

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

June 2023 Update and Liaison Report



The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met in Mobile, Alabama from June 5 – June 8, 2023. The Council presented the 2022 Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award to Alabama’s Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Senior Conservation Officer Chancellor Mancuso. The Council also honored outgoing Council members Dr. Bob Shipp, Dr. Greg Stunz, and Mr. Phil Dyskow. The following is a summary of the other issues addressed during the meeting:

Gag Grouper

The Council took final action on Reef Fish Amendment 56: Modification to Catch Limits, Sector Allocation, and Recreational Fishing Seasons for Gulf of Mexico Gag. The Council chose to:

- Revise the criteria used to determine whether gag is overfished and/or experiencing overfishing, based on results of the most recent stock assessment (SEDAR 72), by setting the maximum sustainable yield proxy at the fishing mortality associated with a 40% spawning potential ratio ($F_{40\%SPR}$).
- Revise the sector allocation to 65% recreational and 35% commercial. This sector allocation based on average landings from 1986-2005, applies new landings information to the historical period originally used determine the sector allocation. Florida’s State Reef Fish Survey is used for private vessels, the Marine Recreational Information Survey is used for recreational shore mode and for-hire vessels, and the Southeast Region Headboat Survey is used for headboats
- Establish a rebuilding timeline of 18 years and set corresponding annual catch limits at 75% of the fishing mortality associated with $F_{40\%SPR}$.
- Set the recreational annual catch target 20% below the recreational annual catch limit; and, set the commercial annual catch target 5% below the commercial annual catch limit and set the commercial quota equal to the commercial annual catch target.
- Open the gag recreational fishing season on September 1 and close it when the recreational ACT is projected to be met; this is expected to result in a season duration of about two months in 2024.

The resulting catch limits are as follows:

Year	OFL	ABC	Total ACL	Rec ACL	Rec ACT	Com ACL	Com ACT	Com Quota
2024	0.591	0.444	0.444	0.288	0.230	0.155	0.147	0.147
2025	0.805	0.615	0.615	0.399	0.319	0.215	0.204	0.204
2026	0.991	0.769	0.769	0.499	0.399	0.269	0.255	0.255
2027	1.200	0.943	0.943	0.613	0.490	0.330	0.313	0.313
2028+	1.454	1.156	1.156	0.751	0.600	0.404	0.383	0.383

All in pounds gutted weight using SRFS & MRIP-FES units. Catch limits are rounded down to the nearest three significant figures.

Amendment 56 will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.

Red Snapper Recreational Catch Limits and Modification of Gray Snapper Catch Limits

The Council took final action on a framework action to update red snapper private recreational data calibrations and gray snapper catch limits. The Council chose to update the private recreational red snapper data calibration ratios for Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi that were developed by the Gulf States and NOAA’s Office of Science and Technology. The current and newly recommended calibration ratios and corresponding state-specific annual catch limits in pounds whole weight, which include increases included in a proposed rule which becomes effective on July 10, 2023, are as follows:

State	Regulation	ACLs – MRIP-CHTS Units	Ratio	2024+ ACL (State Units)
Alabama	Current	1,145,026	0.548	627,474
	Proposed	1,212,687		664,552
Florida	Current	1,951,569	1.34	2,615,102
	Proposed	2,066,889		2,769,631
Mississippi	Current	154,568	0.503	77,748
	Proposed	163,702		82,342

The most recent gray snapper Stock Assessment (SEDAR 75 2022), which incorporates new recreational landings data, shows that gray snapper is neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing. Based on the results of this stock assessment, the Council decided to increase the gray snapper catch limits. The newly recommended catch limits, expressed in pounds whole weight, are as follows:

Years	OFL	ABC	ACL
2024 – 2028+	7,547,000	6,226,000	5,728,000

This framework action to update red snapper calibrations and gray snapper catch limits will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.

Coastal Migratory Pelagic Advisory Panel Appointments

The Council populated its Coastal Migratory Pelagics Advisory Panel. Advisory panels are comprised of people who are knowledgeable about a particular fishery and advise the Council on issues related to their expertise. The list of people who have been selected to serve for a three-year term can be found [here](#).

Rice's Whale Speed Limit Petition

The Council received a presentation on the endangered Rice's Whale. In 2021, NOAA Fisheries received a petition pursuant to the Administrative Procedure Act for additional protections for the species; only 51 individuals are currently estimated to reside in the Gulf of Mexico. Since 2009, two vessel strikes have been documented, and identified as a threat to Rice's whales. The petitioners are requesting a year-round, 10-knot vessel speed restriction within waters between 100-400 meters deep from approximately Pensacola to just south of Tampa, Florida. An additional 10-kilometer 'vessel slowdown zone' was proposed around this speed area with additional vessel positioning requirements and transit restrictions. NOAA Fisheries has opened a public comment period until July 6, 2023, and is requesting information from the public, government agencies, tribes, the scientific community, industry, environmental entities, and any other interested parties concerning the petitioned action. The Council discussed the proposed petition at length and will submit a letter outlining its concerns about the proposed petition. After reviewing comments, NOAA Fisheries will decide how to respond to the related to the petition.

