

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report



January 2021 Update

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met virtually from January 25 – 28, 2021. The following is a brief overview of what was accomplished during the meeting:

Cobia

A recent update stock assessment for cobia showed that the stock is not overfished but is currently experiencing overfishing. The assessment used the new Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) estimates which increased the estimates of recreational catch and effort. Based on the assessment, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended new overfishing limits and acceptable biological catch levels for 2021-2023 and beyond. While the assessment projections appear to allow for increased harvest, they actually represent an approximate 30% reduction from the current allowable harvest when accounting for the change in recreational data from MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) to MRIP-FES. The Council is obligated to end overfishing and consider updating cobia annual catch limits.

At this meeting, the Council worked on a draft of Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendment 32, which considers modifying cobia catch limits; apportionment between the Gulf and Florida East Coast Zones; and, management measures including possession limits and minimum size limits. The Council selected preferred alternatives that would update the Gulf migratory group cobia catch limits based on the Scientific and Statistical Committee recommendations, and would use the 1998-2012 MRIP-FES average landings to apportion 63% of the Gulf migratory group cobia ACL to the Gulf Zone and 37% to the Florida East Coast Zone. The Council also selected preferred alternatives that would reduce the recreational and commercial daily possession limit to 1-fish per person and a limit of two fish per trip in the Gulf zone. The Council also chose to retain the current 36-inch minimum size limit in the Gulf zone, and increase the minimum size limit in the Florida East Coast Zone to 36 inches fork length. Cobia is jointly managed by the Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils so the South Atlantic Council will review the document before the Gulf Council resumes work at its April 2021 meeting.

King Mackerel

The Council received a presentation on the draft Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendment 33. A recent update stock assessment determined that king mackerel is not overfished and is not experiencing overfishing. The update assessment used the new Marine Recreational Information Program Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) landings and effort estimates, which nearly doubled historic estimates of recreational harvest. Based on the results of the update assessment, the

Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended increasing the king mackerel overfishing limit and acceptable biological catch levels for 2021-2023. Similar to cobia, the increase in harvest limits is primarily attributed to the integration of MRIP-FES data into the stock assessment rather than a change in stock condition. The Council is considering increasing king mackerel catch limits accordingly and modifying sector allocations.

Yellowtail Snapper

Yellowtail snapper occurs in both Gulf and South Atlantic jurisdictions and is managed jointly by the Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils. A recent stock assessment showed that yellowtail snapper is not overfished, nor is it experiencing overfishing. The update assessment used MRIP-FES landings and effort estimates. The Gulf and South Atlantic Scientific and Statistical Committees revised the yellowtail snapper overfishing limit and acceptable biological catch recommendations based on the assessment. The Gulf and South Atlantic Councils initiated development of a document that will modify yellowtail snapper catch limits in both regions.

Gray Triggerfish

The Council took final action on a framework action to increase the gray triggerfish acceptable biological catch, annual catch limits and annual catch targets for both sectors. A 2020 interim analysis, using a combined video index survey as its representative index of abundance, indicated that the stock biomass has increased in recent years. Based on this information, and recommendations from the Scientific and Statistical Committee, the Council increased the acceptable biological catch and sector-specific annual catch limits and annual catch targets using the ACL/ACT Control Rule as follows:

OFL	ABC	Recreational ACL	Recreational ACT	Commercial ACL	Commercial ACT
1,220,000	456,900	360,951	274,323	95,949	88,273

Note: gray triggerfish catch advice will continue to be provided in the MRIP-CHTS currency until a stock assessment in completed on gray triggerfish

The Council will submit the proposed increase to gray triggerfish catch limits to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.

Lane Snapper

The Council took final action on a framework action to increase the lane snapper catch limits and modify the fishing season closure accountability measure. The most recent update assessment of lane snapper used catch and effort data from the MRIP-FES, and indicated that there has been an increase in lane snapper stock biomass. This allows for a relative increase in the lane snapper catch limits. The Council voted to increase the stock overfishing limit, acceptable biological catch, and annual catch limit in pounds whole weight but not to establish an annual catch target, as follows:

	Data Type	OFL	ABC	ACL
Current	MRFSS	358,000	301,000	301,000
Recommended	MRFSS	592,941	578,953	578,953
Recommended	MRIP-FES	1,053,834	1,028,973	1,028,973

Note: recommended catch limit values presented in MRFSS for comparison purposes only. Catch limits will be set and monitored using MRIP-FES data.

The Council also voted to modify the lane snapper fishing accountability measure by monitoring harvest annually and prohibiting lane snapper harvest for the remainder of the year if the annual catch limit is met. This is expected to prevent overharvest in the future. The Council will submit these new lane snapper management measures to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.

Status Determination Criteria and Optimum Yield for Reef Fish and Red Drum

Council took final action on Reef Fish Amendment 48 and Red Drum Amendment 5, which consider defining maximum sustainable yield (MSY), maximum fishing mortality threshold (MFMT), minimum stock size threshold (MSST), and optimum yield (OY) for all managed stocks with undefined values for these reference points. These reference points are the basis for determining the health of each stock, and are required under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and National Standard 1 Guidelines.

