

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

Spring 2024 Update and Liaison Report



The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met in Gulf Shores, Alabama, from April 8 – 11, 2024. The following is a summary of the Council’s actions:

2024 Red Grouper Season Projection

NOAA Fisheries announced that the recreational red grouper season would close on June 30th, 2024. That closure date will increase the probability of NOAA being able to constrain harvest to the annual catch target. NOAA will determine after June 30th whether any additional harvest is possible, and if so, will re-open the recreational fishing season later in 2024.

2023 Recreational Gag Landings and 2024 Catch Limits

NOAA presented the Council will final landings estimates for the 2023 recreational gag season. The most recent stock assessment was done using recreational landings data from Florida’s State Reef Fish Survey, and the implementation of Reef Fish Amendment 56 will transition in-season monitoring to those units. Because gag is overfished, it is subject to a post-season overage adjustment, meaning that any overage to the annual catch limit is deducted from the following year’s annual catch limit. Based on the adjusted annual catch limit of 163,376 pounds gutted weight, NOAA will work with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to determine the length of the 2024 recreational gag season.

Shrimp

The Council approved the annual Texas federal closure for shrimp in 2024. The closure is part of a cooperative seasonal closure with the State of Texas that aims to allow shrimp to reach a larger and more valuable size prior to harvest, and to prevent waste of brown shrimp that might otherwise be discarded due to their small size. The closure will go into effect in May and is expected to last from 45-90 days.

The Council continued work on its framework action to transition the federal shrimp fleet to a new platform for data transmission to replace the expired 3G cellular electronic logbook program. After hearing recommendations from its Shrimp Advisory Panel, the Council modified an alternative in the document to specify that data collected through the new program would not be directly transmitted to NOAA’s Office of Law Enforcement. The Council expects to continue work on this document at a future meeting.

For-Hire Data Collection

The Council heard presentations on economic data collection which included an overview of metrics typically used to assess economic effects in fisheries management, and discussion of the

importance of revenue data in fisheries disaster determinations. The Council also heard a presentation on the preliminary analysis of the economic data collected in 2022 through the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting logbook data.

The Council continued work on a draft amendment that considers developing a new for-hire data collection program. The Council directed its staff to develop options for incorporating economic data collection into the amendment. The Council also discussed the Ad Hoc Charter For-Hire Advisory Panel's recommendations relative to the need to validate effort, potentially without the use of a continuous vessel monitoring system (VMS) tracking. The Council directed staff to bring back a suite of validation options that could be used to reduce scientific and management uncertainty. The Council plans to continue work on this draft amendment during its June 2024 meeting.

Mid-Water Snapper

The mid-water snapper complex is comprised of wenchman, silk snapper, blackfin snapper, and queen snapper, which are managed collectively with a single annual catch limit. In 2020 and 2021, high wenchman landings caused the mid-water snapper complex annual catch limit to be exceeded and the season was closed early in 2021. Wenchman landings are almost entirely attributed to commercial bycatch from a very small mid-water trawl fishery targeting butterfish. During this meeting, the Council heard that those butterfish fishermen have left the Gulf so, high wenchman landings should no longer be an issue. As a result, the Council decided to stop work on Reef Fish Amendment 61 which considered removing wenchman from the complex and reconsidered catch limits and accountability measures for the remaining species.

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. The complex can no longer be managed in this way because a stock assessment (SEDAR 68) and associated catch recommendation from the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee was made for scamp and yellowmouth grouper separate from the remaining species. Catch limit recommendations for scamp and yellowmouth represent a decrease in allowable harvest while catch limit recommendations for black and yellowfin grouper remain unchanged. Retaining a single annual catch limit for all species would put scamp and yellowmouth grouper at risk of overfishing. The Council worked on a document that considers modifying the structure and catch limits for the shallow-water grouper complex. The Council discussed mechanisms for fairly distributing shallow-water grouper commercial individual fishing quota shares and plans to continue work on this document at a future meeting.

The Council also initiated work on a document to consider removal of the recreational February and March 20-fathom closure for shallow-water grouper.

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. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) reviewed the most recent stock assessment on yellowedge grouper (SEDAR 85) and updated catch limit recommendations. The SSC also

updated catch limit recommendations for the other three species in the deep-water grouper complex using new recreational landings data collected through the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES). New catch limit recommendations represent a decrease in allowable harvest. The Council initiated work on a document to modify deep-water grouper catch limits based on results of the stock assessment and SSC recommendations.

Commercial Individual Fishing Quota Program

The Council reviewed the goals and objectives of the red snapper and grouper/tilefish Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) programs and began work on Reef Fish Amendment 60, which considers alternative approaches to distributing IFQ shares and allocation. IFQ shares and allocation to be distributed could include shares currently held by NMFS, shares associated with inactive accounts, shares and allocation recovered from divestment by shareholders who do not meet requirements that may be set in Reef Fish Amendment 59, and annual allocation from future quota increases. The amendment also addresses the handling of shares from deceased shareholders' accounts. The Council developed the purpose of the document to emphasize the need to increase access and opportunities to the IFQ program by equitably distributing shares to address access barriers. The Council plans to continue work on both documents.

Spanish Mackerel

The most recent stock assessment for Gulf Spanish mackerel (SEDAR 81) incorporated new recreational landings data using the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES), and determined that as of 2021, Spanish mackerel is not overfished or experiencing overfishing. However, landings and catch-per-unit-effort have both decreased in recent years and commercial and recreational harvest have consistently been much lower than the annual catch limit. As a result, new catch advice represents a 35% decrease in allowable harvest. The Council continued work on a framework amendment that considers updating catch limits and accountability measures for the Gulf migratory group of Spanish mackerel. The Council selected preferred alternatives that would modify Spanish mackerel catch limits based on recommendations from its Scientific and Statistical Committee and modify the accountability measure to only allow closure authority to the Regional Administrator of NOAA Fisheries in a year following an overage. The Council also added an action that would consider reducing Spanish mackerel recreational bag limits. The Council will continue work on this document at a future meeting.

King Mackerel

The Council reviewed historical landings data for king mackerel and heard a presentation on current king mackerel management. The Council has heard public testimony expressing concern about the decline in the Gulf migratory group of king mackerel and harvest has been well below the annual catch limits in recent years. The Council decided to move forward with consideration of catch limit reductions and review of the recreational bag limits to determine if a reduction would have a meaningful effect.

Red Snapper

After reviewing red snapper landings information and hearing public input, the Council decided to begin work on adjustments to recreational red snapper management measures. The Council

will consider adjusting the federal for-hire season and the buffer between the federal for-hire component red snapper annual catch limit and annual catch target which is currently 9%. For-hire operators have indicated that opening the season earlier in the year is preferable to extending the season into late August. The Council also passed a motion to consider modifying the private recreational red snapper accountability measures. Currently, the private angling component of the recreational red snapper fishery is subject to accountability measures that require each state to pay back any overage to their state-specific annual catch limit in the following year. The Council would like to consider ways to allow flexibility in cases when there are state-specific overages, but the entire private recreational annual catch limit isn't exceeded.