

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report

December 2017

Yellowtail Snapper Discussion

At the October 2017 meeting, the Gulf Council reviewed a letter received from the South Atlantic Council (dated 24 July 2017) requesting a joint action for yellowtail snapper that considers combining the jurisdictional acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels and annual catch limits (ACLs). A joint action to combine ABC and ACLs would require one of the Councils to modify their overall approach to setting ACLs. In order to combine ACLs, either the Gulf Council would need to establish sector allocations for yellowtail snapper or the South Atlantic Council would need to consider eliminating its existing sector allocations. After the October meeting, the Gulf Council sent a letter (dated October 19, 2017), agreeing that it would work cooperatively with the South Atlantic Council on yellowtail snapper management.

Joint Spiny Lobster Amendment 13

The Gulf Council reviewed a draft Options Paper for Spiny Lobster Amendment 13 which considers making federal regulations for commercial spiny lobster bully netting consistent with regulations recently adopted by the State of Florida and allowing Florida to directly submit proposed spiny lobster regulations to National Marine Fisheries Service without requiring Council action. These actions are to provide consistency with Florida regulations; thus, it is appropriate and reasonable to only have two alternatives. In October, the Gulf Council elected to add actions to the document to maintain consistency with Florida regulations that would consider adding a bag limit for commercial divers and bully netters; requiring degradable panels in commercial spiny lobster traps; and defining artificial habitats. In December, the Gulf Council anticipates that the South Atlantic Council will concur with the Gulf Council by adding these three actions to the amendment. The Gulf Council will review an updated draft options paper including the new actions added to the document, if the South Atlantic Council concurs at its January 2018 meeting. Since this document is largely administrative the Gulf Council anticipates holding a public hearing webinar and posting an online video to collect public comment.

Cobia Stock Identification (SEDAR 58) and Gulf Council's participation

Three workshops for the stock identification process for cobia are anticipated: the stock identification workshop will be held from April 10-12, 2018 in Raleigh, NC; the review workshop will be held from June 5-7, 2018 in Raleigh, NC or Charleston, SC; and a possible cooperator review of the results will be held via webinar in August of 2018, if necessary.

During a Gulf Council Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) webinar, Council staff recounted the stock identification process for stock assessments, and noted that such a process would be held for the Gulf and Atlantic migratory groups of cobia, ahead of the SEDAR 58 stock assessment on the Atlantic migratory group. Since the results of this stock identification workshop could affect the management of the Gulf migratory group, participation in the workshop by members of the Gulf SSC was requested.

At the October meeting, the Gulf Council expressed concerns about taking final action on CMP Amendment 31 until the results of the cobia stock identification are complete in August 2018.

Coral and Habitat

The Council was presented with a Public Hearing Draft of Coral Amendment 9 which considers creating protections for 15 areas in the Gulf that are known to have an abundance of corals and/or coral diversity that makes them unique. The Council chose to move actions that would incorporate octocorals into the Fishery Management Unit and establish management benchmarks to the ‘considered but rejected’ portion of the document. The Council selected to designate 23 new areas as Habitat Areas of Particular Concern; and selected 13 of these areas as preferred to have associated fishing regulations. One of the 15 areas recommended to have regulations is an expanded area of Pulley Ridge; the preferred alternative for Pulley Ridge would have bottom tending gear regulations, but would allow bottom-longlining in the expanded area. The Council also selected a preferred alternative that would prohibit dredging in all existing HAPCs that have fishing regulations. The Council plans to host a webinar and in person public hearings in the following locations before taking final action on this document: Brownsville, Texas; Palacios, Texas; Clear Lake, Texas; D’Iberville/Biloxi, Mississippi; Grand Isle, Louisiana; Mobile, Alabama; Madeira Beach, Florida; and Key West, Florida.

Sea Turtle Release Gear and Protocol

The Council reviewed Amendment 49, which considers modifying the Sea Turtle Release Gear and Protocol for the Reef Fish Fishery. The Council expects to review a public hearing draft and select preferred alternatives at the January meeting. Since extensive outreach efforts have already been conducted on this issue, public hearings would be held via webinar and online in the spring of 2018.