Commercial Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Program Modifications

The Council reviewed existing goals and objectives of the red snapper and grouper-tilefish individual fishing quota (IFQ) programs, discussed the outcomes of the catch share reviews, and developed a prioritized list of suggested goals and objectives to revise the IFQ programs. The goals, in priority order, are as follows:

1. Improve opportunities for participants to enter the program.
2. Reduce IFQ discards.
3. Maintain flexible fishing options and economic stability within the IFQ program.
4. Increase IFQ market transparency.
5. Reduce cost per unit harvest.

The Council decided to discontinue work on two IFQ related Reef Fish Amendments, 36B and 36B, and directed its staff to initiate a plan amendment based on the identified goals and objectives. The Council plans to continue work on this at a future meeting.

The Council also directed its Law Enforcement Technical Committee to review IFQ red snapper landings and analyze how closely advance landing notifications align with landings reports in inspected and non-inspected landings, especially when adjustments are made in hindsight.

Greater Amberjack

The Council continued work on a Framework Action that considers modifying the recreational closed season and the commercial trip limit. These changes are being considered to ensure that harvest is constrained to catch limits that were recently set to allow the greater amberjack stock to rebuild by 2027. The Council selected a preferred alternative that would modify the recreational season to open September 1 and remain open until October 31 or when the annual catch target is expected to be met, whichever occurs first. The Council removed options that would set commercial trip limits in pounds rather than numbers of fish, and added an alternative that would consider setting the commercial trip limit at 8-fish. The Council plans to produce a public hearing video and solicit public comment on the proposed changes before taking final action during the August 2023 Council meeting.

Shallow-Water Grouper

Scamp, yellowmouth grouper, black grouper, and yellowfin grouper are managed together, with a shared annual catch limit, within the shallow-water grouper complex. During a previous meeting, the Council reviewed the results of a scamp and yellowmouth grouper stock assessment (SEDAR 68, 2021) which determined that they are not overfished or experiencing overfishing, and produced updated catch advice. In the absence of a stock assessment for black grouper and yellowfin grouper, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee reviewed landings information and provided combined catch limit recommendations for those two species also. The Council decided to add considerations for setting catch limits for black grouper and yellowfin grouper in the same document that updates scamp and yellowmouth grouper catch limits. These recommended catch limits all use updated recreational landings data. The Council plans to continue work on the document during a future meeting.

Mid-Water Snapper Complex

Following recommendations from its Scientific and Statistical Committee, the Council initiated work on an amendment that will consider removing wenchman from the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan so that it will no longer be federally managed and will no longer be subject to federal regulations. The amendment will also reconsider catch limits and accountability measures for the remaining species in mid-water snapper complex, which include silk snapper, blackfin snapper, and queen snapper. These recommended catch limits will use updated recreational landings data.

Yellowtail Snapper

Yellowtail snapper is jointly managed with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. During this meeting, the Gulf Council began work on South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Amendment 44 / Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish Amendment 55: Catch Level Adjustment and Allocations for Southeastern U.S. Yellowtail Snapper. A recent stock assessment (SEDAR 64, 2020) and subsequent interim analysis (2022), which included updated recreational landings estimates, found that yellowtail snapper is neither overfished nor is it undergoing overfishing. The Council is obligated to update catch limits using the new recreational landings estimates and based on recommendations from both Councils' Scientific and Statistical Committees. Additionally, the apportionment, or the division of harvest between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils, may be modified based on the new recreational landings estimates. Finally, the buffer between the Gulf's apportionment of the total acceptable biological catch and annual catch limit

can be reconsidered to align it with the new recreational landings data and apportionments. The Gulf Council will continue work on this amendment after the South Atlantic Council reviews it in June 2023.

Ecosystem-Based Management

The Council reviewed prioritized recommendations from its Ecosystem Technical Committee on fishery ecosystem issues that would be appropriate for incorporation into the Council's Fishery Ecosystem Plan process. The Council suggested that its Ecosystem Technical Committee modify the prioritized list to ensure that fishery ecosystem issues can directly translate to Council-level management action. The Ecosystem Technical Committee is expected to fine tune the metrics used to prioritize fishery ecosystem issues and further develop the Fishery Ecosystem Plan process during its next meeting in August 2023.