

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

August 2024 Update and Liaison Report



The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met in Biloxi, Mississippi, August 19-22, 2024. Three new Council members, Juan ‘John’ Sanchez, Troy Frady, and Jason Osborne, and two returning Council members, J.D. Dugas and Billy Broussard, were inducted for a 3-year term. The Council elected J.D. Dugas as Chair and Dr. Kesley Banks as Vice Chair, each for a one-year term. The following is a summary of the Council’s actions:

Recreational Initiative Working Group

The Council’s Recreational Initiative is an effort to engage the Gulf of Mexico recreational community to review and evaluate past and current reef fish management strategies and explore potential new approaches that could be applied in the future. In doing so, the Council seeks to identify ways to increase and maintain angler satisfaction while achieving long-term stock health for managed species. The Recreational Initiative will focus on the following five species as examples: gag grouper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, red grouper, and red snapper. The Council populated the Working Group, which is the main working body of the Recreational Initiative and plans to host the first Working Group meeting before the November Council meeting. A list of Working Group members can be found on the [Councils Recreational Initiative webpage](#).

Special Shrimp Scientific and Statistical Committee

Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSCs) are comprised of professionals with education and expertise in a variety of fields such as biology, ecology, quantitative analysis/modeling, economics, and social sciences. SSCs provide the Council with ongoing scientific advice for fishery management, including recommendations for preventing overfishing and achieving rebuilding targets, and any new methodologies that need scientific review. During this meeting, the Council populated its Special Shrimp SSC. The list of people who have been selected to serve a three-year term can be found [here](#).

2024 NOAA Fisheries Draft Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management Road Map

The Council reviewed a draft comment letter that was developed with recommendations from its Ecosystem Technical Committee on the updated 2024 NOAA Fisheries Draft Ecosystem Based Fishery Management (EBFM) Road Map. The Road Map is being developed to guide NOAA Fisheries’ efforts to implement EBFM Policy over the next five years and to advance climate-ready decision-making. The Council’s comment letter, which applauds the increased emphasis on social and economic considerations, commends efforts to improve understanding of ecosystem processes, and encourages further coordination with management partners, will be sent to NOAA Fisheries as soon as practicable.

Acceptable Biological Catch Control Rule

The Council's Acceptable Biological (ABC) Control Rule is a systematic way to determine sustainable harvest levels that consider scientific uncertainty. The current ABC Control Rule does not adequately account for uncertainty in the scientific data which could potentially result in overfishing. In response, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee is working with NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Science Center (Science Center) to develop a new ABC Control Rule that better addresses the limitations of the current approach. The Council supports the Science Center's plan to evaluate potential approaches to improve the ABC Control Rule procedures which is expected to be completed within two years.

For-Hire Data Collection Program

The Council continued work on a draft amendment that considers developing a new for-hire data collection program. The Council decided to move forward with a non-technical approach to validating effort that would not require the use of Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS). Instead, a combination of trip declarations, pre-landing notifications, approved landing's locations, logbooks submitted before offloading catch, dockside intercepts, and "did not fish" reports is expected to provide validation of trip effort. The Council also considered the collection of economic data and modified options in the document by reducing the proportion of trips that could be subjected to an economic survey. The Council expects to continue work on this document during its November 2024 meeting.

Shrimp

The Council heard a presentation on the Southeast Shrimp Strategy and Planning meeting hosted by Sea Grant and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission. The meeting brought regional stakeholders from both Gulf and South Atlantic regions together to address the challenges facing the shrimp industry. Two of the goals of the meeting were to assist the industry in developing strategies and identify policy changes that may aid in overcoming those challenges. The meeting's outputs will also be incorporated into NOAA Fisheries ongoing Shrimp Futures Project.

Shallow and Deep-Water Groupers

The Council worked on Reef Fish Amendment 58, which considers modifying management measures for the shallow-water and deep-water grouper complexes.

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 catch recommendations were completed for scamp and yellowmouth grouper but not the remaining species. Catch limit recommendations for scamp and yellowmouth grouper represent a considerable decrease in allowable harvest, while catch limit recommendations for black and yellowfin grouper remain unchanged. Splitting the complex requires the Council to establish criteria used to determine if the new sub-complexes are overfished or experiencing overfishing and set allowable harvest and accountability measures for each new sub-complex. Additionally, the Council will consider a recreational season and establishing new commercial individual fishing quota (IFQ) program share categories, allocations, and accountability measures for each sub-complex.

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) which determined that while yellowedge grouper is not overfished, it is experiencing overfishing. The SSC updated catch limit recommendations for yellowedge grouper based on the stock assessment and updated the catch limits for other three species in the deep-water grouper complex. New catch limit recommendations for the deep-water grouper complex represent a decrease in allowable harvest. The deep-water grouper complex can continue to be managed as a single unit because catch recommendations for each species are in the same data units.

The Council decided to split the document into two separate Amendments and expand the management options being considered. The Council expects to continue work on both documents during future meetings.

Charter For-Hire Red Snapper Fishing Season and Buffer

The Council reviewed draft options for a Framework Action that considers adjusting the federal for-hire fishing season and the buffer between the federal for-hire component red snapper annual catch limit and annual catch target. After hearing public testimony, the Council decided not to adjust the buffer between the red snapper annual catch limit and annual catch target. The Council also added an alternative that would consider opening the federal for-hire fishing season on May 15th each year and removed an alternative that would determine the start date each year by forecasting the length of the season backwards, if the season is expected to be open longer than 92 days. The Council does not expect that any potential changes in this document could be implemented in time for the 2025 fishing season and will continue work on it during its November Council meeting.

Commercial Individual Fishing Quota Program

The Council continued work on Reef Fish Amendment 59, which aims to improve opportunities for new participants by modifying requirements for participation. Actions in the document consider requiring a commercial reef fish permit to open or maintain a shareholder account, obtain or maintain shares, and obtain and maintain annual allocation. There is also an action that considers requiring shareholders to land a portion of their annual allocation to demonstrate fishing activity. The Council plans to continue work on individual fishing quota program modifications during its November 2024 meeting.

Stock Assessment Process

The Council heard a presentation on proposed changes to the stock assessment process. The changes aim to improve the flexibility, timeliness, and quality of stock assessments. NOAA's Southeast Fisheries Science Center also aims to prioritize key stocks while allowing remaining stocks to be assessed using less time-consuming approaches.