

# Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

## Winter 2024 Update and Liaison Report



The Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council (Council) met in New Orleans, Louisiana from January 29 – February 1, 2024. The following is a summary of the Council’s actions:

### Lane Snapper

The Council took final action on an Abbreviated Framework Action to increase the lane snapper allowable harvest by nearly 6% or 59,900 pounds. Specifically, the Council selected to modify the overfishing limit, acceptable biological catch, and annual catch limit in pounds whole weight as follows:

|                   | <b>Overfishing Limit</b> | <b>Acceptable Biological Catch</b> | <b>Annual Catch Limit</b> |
|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Current           | 1,053,834                | 1,028,973                          | 1,028,973                 |
| Newly Recommended | 1,116,331                | 1,088,873                          | 1,088,873                 |

The increase is being recommended based on the 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. This document will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.

### Recreational Initiative Steering Committee

The Council appointed recreational Council members Michael McDermott and Capt. Ed Walker to the Steering Committee for the Recreational Initiative. The initiative aims to evaluate the efficacy of current recreational reef fish management practices and develop innovative management approaches and guidance to prevent overfishing, address discards, and better account for uncertainty in recreational fisheries data that is used for management. The Steering Committee will be tasked with coordinating work on the different components of the initiative in conjunction with a consultant. Staff from the Council, NOAA Fisheries, and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission will also serve on the Steering Committee, which is expected to commence work and provide the Council with an update during its April 2024 meeting and discuss progress in detail during its June 2024 meeting.

### Scientific and Statistical Committee

The Council’s Standing and Special Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSCs) are comprised of professionals with education and expertise in a variety of fields such as biological, ecological,

quantitative analyst/modelers, economic, and social sciences. The SSCs provide the Council with ongoing scientific advice for fishery management decisions. The Council decided to modify the composition of its SSC by expanding membership to increase the number of seats available for economists and social scientists. The intent of this change is to improve the multi-disciplinary expertise of the Committee. The Council also modified the language in its Statement of Organizational Practices and Procedures to amend the Ecosystem Technical Committee since the Special Ecosystem SSC was absorbed into the Standing SSC. The SSC is up for re-appointment in June 2024 and the Council will embark on this re-appointment process this spring.

### **Advisory Panels**

Advisory Panels (APs) are comprised of individuals from the public who provide advice and feedback on fisheries management in the Gulf. The Council uses APs to promote a well-rounded understanding of each component of fisheries management in the Gulf by drawing upon the expertise of knowledgeable people from across various fisheries. APs are populated for 3-year terms. This year, the Reef Fish and Shrimp APs are up for reappointment. The Council will solicit applications for those APs before the April Council meeting.

Ad-hoc APs are appointed when the Council wants to address specific issues and are disbanded once the issues are addressed. The Council decided to revise the charge of its Ad-Hoc Red Snapper/Grouper-Tilefish Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) AP to evaluate and make recommendations relative to requirements for participation and modifications to IFQ shares and annual allocation distribution approaches. The Council will re-populate the Ad-Hoc AP and plans to solicit applications prior to the April 2024 Council meeting.

### **For-Hire Electronic Reporting**

After reviewing a summary report of its Ad-Hoc Charter-For-Hire Data Collection AP, the Council decided to include the following program aspects, as recommended by the AP, into an initial draft amendment for charter-for-hire data collection:

- suggested objectives for a new program;
- no requirement for 24-hour tracking;
- refined trip declaration requirements;
- only require declarations prior to departure of for-hire fishing trips;
- refined trip reporting requirements; and
- allowance for safe dockage before submitting trip reports.

The Council also discussed considerations for collecting economic data from the federal for-hire fleet and plans to continue work to develop a new charter-for-hire data collection program at its next meeting.

### **Shrimp**

The Council heard an update from National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on the Early Adopter Program that funds shrimpers to equip their federally-permitted vessels with approved cellular vessel monitoring system (cVMS) units that will transmit data directly to the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC). The previous shrimp vessel position data collection program ceased transmitting information to NMFS in 2020, and the Council and NMFS have been working to transition the federally permitted Gulf shrimp fleet to a new platform. NMFS is still

actively working to equip more shrimp vessels with cVMS units, and shrimpers who wish to take advantage of the early adopter funds should contact Nathan Putman with LGL Ecological Research Associates at [nputman@lgl.com](mailto:nputman@lgl.com).

### **Mid-Water Snapper Complex**

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. The Council is considering removing wenchman from the complex and, potentially, from the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan (FMP), and reconsidering catch limits and accountability measures for the remaining species in the complex. During this meeting, the Council expanded the alternatives in the document to include a new alternative that would remove wenchman from the mid-water snapper complex, but retain it within the Reef Fish FMP under federal management, potentially as an ecosystem component. The Council will continue discussing this document at its April 2024 meeting.

### **Recreational Catch and Effort Data**

NMFS staff presented preliminary 2023 recreational landings estimates from the federal Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) for gag and red grouper. For both species, the landings estimates in MRIP-FES units exceed the annual catch limits. After reviewing the preliminary landings data and hearing considerable public testimony on the issue, the Council decided to write a letter to NOAA's Office of Science and Technology and the Gulf States escalating the review and evaluation of the recreational effort extrapolation methodologies between the federal MRIP-FES program and the state-specific surveys. The Council requested that findings from that review be presented to the Council's SSC as soon as possible.

### **Gag Grouper**

The Council reviewed a presentation which showed that reducing the daily recreational bag limit from two-fish to one-fish is only expected to increase the duration of the recreational gag fishing season by 10%. Further, a recreational bag limit reduction is expected to correspond with an increase in regulatory discards, as approximately 20% of private vessel trips currently land 2 gag per person. Given these results, and in consideration of the Council's goal of avoiding increasing discard mortality on gag, the Council decided to stop work on a framework action that considers adjusting gag grouper management measures.

### **Requirements for Participation in the Commercial Individual Fishing Quota Programs**

The Council began work on an amendment that considers requirements for obtaining an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) account and holding and obtaining shares and allocation. The Council expanded the alternatives being considered in the document by including an alternative that would require a commercial reef fish permit to maintain an IFQ account. The Council plans to continue work on this document at a future meeting.

### **Exempted Fishing Permit**

The Council recommended approval of an Exempted Fishing Permit to evaluate the short-term condition of fish bycatch occurring in the Louisiana menhaden purse seine fishery. If approved by NMFS, the Exempted Fishing Permit would evaluate the short-term condition of fish bycatch in purse seines, fish excluder grates, dewatering screens, and release chutes. The goal is to

quantify survival of bycatch by species that occurs from each exclusion method used in the fishery.

### **Inflation Reduction Act**

The Council approved the proposed activities, project plan, and budget for Phase II of the Inflation Reduction Act funding for the Regional Fishery Management Councils. The Gulf Council proposal will be evaluated against the other Regional Fishery Management Council proposals and be awarded on a competitive basis.

### **Review of the Stock Assessment Process**

The Council discussed the result of the SEDAR 74 research track stock assessment for red snapper, which did not yield a model suitable for developing management advice. In response, the Council requested that NOAA's Southeast Fishery Science Center outline a proposed action plan for revising aspects of the Southeast Data and Review (SEDAR) stock assessment process, to be first presented at the March 2024 SEDAR Steering Committee Meeting in Charleston, South Carolina. The proposal should include: consideration of state surveys becoming fully integrated replacements for the federal recreational data collection program (MRIP-FES); consideration of conducting assessments of some stocks outside of SEDAR; and, the potential for utilization of other methods such as interim assessment for some species toward implementation of more responsive approaches.