Mississippi, thus the dividing line at the Florida/Alabama border and a July 1 season opening were considered the least disruptive measures to participants. These decisions were based on known elements of the fishery from the mid to late 1970s. A review of the current and more recent past data may provide additional information.

In 2000, the Council established two subzones off the west coast of Florida with the northern subzone extending from the Collier/Lee County line to the Alabama/Florida border. This action was based on the king mackerel fishery in the panhandle area of Florida having significantly increased its catch in the last few years prior to 1999. In establishing this northern subzone the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils agreed to allocate to this new subzone a small portion of the total allocation for the eastern zone (approximately a 3.85% reduction that amounted to approximately 168,500 pounds). Since the implementation of this action, the northern subzone has only caught its allocation in seven of the twelve years. Consequently, the need for this separate subzone with its own allocation of TAC may not be as great as previously believed. However, when the subzone has been closed, it has happened usually in the fall, before the fish have migrated south. The result is that fishermen along the peninsula of Florida do not have an opportunity to participate in the fishery during those years. Combining the northern subzone

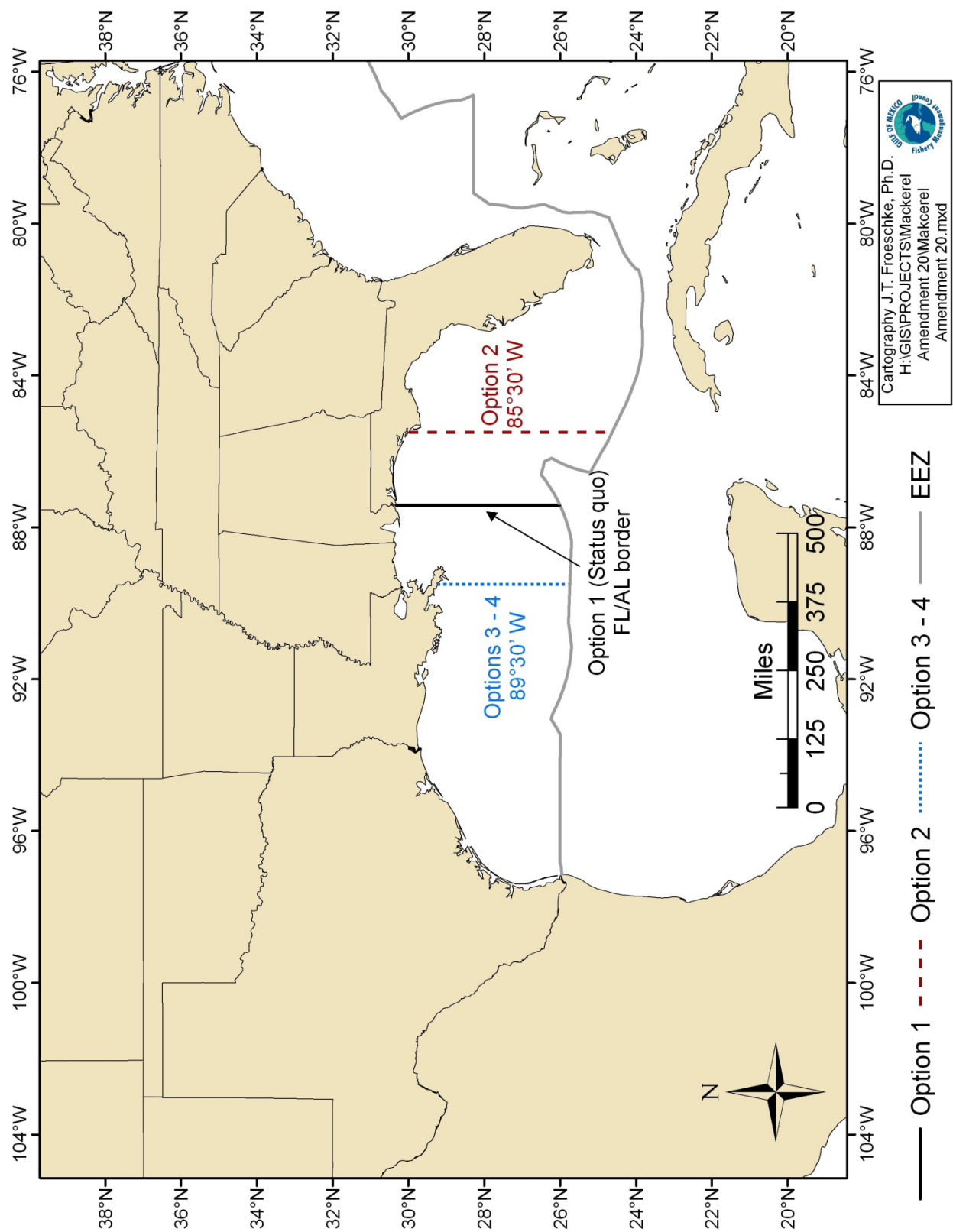
with the southern subzone or western zone reduces the number of quota areas for Gulf group king mackerel from 3 to 2, thus it simplifies monitoring. It also provides for a larger potential share of TAC for fishermen over a broader area.

