

## Coastal Migratory Pelagic Special Engagement Summary

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council endeavored to gather input from a broad variety of stakeholders on king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia through this Coastal Migratory Pelagic Special Engagement effort. This effort was undertaken as a complementary effort to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Port Meeting effort along the Atlantic coast and to inform future Council management approaches. The most recent stock assessments for king (SEDAR 38 Update 2019) and Spanish mackerel (SEDAR 81, 2023) in the Gulf of Mexico determined that neither species is overfished or undergoing overfishing, however, declines in landings of both mackerel species in recent years may be an indication of declining stocks or they may be indicative of a shift in distribution or migration patterns of the species. Additionally, the most recent cobia assessment (SEDAR 28 Update 2020) indicated that the stock was experiencing overfishing and the Council reduced catch limits and modified management measures in 2022, in CMP Amendment 23. The Council gathered feedback from CMP fishermen using three methods: special sessions held with its Coastal Migratory Pelagic and Reef Fish Advisory Panels; virtual public feedback workshops; and an online feedback tool. The following is a summary of feedback received from those efforts.

### Table of Contents:

1. Coastal Migratory Pelagic Advisory Panel CMP Engagement Session Summary
2. Reef Fish Advisory Panel CMP Engagement Session Summary
3. Coastal Migratory Pelagic Virtual Public Engagement Summary
4. Coastal Migratory Pelagic Written Public Engagement Summary

### Coastal Migratory Pelagic Advisory Panel February 13, 2024

During the Coastal Migratory Pelagic Advisory Panel meeting held on the February 13, 2024, a special engagement session was held. Advisory Panel members were asked a series of questions designed to gather broad input on the health and dynamics of the stock, fishing behavior, and ecosystem interactions of coastal migratory pelagic species which includes king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia.

A number of themes emerged during the discussion. King mackerel was discussed most frequently and Spanish mackerel was mentioned the least; however, many observations often applied across all three species. The following is a list of main themes that emerged during the Special Engagement Session:

- All three species are experiencing some decline in abundance and/or size of available fish.
- King mackerel and cobia seem to be found further offshore than usual.

- Changes in migratory patterns seem to be occurring in relation to timing, area, and size of schools.
- Recreationally, none of the three species are the primary target species because they're not as readily available. This is a departure from historical behavior.
- The removal of rig structure has disrupted fish movement and targetability.
- Bait that used to attract fish has nearly disappeared in inshore environments and has changed locations and availability.
- Shark depredation is driving increased release mortality.
- Commercially, there is increased competition for fish in the Southern Zone and a decline in pressure in the Western zone. Additionally, the commercial king mackerel fishery remains economically viable because the increase ex-vessel price due to a decreased supply has kept pace with increasing costs associated with targeting the fish which are harder to find.
- Fishing regulations are not limiting harvest. Instead, ecological challenges and decreased availability of each species stop catch limits from being harvested.
- Changes in salinity, water temperature, degradation of habitat, harmful algal blooms, and areas of low dissolved oxygen are driving population decline and impacting migratory behaviors.

The following is a full summary of the questions and responses received during the workshop:

- 1) Have there been substantial changes in the fishery in recent years. If so, describe the timing, location and reason for the change for:
  - a) King mackerel
    - Near shore, off the coast of Orange Beach, Alabama a lot more undersized fish were encountered.
    - The fishery off coastal Alabama has become less consistent.
    - Production in the Western Gulf Zone has declined dramatically since 2020. Most of the traveling commercial fisherman that used that zone have retired. Additionally, those fishermen use to show the young fishermen where to fish and the loss of historical knowledge will impact production in that zone for the future.
    - The fish in the Florida Keys and off Naples, Florida are smaller than they have been historically. There are very few fish over 8-pounds and most are around 5-pounds.
  - b) Spanish mackerel
    - There has been a decline in abundance over the last 6-10 years.
    - They used to be more prevalent although large schools still show up in the Northern Gulf in July and August.
- 2) Have there been changes in the effort and/or fishing techniques used to target each species:
  - a) King mackerel

- In the Northern Gulf, fishermen have switched to using live bait and chumming to catch instead of trolling because trolling was less productive.
  - In tournaments, the size and range of the boats has increased to find the fish.
- 3) Have there been changes in the migratory patterns or behaviors of each species as they relate to time, area, and depth?
- a) King mackerel
- Fish in the Keys are fewer and farther between. They are not seeing the schools in the number or frequency that they used to.
  - The winter fishery off the Florida Keys reef line is not what it used to be. The large fish are not south of the reef, they're much farther north. The fish come through sooner in the spring, and move through quicker in the fall than they have historically.
  - Some fishermen without historical perspective might perceive the run to mean the fishery is healthy but the number and size of the fish in the run has declined.
  - Off the Florida coast, the fish come through thinner in the spring and quicker in the fall than they have historically.
  - The fish are found further offshore and don't cruise the beaches like they used to.
  - In the Western and Northern Zones, the fish are not showing up on time, their movement is delayed by a number of weeks.
  - Last year, the fish held south of Tampa Bay, Florida for weeks like they used to in the 1970's.
  - Fish are still concentrated in their historically spawning area off the Big Bend of Florida in the spring.
  - The fish are no longer sitting off of Grand Isle, Louisiana like they used to.
  - Off peninsular Florida, the fish have moved offshore onto yellowtail snapper and blue runner schools that didn't use to be there.
  - The bait seems to be holding further north in peninsular Florida.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- Off of peninsular Florida they seem to show up earlier and leave later. Sometimes they don't leave at all during warm winters.
- c) Cobia
- They're not found close to the beach off in the Northern Gulf like they used to be.
  - They're still found on buoys and shipping channels in the Northern Gulf but they are less common.
  - They're only found farther offshore.
  - Historically, the fall migration skipped the Big Bend area of Florida. That area always had a strong spring migration but, it seems like they may be cutting west in the spring now and skipping the northeastern Gulf.

- 4) Have there been changes in discard trends for each of the species?
  - a) King mackerel
    - Sharks are a problem. Fishermen noted more cut-off fish from shark interactions.
    - There has been a minor increase in the number of small king mackerel released.
  
- 5) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your economic performance for each species?
  - a) King mackerel
    - Targeting them commercially is still viable because the high ex-vessel value of the fish balances the increased use and cost of fuel and increased time and effort to harvest worth it.
    - Private anglers rarely take trips targeting a limit of king or Spanish mackerel.
  - b) Spanish mackerel
    - Spanish are typically only targeted on charter trips when other fishing is slow.
  - c) Cobia
    - Cobia are so rare nobody takes trips just to target them anymore.
  
- 6) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your behavior or your lifestyle as it relates to each species?
  - a) King mackerel
    - There is an increase in gear conflicts between the gillnetters and hook and line fishery in the Southern Zone because there are fewer, smaller pods of fish to chase. Each fleet used to be able to target their own pods but now they're competing for the same ones because there are so few.
    - The gillnet season in the Southern Zone is lasting much longer. This is in part because there are less fish and in part because the fleet is intentionally targeting smaller amounts at a time to drive up the price and avoid flooding the market.
    - It's not unusual to cover 60-100 extra miles during a tournament to avoid shark depredation.
    - Tournaments have created tighter area restrictions to ensure that smaller boats still have a place in competitions.
    - There is less motivation to fish tournaments because it takes more time and effort to pre-fish compared to what it used to.
  - b) Cobia
    - The fleet in Alabama has self-imposed their own limits. It's not popular to bring them home anymore and it's frowned upon. Instead, it's more socially acceptable to take a photo and release them.
  
- 7) Provide feedback on the appropriateness of current regulations and catch limits for each species:
  - a) King mackerel
    - Since we're not meeting the catch limits, the quotas and regulations are working.

- It's not the fishing limits that are controlling harvest, its environmental factors and stock health.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- Recreational limits may be more liberal than the desire to keep them.
- 8) Are there any environmental or ecological factors or recent events that are influencing each of the species?
- a) King mackerel
- Issues related to coastal estuaries in Louisiana that have limited inshore spawns of shrimp and pogy have negatively impacted the fish.
- b) Removal of oil platforms has impacted the migration behaviors of the fish. They're not being drawn in like they used to.
- Estuaries are full of more fresh water than they used to be.
  - Harmful algal blooms are more frequent and vary more in type than they used to.
  - Changes in water temperatures could be impacting the stocks.
  - Areas of low dissolved oxygen are driving changes.
  - Traditional king mackerel grounds over live bottom are dead offshore of Naples, Florida so, the fish bypass them now.
  - Intense hurricanes in recent years off the coast of Florida and corresponding high freshwater inflows is impacting the stocks.
  - The use of social media to teach people how to be effective fishermen has increased efficiency of the angling community.
  - Technological improvements including spot lock trolling motors have turned people into better fishermen.
- c) Cobia
- Cobia used to travel the rigs and stick around them but, removal of oil and gas platforms has stopped drawing them in.
  - The lack of bait near the beaches and estuaries may be driving the fish offshore.
  - Increasing populations along the coast which impacts light pollution may drive them away from inshore areas.

**Reef Fish Advisory Panel**  
**December 3, 2024**

During the Reef Fish Advisory Panel meeting held on the December 3, 2024, a special engagement session was held. Advisory Panel members were asked a series of questions designed to gather broad input on the health and dynamics of the stock, fishing behavior, and ecosystem interactions of coastal migratory pelagic species which includes king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia.

