

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

October 2023 Update and Liaison Report



The Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council (Council) met in Panama City Beach, Florida, from October 23-26, 2023. The Council began by populating its [Council Committee Roster](#) for October 2023 – August 2024. The Council took final action on items addressing electronic reporting for commercial fishing vessels and recreational and commercial management measures for greater amberjack. The following is a summary of the Council’s actions:

Electronic Reporting for Commercial Vessels

After hearing a summary of public comment received, the Council took final action on an amendment developed in conjunction with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council to transition the commercial Coastal Logbook Reporting Program to an electronic reporting platform across the southeast region. This amendment will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.

Yellowtail Snapper

The Council has been working on joint South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Amendment 44 / Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Amendment 55, which considers adjusting catch levels and allocations for southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper. A recent interim analysis (SEDAR 64 2022) estimated that yellowtail snapper is not overfished and not experiencing overfishing as of 2020. The interim analysis used updated landings estimates, including recreational landings using the federal Marine Recreational Information Program’s Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES). Considering a recent announcement indicating that MRIP-FES could be overestimating private recreational effort by as much as 30-40%, the Council decided to deprioritize work on this amendment until another assessment of yellowtail snapper that incorporates landings data from Florida’s State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) is completed.

Greater Amberjack

After hearing a summary of public comment received, the Council took final action on a framework action that considers modifying the recreational season and the commercial trip limit. The Council chose to modify the recreational season so it opens on September 1 and remains open through October 31, unless the annual catch target is projected to be met earlier. The Council also chose to reduce the commercial trip limit to 7-fish, which is equivalent to about 210 pounds gutted weight. This framework action will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.

In anticipation that this rule may not be implemented before the beginning of the 2024 commercial fishing season, the Council requested that NOAA Fisheries implement an emergency rule to reduce the commercial trip limit to 7-fish at the start of the year. Since Amendment 54 reduced catch limits by about 83% and the 2023 commercial annual catch limit was exceeded, a payback provision will reduce the 2024 commercial annual catch target to 56,661 pounds whole weight. Under the current 1000-pound trip limit, the commercial fishing season is expected to be incredibly short, which may increase regulatory discards through the remainder of the year.

Ad Hoc Data Collection Advisory Panel

The Council appointed members to its newly formed Ad Hoc Data Collection Advisory Panel, which was formed to advise the Council as it works on a document that will consider establishing a for-hire data collection program to replace the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting Program (SEFHIER). The Panel will be charged with providing Gulf-wide stakeholder insight on the development of a new electronic data collection program for the charter for-hire and headboat fishing industries. A list of members can be found [here](#).

Vermilion Snapper

The Council was presented with results of an interim analysis for vermilion snapper that incorporated data through 2022. The interim analysis was based on a video index that is associated with considerable uncertainty, and shows a generally flat trend over time with large oscillations in recent years. The Council also heard that since new catch limits were just implemented in 2023, neither its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) nor its Reef Fish Advisory Panel recommended modifying vermilion snapper catch limits at this time.

Lane Snapper

The Council was presented with results of an interim analysis for lane snapper that incorporated data through 2022, and was based on an index derived from catch per unit effort data from the headboat fleet. The Council also heard that both its SSC and its Reef Fish Advisory Panel recommended a nearly 60,000-pound increase to the lane snapper acceptable biological catch based on the results of the interim analysis. As a result, the Council initiated work on an abbreviated framework action that considers increasing lane snapper catch limits based on the results of this interim analysis.

Commercial Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Program Modifications

The Council continued to work on evaluating and improving the commercial IFQ program, specifically focusing on its goal to improve opportunities for new participants to enter the IFQ program. The Council initiated work on an amendment that will consider requirements for obtaining an IFQ account and holding and obtaining shares and allocation. The Council plans to review a first draft of this document during its January 2024 meeting. The Council also decided to initiate work on a plan amendment that will evaluate options for equitably distributing IFQ shares held by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and recovering and redistributing shares associated with inactive accounts.

