

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

Update and Liaison Report



Summer 2020 Update

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) had to cancel its August 24-28th due to two hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico. The following is a brief summary of the Council's actions when they met virtually June 15 – 18, 2020 and a synopsis of some meetings that were held since then.

Yellowtail Snapper Stock Assessment

The Gulf and South Atlantic Council's Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC) met in mid-July to review the SEDAR 64 assessment of southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper. At this meeting the SSCs determined that the SEDAR 64 assessment of southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper represents the best scientific information available on the stock and based on the assessment results the stock is not overfished and not undergoing overfishing. The SSCs explored alternative projection procedures and Control Rule options. Several SSC members had questions about the appropriate methods for determining OFL and ABC that confounded the interpretation of the differences in the current and projected catch limits. Also, the recreational yellowtail snapper harvest is presently monitored in MRIP-FES, and those data are then converted back to MRFSS for quota monitoring. However, the SEDAR 64 projection results are derived from and presented in MRIP-FES. There was concern among SSC members that projection results required further clarification before OFL and ABC values could be recommended. There were also concerns that buffers between projection scenarios and from the ABC Control Rule were not sufficiently capturing the uncertainty about the OFL. Due to these concerns, the SSC decided to hold a subsequent joint meeting of the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs on September 30th to define OFL and ABC for southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper.

Fishing Access and Possession Allowances in Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps Marine Protected Areas

At its June 2020 meeting, the Council took final action on a document that considers modifying surface trolling provisions and possession allowances in Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps Marine Protected Areas to protect gag grouper spawning aggregations. The Council recommends prohibiting all fishing year-round in both Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps. The Council decided on this action because it is difficult to enforce the no-bottom-fishing regulation when surface trolling is allowed, and the Council heard concerns that illegal recreational bottom fishing is occurring in the areas. The fishing prohibition does not include fishing for Atlantic Highly Migratory Species. The Council also recommends prohibiting the

possession of any Gulf reef fish species year-round, except for vessels with a vessel monitoring system (VMS) and a valid commercial reef fish permit that are in transit, with all fishing gear stowed.

The Council will submit these proposed changes to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation. The Council will request that the Atlantic Highly Migratory Species Division of NOAA Fisheries consider making regulations for highly migratory species that are consistent with these new requirements. This document was transmitted to the Southeast Regional Office in August.

Coastal Migratory Pelagics and Red Drum Advisory Panels

The Council made preliminary selections to populate the Coastal Migratory Pelagics and Red Drum Advisory Panels. Candidates will undergo a fisheries violation background check before official appointment to the advisory panels are made at the September Council meeting.

Industry Impacts Due to COVID-19

The Department of Commerce provided an update on the Federal Fisheries Assistance Package, which is part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Funding for Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas will be administered through the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission and funding for Florida will be administered through the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. Commercial, recreational, and for-hire fishery businesses are eligible for assistance if they experienced at least a 35% loss in revenue. Each state is responsible for determining the amount of revenue loss for businesses and for determining spending plans.

The Council heard a summary of comments detailing how COVID-19 has impacted fishing around the Gulf of Mexico. NOAA Fisheries presented the Council with landings data showing a slight decrease in the commercial landings and the price of red snapper, gag, and red grouper since the pandemic started. The decrease in commercial harvest and price are not significantly different from trends from previous years. Recreational data collection programs were interrupted by the pandemic in mid-March, April, and May in most of the Gulf states; thus, landings estimates are not yet available. The Council decided to wait until its next meeting before providing recommendations on whether to modify management to mitigate impacts from COVID-19.

Vermillion Snapper

The Council was presented with the results of SEDAR 67: Gulf of Mexico Vermilion Snapper Stock Assessment. The assessment determined that vermilion snapper is not overfished and is not experiencing overfishing. The assessment used updated recreational catch and effort estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey. Based on the results of the assessment, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended a constant catch Overfishing Limit of 8,600,000 pounds whole weight and an Acceptable Biological Catch of 7,270,000 pounds whole weight. The Council will initiate a framework

action to increase the vermilion snapper overfishing limit, acceptable biological catch, and annual catch limits based on the stock assessment results.

Red Grouper

The Council reviewed Reef Fish Amendment 53 which considers modifying red grouper commercial and recreational sector allocations and catch limits based on the results of the latest stock assessment (SEDAR 61). The assessment showed that the red grouper stock is smaller than it has ever been. Additionally, the assessment used the new Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) landings and effort estimates, which increased the estimates of recreational harvest. NOAA Fisheries presented the predicted recreational closure dates and season lengths based on the Annual Catch Target options in the Amendment. Each alternative, other than the No Action alternative, is predicted to result in a recreational closure prior to the end of the year. The Council will review a public hearing draft of this Amendment at the October Council meeting and if approved will hold public hearings later this year to gather feedback on this Amendment. The Council has also requested that the Reef Fish Advisory Panel provide recommendations at its October 6th meeting.

