

# Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

## January 2025 Liaison Report



The Gulf Council met in New Orleans, Louisiana from January 27 – 30, 2025. The following is a summary of the Council's Actions:

### **Coastal Migratory Pelagics**

The Council reviewed a summary of comments gathered during its Coastal Migratory Pelagics Special Engagement Effort that aimed to gather information from fishermen on Spanish mackerel, king mackerel and cobia to inform future management. The effort gathered targeted feedback using a series of questions during three public webinars, through a public comment form, and through workshops with the Reef Fish and Coastal Migratory Pelagic APs.

### **Spanish Mackerel**

The Council continued work on a framework action that considers Spanish mackerel catch limits, accountability measures, and the recreational bag limit. The most recent stock assessment (SEDAR 81) included data through 2021 and incorporated new recreational landings information. While the assessment indicated that Spanish mackerel is neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing, new catch advice did represent a reduction in allowable harvest based on recent population trends for the stock. Preferred alternatives would reduce catch limits based on the advice of the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee and modify the Spanish mackerel accountability measure. The latter would allow the Regional Administrator closure authority for commercial and recreational fishing only if the stock annual catch limit was exceeded in the previous fishing year. The Council decided not to consider a reduction to the recreational Spanish mackerel bag limit. The Council will solicit public comment on this document before taking final action during its June 2025 meeting.

### **King Mackerel**

The Council received a presentation on recent landings, population dynamics, and environmental trends for king mackerel. Preliminary conclusions indicate that environmental conditions may be contributing to the decline of the stock. The Council then discussed a framework action that considers decreasing catch limits and the recreational bag limit. The Council decided to stop working on the framework action until the next stock assessment (SEDAR 99) is completed. The Council then requested an exploration on whether there have been changes in fish reproduction over time. The Council also requested a comparison of different start dates in the next king mackerel stock assessment which is scheduled to be completed, reviewed by the SSC, and reported to the Council in June 2026.

### **Deep-Water Grouper**

The deep-water grouper complex is comprised of warsaw grouper, snowy grouper, yellowedge grouper, and speckled hind, and is currently managed with a single annual catch limit for the complex. The most recent stock assessment on yellowedge grouper (SEDAR 85) determined that while yellowedge grouper is not overfished, it is experiencing overfishing as of 2021. Based on the stock assessment results, which indicated low recent recruitment and increased recreational harvest, the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommended an overall decrease in the allowable harvest. While yellowedge grouper is the most frequently landed species in the deep-water grouper complex, it is frequently caught with the other deep-water grouper species. Thus, the SSC also recommended updated catch limits based on average historical landings for the other three deep-grouper species in the complex, and that the catch limits for those species and yellowedge grouper be combined.

The Council is considering management alternatives for deep-water grouper complex which include modifying status determination criteria, establishing sector allocations, updating catch limits, and modifying accountability measures. The Council narrowed the options being considered for establishing annual catch limits and allocations by eliminating alternatives that included years when the commercial individual fishing quota program was not in effect. The Council also modified the suite of alternatives addressing recreational accountability measures by eliminating an alternative that would allow for in-season closures if the recreational annual catch limit was projected to be met. The Council then added an accountability measure alternative that would use average landings and catch limits over a three-year moving period to trigger season duration reductions to reduce the likelihood that recreational catch limits are exceeded. The Council plans to review a public hearing draft of the document in April 2025. If that draft is approved for public hearings, the Council will solicit public input by hosting a series of in-person and virtual meetings before taking final action during its June 2025 meeting.

### **Shallow-Water Grouper**

The shallow-water grouper complex is comprised of scamp, yellowmouth grouper, black grouper, and yellowfin grouper, and is currently managed with a single annual catch limit for the complex. The Council reviewed a framework action to revise catch limits and recreational season for the shallow-water grouper complex in the near-term, starting in 2026. This framework action is intended to decrease fishing mortality on shallow-water grouper while the Council continues to develop Reef Fish Amendment 58A, which will address these issues more comprehensively. The Council modified the range of alternatives being considered for the recreational season duration and selected a preferred alternative that would reduce catch limits based on the Scientific and Statistical Committee's recommendations. The Council will continue work on this document during its April 2025 meeting.

### **Lane Snapper**

Lane snapper harvest has exceeded the annual catch limit the previous three years, resulting in early season closures despite recent Council actions to increase lane snapper catch limits in 2021 and again in 2024. Stakeholders have expressed interest in reducing late season closures and the Council is obligated to assess current management measures and consider making changes to prevent overfishing. The Council reviewed a presentation of draft actions that would increase the minimum size limits and revise recreational bag limits in an effort to constrain harvest to the

stock annual catch limit and extend the fishing season duration. The Council decided not to modify the lane snapper recreational bag limit and selected a preferred alternative that would increase the minimum size limit to 10 inches total length. The Council will solicit public comments before taking final action during its April 2025 meeting.