In 2003, numerous complaints were received from fishermen that vessels from particularly the east coast of Florida had moved into southern Louisiana in late summer to fish on the western zone allocation of the commercial TAC. This additional effort resulted in the quota allocation being filled over a month sooner than in 2002 (9/24/03). At the Council's request, NMFS implemented a 3,000-pound trip limit for the western zone in 1999 to lengthen this season. This action appeared to be partly successful in that the season stayed open until 11/19/01 and 10/25/02; however, it closed in August of 2000. (Closure dates for the western zone from fishing years 1999-2000 through 2011-1012 are shown in Table 1). The Council has also received complaints from fishermen in the northern subzone of the eastern zone regarding these same vessels fishing out the small allocation of TAC (168,750 pounds).

**Table 1. Gulf King Mackerel Western Zone Season Closure Dates**

Year	99-00	00-01	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12
Closing Date	25-Aug	26-Aug	19-Nov	25-Oct	24-Sep	20-Oct	17-Nov	6-Oct	3-Nov	27-Mar	4-Sep	11-Feb	16-Sept

Reducing the trip limit from 3,000 pounds with a potential step down to 500 pounds would likely extend the season for the area and would simplify enforcement because the trip limit for the hook-and-line fishery would be the same throughout the Gulf. The current situation is that vessels fishing off Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas can land 3,000 pounds; whereas vessels fishing off Florida can only land 1,250 pounds.



**Figure 1. Action 1 Proposed Optional Boundaries**

**Action 2. Consider changing the opening date of the Gulf group king mackerel season for the western zone**

**Option 1. No action – opening date remains at July 1.**

**Option 2. Change the opening date of the Gulf group king mackerel season for the western zone or other subzones from July 1 to September 1.**

**Option 3. Change the opening date of the Gulf group king mackerel season for the western zone or other subzones from July 1 to October 1.**

**Option 4. Change the opening date of the Gulf group king mackerel season for the western zone or other subzones from July 1 to November 1.**

**Discussion:**

Some fishers have indicated in the past that a later opening would allow them to harvest king mackerel from the western zone more efficiently because fish are present in larger numbers and closer to shore in the main fishing areas off south Louisiana in the fall as opposed to the summer. They also claim that fish can be kept in better condition due to the cooler weather. A later opening, possibly combined with a lower trip limit, might also discourage movement of fishers from the Atlantic coast of Florida to south Louisiana as has been the case for several years. Such a change could extend the season; however, if it is set too late in the fall, fish may migrate back south earlier in some years and not be available. Also, weather conditions may make fishing more difficult and less safe if the season extends into winter months.



**Action 3. Establish a transit provision for fish harvested in the EEZ off Monroe County when the rest of the west coast of Florida is closed.**

**Option 1. No action – do not establish a transit provision**

**Option 2. Establish a transit provision for fish harvested in the EEZ off Monroe County when the rest of the west coast of Florida is closed**

**Discussion:**

A transit provision would allow fishermen to legally harvest king mackerel from Monroe County after April 1 of each year to transport and land their catch in other areas of the Gulf. Transit would be allowed for vessels traveling through the closed area with fishing gear appropriately stowed. The term "transit" is defined as on a direct and continuous course through a closed area. The term "appropriately stowed" means:

- 1) A gillnet must be left on the drum. Any additional gillnets not attached to the drum must be stowed below deck.
- 2) A rod and reel must be removed from the rod holder and stowed securely on or below deck. Terminal gear (i.e., hook, leader, sinker, flasher, or bait) must be disconnected and stowed separately from the rod and reel. Sinkers must be disconnected from the down rigger and stowed separately.