Commercial Electronic Logbooks

The Council heard a presentation on the development of an electronic logbook program for commercial fishing vessels in the Gulf of Mexico. The goal of electronic logbooks is to improve the accuracy and timeliness of the data reported by commercial reef fishermen. A 2015 pilot study indicated that electronic logbooks were feasible for the industry, noting that captains in the study said additional data entry requirements were acceptable and that a variety of hardware should be available to report catch. NOAA Fisheries noted that the Council would need to develop an amendment to make electronic logbooks mandatory in the commercial fishing sector. The Council will continue this discussion at its October meeting.

Southeast For-Hire Electronic Reporting Program

NOAA Fisheries presented details on the development and implementation of the Southeast For-Hire Electronic Reporting Program. The final rule for the Gulf of Mexico is expected to be published July with an effective date of September 1, 2020. However, at its last meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council requested that the implementation date for its program be delayed until at least January 2021. The Council and NOAA Fisheries indicated that it would be advantageous if both Gulf and South Atlantic Programs become effective on the same date. Additionally, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission noted that additional time would allow for better development of validation procedures and dockside survey protocols in conjunction with the states. The Council recommended that NOAA Fisheries delay the effective date of the Southeast For-Hire Electronic Reporting Program for vessels with Gulf permits until January 1, 2021 and that both Gulf and South Atlantic rules become effective on the same date. The Council also decided to request that NOAA Fisheries work with Mississippi to discuss the integration of the Southeast For-Hire Electronic Reporting Program with the Tails 'n Scales state data collection program.

Extending the Terms of Council Chairman and Vice Chairman

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Council business has not been conducted in its normal manner or at its usual pace. The Council said that it would be difficult for a new Chairman and Vice Chairman to take those positions during these irregular circumstances and decided to allow a temporary exception to the Council Chairman and Vice Chairman's two-year term limit for the upcoming year, allowing them to serve a third term. Elections for Council Chairman and Vice Chairman will occur at the September meeting.

Red Snapper State Data Collection Programs and Calibrations

The Council heard an update at its June meeting on each Gulf state's recreational data collection program and 2020 red snapper season. The Council was also presented with an update on the preliminary calibrations for recreational red snapper harvest between the state data collection programs and the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). The Council will need to consider how to move forward to ensure that overfishing does not occur based on the calibrations. The Council could consider using the calibration ratios, once finalized, to adjust the state-specific Annual Catch Limits established in Amendment 50: State Management of Recreational Red Snapper; or, it could create a buffer on the state-specific Annual Catch Limits.

The Council requested that a state/federal calibration workshop be held, and a report completed, by the August Council meeting. NOAA's Office of Science and Technology held this workshop with representatives from Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana and reviewed the calibration methods and discuss refinement of the calibration ratios used for each state. Following the workshop, the Gulf Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee reviewed the proceedings of the calibration workshop and provided recommendations and feedback to the Council in September.

Since the June Council Meeting – the Following Workshops were held

Workshop on Marine Recreational Information Program – Fishing Effort Survey

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council hosted a two-day workshop via webinar of its Standing, Reef Fish, Mackerel, Ecosystem, and Socioeconomic Scientific and Statistical Committees. Specifically, they discussed how calibrations will impact previous estimates of fishing effort and harvest, and consider implications for management including: quota monitoring, season projections, and sector allocations. The summary report and recommendations have not been provided to the Council yet, but are slated for the September 28-30th meeting.

Workshop on Marine Recreational Information Program State/Federal Private Recreational Red Snapper Data Calibration Workshop

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's Standing, Reef Fish, Ecosystem, and Socioeconomic Scientific and Statistical Committees meet via webinar on August 5th to discuss the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) state/federal private recreational red

snapper data calibration workshop outcomes. The Committees received a summary of Gulf State data collection program methods and resulting calibrations to the landings data generated by the Marine Recreational Information Program's Access Point Angler Intercept Survey and Fishing Effort Survey. The Committees also reviewed the results of individual state calibrations and state-specific annual catch limits for red snapper. After discussing the calibration methodology and results, the Committees provided recommendations to the Council that are slated to be discussed during the September 28-30th Council meeting.