

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

November 2024 Update and Liaison Report



The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met in Saint Petersburg, Florida, from November 4-7, 2024. The Council adopted Council Committee assignments for the next year and presented the 2023 Law Enforcement Team of the Year Award to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's Northwest Offshore Patrol Vessel Team. The following is a summary of the Council's actions:

Wahoo

The Council heard a presentation on the consideration of wahoo for federal management in the Gulf of Mexico. The Council, the National Marine Sanctuaries, or the Gulf States could consider management. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission regulates wahoo with a 2-fish bag limit for the recreational sector. The Council requested that the remaining Gulf states consider the appropriateness of developing state wahoo regulations that would also apply to federal waters, because there are currently no federal regulations in the Gulf of Mexico. The states committed to evaluating state management of wahoo and the Council plans discuss the issue further in 2025.

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 reviewed and approved updates to the document which included allowing for satellite-based vessel monitoring systems. The Council decided to convene its Shrimp Advisory Panel to discuss these changes to the document before the January 2025 Council meeting.

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 determined that while yellowedge grouper is not overfished, it is experiencing overfishing. Based on the stock assessment results, the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommended an overall decrease in the allowable harvest. Yellowedge grouper is the most frequently landed species in the deep-water grouper complex compared to the other species; thus, the SSC recommended updated catches based on average historical landings for the other deep-grouper species in the complex.

The Council is considering management alternatives for deep-water grouper complex which include modifying status determination criteria, establishing sector allocations, and updating

catch limits, and accountability measures. The Council discussed and expressed concern for setting catch limits and accountability measures based on recreational landings data which are highly uncertain for these rare event, deep-water species. The Council modified the range of alternatives considered for setting sector specific allocations and catch limits. The Council also decided to expand the range of alternatives that would modify recreational accountability measures to account for the uncertainty in landings estimates and evaluate multi-year approaches for triggering accountability measures. The Council plans to continue working on this document at the January 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 complex can no longer be managed in this way because a stock assessment and catch recommendations were completed for scamp and yellowmouth grouper separate from 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. The Council reviewed Amendment 58A which considers splitting the complex, establishing criteria used to determine if the new sub-complexes are overfished or experiencing overfishing, and setting allowable catch and accountability measures for each new sub-complex. The amendment considers a recreational season and establishing new commercial individual fishing quota (IFQ) program share categories, allocations, and accountability measures for each sub-complex.

Due to the timing of development and implementing Amendment 58A, the Council decided to begin work on a separate framework action that would revise catch limits for the shallow-water grouper complex for a short time period starting in 2026 while the Council works to finalize and implement Amendment 58A.

Lane Snapper

Lane snapper has experienced overfishing the previous 3 years, resulting in early season closures despite recent Council actions to increase lane snapper catch limits in 2021 and again in January of 2024. Stakeholders also expressed interest in reducing late season closures. The Council is obligated to assess current management measures and considering making changes to reduce the probability of overfishing. The Council reviewed a presentation of draft actions that would increase the minimum size limits and revise recreational bag limits to constrain harvest to the stock annual catch limit and extend the fishing season duration. The Council requested that further analysis be completed to compare how changes to size and recreational bag limits are expected to impact landings and season duration. The Council expects to continue work on this document during its January 2025 meeting.

Commercial Individual Fishing Quota Program

The Council heard a presentation on draft Reef Fish Amendment 60 which addresses the distribution of shares and annual allocations in the red snapper and grouper/tilefish Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) programs. The Council decided to convene its Ad Hoc Individual Fishing Quota Advisory Panel to review this Amendment and Amendment 59 which considers requirements for participation in the IFQ programs.

Federal For-Hire Fishing

Data Collection

The Council continued work on a draft amendment that considers developing a new for-hire data collection program. The Council focused on the approach for collecting economic information from a portion of participating vessels, rather than for each trip. The Council requested an evaluation of cost associated with the various alternatives and plans to continue work on the document during the January 2025 Council meeting.

Red Snapper Season

The Council reviewed a draft document that considers moving the federal for-hire red snapper season opening earlier in the year. After reviewing analyses evaluating how season duration would be impacted by opening the season earlier and listening to public testimony, the Council selected a preferred alternative that would open the federal for-hire fishing season on the Friday before Memorial Day. The Council will solicit public input before taking final action on this document in 2025. The changes are expected to be implemented before the 2026 federal for-hire red snapper fishing season.

Greater Amberjack

The Council directed its staff to begin work on a flowchart to explore the decision points necessary for considering state and/or regional management of greater amberjack for the recreational sector. This decision flowchart will include a comparison of outcomes with and without sector separation. The Council also requested an update on the “Great Amberjack Count” for the January 2025 meeting, including the projected timeline for completion.

Exempted Fishing Permit

The Council recommended that NOAA Fisheries approve an exempted fishing permit proposed by Texas Sea Grant that will allow new bycatch reduction device designs to be tested in the commercial shrimp fishery in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico.