

**THE GOLDEN TILEFISH FISHERY:
Issues and Possible Options for Improvement from the Fishermen's
Perspective Based on Informal Surveys of Tilefish Fishermen**

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The following issues and possible options were brought forth by fishermen spoken with since the March 2008 Council meeting.

Background

The golden tilefish fishery is managed so that once 75% of the annual quota has been met, the trip limit decreases from 4000 pounds to 300 pounds. Typically, the longline fleet fishes in the winter, spring, and summer months until the trip limit decreases to 300 pounds at which time, some longline vessels drop out. While the Florida longline fleet begins fishing in January, weather allowing, longliners from the Carolinas typically begin fishing at the end of March or April due to weather. In the fall (September and October), the hook and line fleet typically targets tilefish.

Table 1 shows the number of people, by gear group, who landed greater than 400 pounds in any one year 1999-2006 as well as total and average landings by gear group.

Table 1. Historical Participation in the Golden Tilefish Fishery, 1999-2006.

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Longline participants	23	17	20	15	15	14	11	9
Longliners as a percentage of total participation	49%	40%	54%	39%	52%	50%	39%	45%
Hook and Line participants	24	26	17	23	14	14	17	11
Hook and Liners as a percentage of total participation	51%	60%	46%	61%	48%	50%	61%	55%
Total Participants with landings over 400lbs/yr	47	43	37	38	29	28	28	20
Total longliner harvest	482,664	692,128	449,999	383,090	323,894	236,727	269,237	342,119
Longliner harvest as a percentage of total harvest	90%	89%	93%	89%	94%	89%	90%	92%
Average longliner harvest	20,985	40,713	22,500	25,539	21,539	16,909	24,476	38,013
Total hook and liner harvest	55,227	84,782	33,009	45,335	21,052	29,154	31,557	27,991
Hook and liner harvest as a percentage of total harvest	10%	11%	7%	11%	6%	11%	10%	8%
Average hook and liner harvest	2,301	3,261	1,942	1,971	1,504	2,082	1,856	2,545
Total harvest	537,891	776,909	483,008	428,425	344,946	265,881	300,794	370,110

Issues

- Almost all fishermen contacted agreed that there is a “race to fish” for golden tilefish.
- In recent years, golden tilefish fishermen in south Florida collectively attempted to delay catch of golden tilefish until March when they thought they could get a higher ex-vessel price. This did not work since other fishermen continued to fish when they did not.
- Some longline fishermen have been unable to participate in the tilefish fishery since implementation of Amendment 13b due to the 4000 pound trip limit which made their trips uneconomical. These people were included in the informal survey if they had average landings of 500 pounds or greater from 1999-2006.
- Hook and line vessels traditionally fish in September and October. In recent years, the fishery has closed around that time or earlier, preventing them from taking the share of the tilefish harvest they feel entitled to. They feel that the current situation will result in the fishery closing earlier and earlier, shutting them out.
- Several fishermen mentioned that longliners have been fishing the 300 pound trip limit in the past few years. Some fishermen are concerned that the longliners are highgrading on these trips.
- Longline vessels would like a later start date to avoid the spawning period and to possibly increase ex-vessel prices by selling fish at a time when tilefish from the Gulf and Mid-Atlantic are not being caught as heavily.
- The hook and line fleet is concerned that an initial allocation based on a methodology that uses the average of 5-8 years in the past that do not include 2007 or 2008 will not reflect the recent revival of the bandit tilefish fishery. People who have not fished tilefish for several years have begun to re-enter the fishery due to the larger size and numbers of tilefish available in recent years.
- Several fishermen are also concerned that initial allocation will not reflect their past willingness to participate in the tilefish fishery due to the incidence of hurricanes and other storms that prevented them from fishing in years past.
- Some hook and line fishermen are concerned that their willingness to participate in past years will not be reflected in an initial allocation formula due to regulatory closures as a result of the quota being met in September or October, the time when hook and line fishermen are just entering the fishery.
- Several fishermen voiced the desire to avoid having to go out in bad weather and being away for their families for long periods of time as a result of the race to fish.

Possible Options

April 1 opening: Some longline fishermen suggested opening the fishery April 1st as a way to avoid selling tilefish when other regions (Gulf and Mid-Atlantic) are selling tilefish.

September 1st opening: Several hook and line fishermen suggested opening the fishery September 1st. September and October are the months during which the hook and line fleet typically fishes for golden tilefish. However, this will force hook and line vessels to compete against longliners and may result in a lower price per pound than under the status quo.

Golden tilefish longline and hook and line endorsements: One fisherman suggested the idea of creating golden tilefish endorsements (a longline endorsement and a hook and line endorsement) to be distributed to all commercial golden tilefish fishermen depending on their gear. The endorsements, instead of the permit, would indicate the trip limit for golden tilefish. The endorsements would be transferable between endorsement holders and stackable (people can own more than one, enabling them increase harvest). This closes the fishery to those without historical landings of golden tilefish and allows fishermen to increase their golden tilefish trip limit when they have more than one endorsement. In this way, some property rights characteristics would be assigned without a drawn out initial allocation and fishermen bumping up against the trip limit could fish again. In addition, two fishermen could fish on the same vessel and thereby save on diesel costs.

Allow for two or more permits to be temporarily placed on one vessel: This proposal would allow for two or more fishermen to take a trip together, instead of on separate vessels as is done now, and thereby decrease fuel and other operating costs. The vessel would be allowed to take the trip limit amount equivalent to what would be taken on separate trips on different vessels. In this way, fishermen who are finding fuel costs prevent them from taking trips recently, can still fish if they are able to find someone to team up with.

Voluntary LAP: A voluntary LAP program would allow those fishermen that want to participate in a LAP to do so. The other fishermen would remain under current management. This type of program would be similar to a sector allocation, except that the landings privilege would be transferable within the group of LAP participants and fishermen would not write management proposals. This decreases fuel and other operating expenses by allowing for some fishermen to take less trips, possibly increasing the amount they harvest on each trip. The program would allow fishermen and dealers more flexibility to capture higher prices. The program could sidestep the conflict that sometimes occurs within fishing communities with regard to initial allocation under traditional LAPs.

Golden Tilefish LAP: Full LAP for the golden tilefish fishery with perhaps two tiers – one for each gear type. Sub-tiers could exist under each tier group for initial allocation so that different levels of fishing effort could be preserved. For example, those with very low landings in the hook and line fleet could receive an equal allocation while other sub-tiers are based on historical catch, similar to the allocation methodology used in the Mid-Atlantic tilefish LAP.

All management options were suggested by fishermen.