Descending Devices and Venting Tools

The Council looked at an options paper that considers ways to encourage or require venting tools or descending devices on vessels catching reef fish to reduce the mortality of fish that are released, while allowing anglers the flexibility to decide if and when it’s appropriate to use them. Rather than create an amendment, the Council decided to develop a policy statement supporting the use of descending devices or venting tools as needed on board vessels possessing reef fish. Additionally, the Council will develop an outreach program to promote their proper use.

Greater Amberjack Fishing Year and Recreational Season

In August, the Council revised the rebuilding plan for greater amberjack after learning that the stock continues to be overfished and experiencing overfishing. The Council opted to close the 2018 recreational season at the beginning of the year while it worked to set a recreational season that best balances conservation and stakeholder use. The Council took final action in October on a Framework Amendment that modifies the recreational fishing year to begin on August 1 and run through July 31 of the following year. The Council also selected a fixed recreational closed season January 1 – April 30, June 1 – July 31, and November 1 – December 31. Meaning, the recreational amberjack fishing season will be open August – October and again in May with any quota closures occurring later in the fishing year rather than the calendar year. The Framework Action will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation in November.

Federal Charter For-Hire Management

After hearing a summary of the Ad-Hoc Red Snapper Charter For-Hire Advisory Panel meeting, the Council reviewed draft Reef Fish Amendment 41 which considers allocation based management approaches for federally permitted charter vessels. The Council's current preferred alternative would establish a Permit Fishing Quota program that provides participants with shares and annual allocation. For the adaptive management process, the Council selected preferred alternatives that would establish cycles of increasing length and that would use progressively decreasing percentages for reclaiming shares. The Council selected a preferred alternative that would redistribute reclaimed shares by category proportionally among all participants that harvested species in that category. The Council also supported preferred alternatives that would not allow the transfer of shares, but would allow the transfer of allocation. The Council decided to remove an action that considers harvest tags and to add actions that consider cost recovery for the maintenance of an allocation based management program and that consider quota adjustments. The Council expects to see an updated draft of this document at the January meeting.

Management for Headboat Survey Vessels

In October, the Council heard a summary of the Ad-Hoc Reef Fish Headboat Advisory Panel meeting and examined a draft of Amendment 42, which considers reef fish management approaches for headboat survey vessels. The Council selected preferred alternatives that would require program participants to have a Landings History Vessel (LHV) endorsement. The endorsement would be required for participants to hold shares or allocation, both of which could be transferred. The Council also supported a preferred alternative that would create a share cap that would not allow a single person to hold more shares than the maximum percentage issued to the recipient of the largest shares during initial apportionment. The Council chose preferred alternatives that would apportion initial shares based on the year with the highest landings by vessel for each species during the most recent five years (2011-2015) and distribute those shares proportionally. The Council added alternatives that would consider allowing allocation to be

transferred by surrendering it to a NMFS allocation bank for redistribution via lottery or action, and include options for redistribution of withheld annual allocation if the effective date of a final rule implementing a quota reduction has not occurred by a specific date. The Council will review another draft of this document at the January meeting.

State Management for Recreational Red Snapper

The Council reviewed a series of draft amendments that would enable the Gulf States to establish management programs for the recreational harvest of red snapper out to 200 nautical miles. The Council added an alternative for “full delegation” to the Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi amendments, which was already included in the Florida and Texas amendments. Staff sent letters (dated October 23, 2017) to the five Gulf States requesting clarification as to what “full delegation” entails, for discussion at the January meeting. The Council will also receive recommendations from the Scientific and Statistical Committee on the allocation alternative that would use estimates of red snapper biomass off each state and the number of recreational trips.

Stock Assessment Schedule

The Council discussed the South East Data Assessment and Review (SEDAR) schedule, and concerns it has with the process. The Council directed staff to research stock assessment procedures that could serve as an alternative to the current stock assessment process conducted through SEDAR.