The Council also requested that NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Science Center conduct an interim analysis for lane snapper that could be used to modify the catch limit.

### **Commercial Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Participation Requirements**

The Council continued work on Reef Fish Amendment 59, which addresses participation requirements in the IFQ programs. Participation requirements include ownership of valid or renewable commercial reef fish permits and landings of preset percentages of annual allocations held in shareholders' accounts. The Council decided to move the landings requirements to a separate amendment to streamline the development of the remainder of Amendment 59. In the remaining actions, the Council selected preferred alternatives that would require a commercial reef fish permit to obtain and maintain an IFQ shareholder account and allow one year for shareholders to divest before shares are reclaimed if they do not meet requirements for participation. The Council plans take final action on those remaining actions during its June meeting.

### **Recreational Red Snapper Accountability Measures**

The Council heard a presentation on recreational red snapper accountability measures, state-specific landings, annual catch limits, and catch limit overages since state management was implemented in Reef Fish Amendment 50A. Staff will develop a draft document that aims to increase flexibility for red snapper state management of private anglers.

### **Gag Recreational Landings Update**

NOAA Fisheries reported that preliminary estimates of the recreational gag landings for the 2024 fishing season total approximately 270,000 pounds. Based on this information, the 2024 recreational annual catch limit, which was 163,000 pounds, was exceeded by approximately 100,000 pounds. The 2025 recreational annual catch limit for gag is 399,000 pounds and the annual catch target is 322,000 pounds before the application on any payback due to the 2024 overage. Preliminarily, the adjusted 2025 annual catch target for gag would be about 211,000 pounds. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and NOAA Fisheries will continue to work together to finalize these numbers, and the Council expects to hear a season duration announcement in late spring.

### **Shrimp**

The Council continued work on a Framework Action that aims to transition the federally permitted Gulf shrimp fleet to a new platform for vessel position data collection and transmission. This will replace the cellular electronic logbook program which stopped transmitting vessel position data at the end of 2020, due to the expiration of 3G network support. The Council heard recommendations from its Shrimp Advisory Panel and modified the language of the alternatives in the document to replace vessel monitoring systems with cellular electronic logbooks, and clarify that position data would only be collected while on fishing trips in the Gulf. The Council selected a preferred alternative that would implement cellular electronic logbooks that provide archived position data for Gulf shrimp trips. Data would be

automatically transmitted to the non-Law Enforcement based National Marine Fisheries Service server, and devices would be type-approved through a process external to the one that currently exists for vessel monitoring system devices. The Council requested a detailed accounting of all administrative costs associated with alternatives in the framework action. The Council plans to send a direct mailing to all federal Gulf shrimp permit holders and conduct a virtual public hearing to solicit comments on the framework action before taking final action during its April 2025 meeting.

### **Aquaculture**

NOAA Fisheries staff presented the Council with preferred alternatives for draft Aquaculture Opportunity Areas (AOAs) off Texas and Louisiana that total 6,500 acres. The Council will submit a comment letter including comments in support of the proposed alternatives that are least likely to disrupt fishing for all sectors and are expected to produce the fewest adverse impacts.

### **Anonymous Voicemail Based Public Comment**

The Council decided to pilot a new anonymous voicemail service as an additional mechanism to gather public comment. This program will be piloted for 6-months to accommodate commentors who are not comfortable speaking in-person or providing written comment. The voicemails will be transcribed and reported to the Council in a way that will ensure comments remain anonymous.

### **Vessel Identification Requirements**

The Council discussed current guidance for vessel identification on commercial and for-hire vessels in the Gulf. Current regulations tier bow number sizing requirements based on vessel length above and below 25 feet, and for vessels over 65 feet. The Council has requested its Law Enforcement Technical Committee, an advisory group comprised of state and federal law enforcement personnel from across the region, provide recommendations on adding an additional font sizing tier for those vessels between 25 and 65 feet.

### **Headboat Port Agents**

The Council learned that funding is no longer available for headboat port agents who collect data from headboats in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The Council requested that NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Science Center provide a summary of costs associated with the headboat port agent program and explain how stock assessments may be impacted by the lack of dockside headboat catch data.

### **Advisory Panel Appointments**

Advisory Panels are re-appointed every three years. This year, the Data Collection, Spiny Lobster, and Coral Advisory Panels are up for re-appointment. Since the Data Collection AP was only convened one time and the Coral Advisory Panel is anticipated to be needed in early 2025, the Council decided that it was unnecessary to update membership at this time. The Council does plan to move forward with re-populating its Spiny Lobster Advisory Panel because fishermen who are not currently on the panel have expressed interest in the opportunity to join. This process will be initiated in the coming weeks and notifications on process will be shared across Council communications platforms.