The Council recommends the following:

- **Maximum Sustainable Yield:** Set the goliath grouper MSY proxy at the yield when fishing at 40% spawning potential ratio. Set the red drum MSY proxy at the yield that provides for an escapement rate of juvenile fish to the spawning stock biomass (SSB) equivalent to 30% of those that would have escaped had there been no inshore fishery. Set MSY proxy for remaining reef fish species at the yield when fishing at 30% SPR ($F_{30\% SPR}$). Set MSY proxy values in the future based on the yield produced by F_{MSY} recommended by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee and subject to approval by the Council through a plan amendment.
- **Maximum Fishing Mortality Threshold:** Set the MFMT equal to the fishing mortality at MSY for each stock.
- **Minimum Stock Size Threshold:** For stocks assessed across the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils' jurisdictions (goliath grouper, mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, and black grouper), set MSST using existing definitions of MSST defined by the South Atlantic Council. Set the $MSST = 0.75 * B_{MSY}$ for the remaining species.
- **Optimum Yield:** Set the shallow-water grouper OY at 90% of MSY; set the goliath grouper OY at $(ACL/OFL) * MSY$, or zero if the annual catch limit equals zero; maintain the current OY for red drum; and set OY at 90% of MSY for the remaining reef fish stocks.

The Council will submit these proposed changes to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation.

Red Snapper

The Council heard a summary of the Scientific and Statistical Committee's review of the preliminary results of the Great Red Snapper Count (GRSC), a comprehensive study completed to estimate the absolute abundance of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. A panel of independent reviewers will review the GRSC and determine whether it is an appropriate estimate, and whether to use the data to generate management advice. In March 2021, the Scientific and Statistical Committee will complete its review of the GRSC, and of an interim analysis of red snapper using the GRSC's estimate of absolute abundance. The Council will review resulting catch level recommendations during the April 2021 Council meeting.

The Council reviewed a draft framework action that considers adjusting individual state private recreational red snapper catch limits. NOAA Fisheries has been using the MRIP in concert with landings and effort data collected from Gulf state data collection programs to monitor private recreational red snapper seasons. Establishing calibration ratios will allow state survey data to be converted to MRIP 'currency' so data from the state programs can be compared to the annual catch limits that were developed and established using the most recent red snapper stock assessment. The Council is considering adjusting the state-specific catch limits based on calibration ratios to ensure that management measures are based on the best available scientific information; to account for differences in the harvest monitoring programs used by each state; and to ensure that the private recreational component annual catch limit is not exceeded. The Council modified the action and alternatives in the document and plans to take final action at the April Council meeting after the results of the GRSC are integrated into an interim analysis and new red snapper catch limit recommendations are made by the Scientific and Statistical Committee.

The Council initiated the development of a framework action that will consider adjusting the overfishing limit and acceptable biological catch based on the interim analysis with results of the Great Red Snapper Count integrated. The Council also initiated development of another plan amendment that will consider changes to individual state private recreational red snapper allocations with options that consider the biomass of red snapper. This document will also consider adjustments of allocation for commercial, private recreational, and for-hire sectors.

Red Grouper

The Council continued working on Reef Fish Amendment 53, which considers modifying red grouper commercial and recreational sector allocations and annual catch limits based on the results of the latest stock assessment (SEDAR 61). The assessment showed that the red grouper stock size is smaller than it has ever been. Additionally, the assessment used the MRIP-FES landings and effort estimates, which increased the estimates of recreational catch and effort. The Council selected a preferred alternative that would revise allocations between commercial and recreational sectors based on average landings during the years 1986-2005 using MRIP-FES data. This would adjust the current 76% commercial and 24% recreational allocation split to a 59.3% commercial and 40.7% recreational allocation split. The Council also selected a preferred alternative that would maintain the current commercial buffer between the annual catch limit and annual catch target at 5% and use the ACL/ACT Control Rule to revise the buffer between the recreational annual catch limit and annual catch target from 8% to 9%. The Council will take this

document to public hearing to solicit public comment before taking final action on this amendment.

Greater Amberjack

The Council reviewed a stock assessment which showed that greater amberjack is overfished and experiencing overfishing. The Council is obligated to act to end overfishing within two years, and to develop a plan to rebuild the stock within ten years. Based on the results of the assessment, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended new overfishing limits and acceptable biological catch levels for 2022-2024. The Council initiated the development of an amendment that will revise the greater amberjack catch limits and evaluate sector allocations.

Reef Fish and Shrimp Advisory Panel Reappointments

Advisory Panels are populated with recreational and commercial fishermen, charter boat operators, buyers, sellers, and members of not-for-profit organizations who are knowledgeable about a particular fishery. They advise the Council on different topics, including proposed management changes, and are appointed for 3-year terms. The Council will solicit applicants to repopulate its Reef Fish and Shrimp Advisory Panels in the coming weeks.