**Action 4. Requirement to identify commercial Gulf group king mackerel fishing zone(s) in which a vessel will be fishing**

**Option 1. No action - do not require vessels to identify the zone(s) or subzone(s) in which they will be fishing**

**Option 2. Require that prior to the beginning of the fishing year each owner of a permitted commercial king mackerel hook-and-line vessel must identify the zone/subzone in which the vessel will fish during the upcoming fishing year (western zone, Florida east coast subzone, Florida west coast southern subzone, or Florida west coast northern subzone)**

**Option 3. Require that prior to the beginning of the fishing year each owner of a permitted commercial king mackerel hook-and-line vessel must identify no more than 2 of the zone/subzones in which the vessel will fish during the upcoming fishing year (western zone, Florida east coast subzone, Florida west coast southern subzone, or Florida west coast northern subzone)**

**Note:** Vessels will not be allowed to fish under quotas for zones/subzones that they have not declared, and if a vessel fails to declare a zone/subzone on which it intends to fish prior to the beginning of the fishing year, that vessel will not be allowed to participate in the fishery during that year.

**Discussion:**

Historically, commercial king mackerel hook-and-line vessels have primarily fished in the zones that they are home-ported. In recent years, however, a fleet of vessels from the east coast of Florida has traveled to the western zone in the summer months to fish on that allocation and subsequently moved to the Florida west coast northern subzone; thus following the migrating fish from area to area where they are most abundant. This additional effort in each zone has resulted in earlier than normal closings in some years. Requiring vessels to declare and fish in only 1 or 2 zones/subzones during a given year would help in ameliorating potential earlier closures and could help maintain a higher ex-vessel value.

**Action 5. Establish commercial Gulf group king mackerel fishing endorsements by zone(s) in which a vessel will be fishing**

**Option 1. No Action – do not establish commercial Gulf group king mackerel fishing endorsements by zone(s)**

**Option 2. Require an endorsement to fish in a particular zone or subzone. Only one endorsement is allowed during a fishing year, and it is not transferable during that year.**

**Option 3. Require an endorsement to fish in a particular zone or subzone. No more than two endorsements are allowed during a fishing year, and they are not transferable during that year.**

**Discussion:**

As stated under Action 4 above, commercial king mackerel hook-and-line vessels have historically fished in the zones that they are home-ported. Requiring vessels to identify the zone(s) or subzone(s) in which they will fish in a given year would reduce effort in some areas and may prolong the season in those areas. In addition, requiring an endorsement would ease the at sea enforcement burden of identifying the legal area in which a vessel is entitled to fish.

**Action 6. Establish state-by-state or regional quotas for Atlantic Migratory Group king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia.**

**Option 1. No Action – do not establish state-by-state or regional quotas**

**Option 2. Establish allocations by individual states.**

**Option 3. Split the king and Spanish mackerel and cobia commercial allocations into combined North Carolina/South Carolina and Georgia/Florida state commercial quotas.**

**Discussion:**

The South Atlantic Council is concerned that the commercial annual catch limits (ACLs) will be filled by fishermen in one state before fish are available to fishermen in other states (e.g., NC and FL). This becomes more probable as the ACLs are lowered (e.g., Spanish mackerel) or the commercial ACL established is very low (e.g., cobia). Allocating state by state would be similar to how commercial quotas are managed in the Mid-Atlantic and New England areas. Fishermen and some state representatives have expressed a desire to move in this direction.

**Action 7. Establish an eastern subzone within the Gulf migratory group of cobia and modify the framework to provide that the SAFMC is to set regulations within this subzone. In addition, establish a southern subzone within the Atlantic migratory group of cobia.**

**Option 1. No Action. The boundary is the Council boundary.**

**Option 2. Establish an eastern subzone within the Gulf migratory group of cobia to include the Florida east coast south of Cape Canaveral and the Atlantic side of the Keys. Establish a southern subzone within the Atlantic migratory group of cobia to include Georgia and northeast Florida.**

**Option 3. Establish an eastern subzone within the Gulf migratory group of cobia to include the entire Florida east coast and the Atlantic side of the Keys. Establish a southern subzone within the Atlantic migratory group of cobia to include Georgia.**

**Discussion:**

Amendment 18 established the Council boundary as the boundary between Gulf and Atlantic Migratory Groups of Cobia. The SEDAR Stock Assessment, currently under development, will use a biological boundary at the GA/FL line or in the Cape Canaveral, FL area. This will result in an ACL for Gulf and Atlantic migratory groups for areas different from the boundary implemented through Amendment 18.

Amendment 8 (1996) established a similar zone and process for Gulf migratory group king mackerel on the Florida east coast. The Gulf Council would set the ACL for Gulf migratory group Cobia and would allocate a portion (based on landings data) of the ACL to this zone. The South Atlantic Council would then set regulations to ensure the ACL for this subzone was not exceeded.