Gag

The Council was presented with results of a health check for gag, based on two video indices and a recruitment index, which indicated that abundance gag remains below the long-term average. However, the data did indicate the possibility that an above-average number of gags were born in 2020. The Council requested an interim analysis be conducted on gag annually, using the video indices, until the next stock assessment is completed.

The Council heard a summary of recent gag research and discussed its implications on alternatives proposed in the framework document that considers modifying management measures to ensure that gag harvest is constrained to the new, lower catch limits specified in Reef Fish Amendment 56. After considering the need to protect males and allow more fish to survive and contribute to spawning, the Council decided to remove consideration of creating a recreational vessel limit and commercial spawning season closure from the document. The Council removed all consideration of management changes to black grouper, and plans to continue considering lowering the recreational bag limit after data from the 2023 fishing season are available and analyzed.

Spanish Mackerel

The Council began work on a framework amendment that considers updating catch limits for the Gulf migratory group of Spanish mackerel, based on the results of a recent stock assessment (SEDAR 81 2023) and recommendations from the Council's SSC. SEDAR 81 incorporated new recreational landings data using 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 plans to continue work on this document during a future meeting.

Shrimp

The Council received the results of National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) side-by-side testing of the viability of cellular vessel monitoring system (cVMS) and cellular Electronic Logbook (cELB) units for vessel position data collection in the Gulf federal shrimp industry. NMFS will be initiating an Early Adopter Program to incentivize shrimpers to equip their federally-permitted vessels with cVMS units that will transmit data directly to the Southeast Fisheries Science Center. The Council has requested a presentation on the results of the Early Adopter Program when appropriate. The Council will continue to 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.

Ecosystem-Based Management

The Council heard recommendations from its Ecosystem Technical Committee on the structure of the Fishery Ecosystem Plan and steps in the Fisheries Ecosystem Issue loop. The Council decided to use red tide as a pilot issue to put through the steps currently laid out in the Fishery Ecosystem Plan. The Council expects to further develop and solidify its new Fishery Ecosystem Plan as it works through this first fishery ecosystem issue.

Recreational Data Collection and Allocations

The Council reviewed a list of present and future actions that could be impacted by the potential overestimation of recreational landings estimated by MRIP-FES. In some cases, alternative programs, including some state-based recreational data collection programs, could be used in lieu of MRIP-FES. The Council decided to delay any changes in sector allocation between the commercial and recreational sectors that are subject to MRIP-FES until a 2024 pilot study determines the magnitude of potential bias, and MRIP-FES is deemed consistent with the ‘best scientific information available’ by its Scientific and Statistical Committee.

Deep-water Species

After hearing public testimony expressing concern about effort shifting to deep-water grouper, tilefishes, and mid-water snapper species, and the potential trend showing that the average length of these species is in decline, the Council requested an analysis of available data including catch-per-unit-effort and trends in abundance. The Council will review these data and determine if any changes in management are necessary.

King Mackerel

The Council heard public testimony expressing concern about a decline in the Gulf migratory group of king mackerel, noting that harvest has been well below the annual catch limits in recent years. The Council decided to initiate work to review and consider modifications to Gulf king mackerel recreational and commercial annual catch limits and management measures. This effort will include an effort to compile available data on king mackerel to provide some information on the current status of the stock in advance of the next stock assessment, which is anticipated to begin in 2025.

Inflation Reduction Act Funding

The Council reviewed a proposed budget and project plan for the first phase of the Inflation Reduction Act funding for the Regional Fishery Management Councils. Under the Climate Ready Fisheries Program, the Council will hire a staff member for two-years, with the opportunity to extend this time, to work on creating dynamic management frameworks or processes for dealing with climate related fisheries issues. This new hire will also assist in the development of the ecosystem management efforts such as development of fishery ecosystem issues and on-ramps for consideration in the management process.