The following is a list of main themes that emerged during the Special Engagement Session:

- 1) Bait is not as available as it used to be so King and Spanish mackerel are not showing up.

- 2) The lack of structure off the northern coast of the Gulf has made king and Spanish mackerel less available.
- 3) Spanish mackerel populations seem unchanged in many regions.
- 4) People fish for king mackerel and cobia less than ever because the fish aren't available.
- 5) The fall cobia run in the northern Gulf is better than the spring run, which is essentially non-existent.
- 6) Charter vessels are no longer selling targeted king mackerel or cobia trips.

The following is a full summary of the questions and responses received during the workshop:

- 1) Have there been substantial changes in the fishery in recent years. If so, describe the timing, location and reason for the change for:
  - a) King mackerel
    - Years ago, you could troll 6-8 miles offshore of Mississippi for them but they're not there anymore.
    - Kings haven't been around since 2018 in the Florida Panhandle. They did show up a tiny bit this year after the cold fronts blew in.
    - They're not being caught well during tournaments off Louisiana, they've declined.
    - No fish off Texas.
    - They're still finding them in the Florida Keys.
    - Fishing for them was better 3-5 years ago off Central Florida.
    - They may be moving over to the Atlantic side after they leave the mixing zone because it seems like we're having trouble while the Atlantic populations are healthy.
  - b) Spanish mackerel
    - The fish aren't around in Southwest Florida near the end of the year like they used to be.
    - Spanish can still be found reliably in the Panhandle of Florida.
    - Not a target fish in Louisiana but they haven't noticed a decline.
    - Spanish show up off central Florida as long as the water is clear.
  - c) Cobia
    - Average size has declined.
    - Off Southwest Florida they still have fish but they're smaller.
    - The population is down off Louisiana this year.
    - They're not really a target species off central Florida.
- 2) Have there been changes in the effort and/or fishing techniques used to target each species:
  - a) King mackerel
    - There seems to be a lot more commercial boats fishing off Louisiana throughout the year starting in March and going through until late October.

- There's no more commercial fishing for them off Mississippi.
  - They don't troll for them off Texas anymore since they're not there.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- c) Cobia
- Regulations have made people fish for them less.
  - They're no longer targeted in the spring off Mississippi.
  - Since the limits were changed, they seem to be showing up a little better in the fall off Mississippi.
  - Off Mississippi, because of the lack of offshore structure, people have been targeting them nearshore every day of the week.
- 3) Have there been changes in the migratory patterns or behaviors of each species as they relate to time, area, and depth?
- a) King mackerel
- Off the coast of Mississippi, they're no longer schooling close to shore. Now, they're found infrequently on rigs.
  - They used to show up over the salt domes off Mississippi in February and March when they were tuna fishing but they're not there anymore. They don't see them much over other natural bottom like the Horseshoe Lumps either.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- N/A
- c) Cobia
- Off Louisiana, they may be found closer to shore because bay boats have been bringing them in.
  - The fall run is better than the spring run in the northern Gulf. This was never the case historically.
  - You used to be able to chum the sandbar and catch big females but now they hang out off the rigs in Mississippi.
  - There are no cobia in the spring off the Florida Panhandle.
  - Off Louisiana, they show up earlier and stick around longer, they seem to be migrating less.
  - In the Panhandle, anglers used to compete to see who could land the first fish of the year. Now, it's a celebration if a single fish is landed at all.
  - The water has to be right off Mississippi for the fish to show up.
- 4) Have there been changes in discard trends for each of the species?  
N/A
- 5) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your economic performance for each species?

- a) King mackerel
- Commercial prices have gone down.
  - Headboats in Southwest Florida used to be able to sell targeted trips October – December but now, they don't.
  - Off of Mississippi they would sell charter trips outside of red snapper season that targeted a variety of species including kings but, without them, those trips aren't popular.
  - Off the Panhandle of Florida, commercial king fishing was profitable in 2017-2019. When their charter season slowed down they could still make money on commercial kings. Now, that's not possible.
  - They used to be able to sell targeted king mackerel trips after red snapper season in the Panhandle of Florida but, that isn't possible anymore.

- b) Spanish mackerel  
N/A

- c) Cobia
- No longer selling targeted charter cobia trips off Louisiana because its more reliable and profitable to sell bottom fishing trips.
  - There are no more targeted cobia charters sold out of Mississippi.

6) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your behavior or your lifestyle as it relates to each species?

- a) King mackerel
- There are no longer traveling fishermen in Southwest Florida.
  - They can't sell targeted charter trips off the Florida panhandle or Louisiana.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- In the spring off the Florida Panhandle, they sell family trips for Spanish mackerel and that's been quite productive in the last few years.
- c) Cobia
- Mississippi still hods a few tournaments but few boats participate.
  - The big kingfish tournaments off central Florida are still profitable and viable.

7) Provide feedback on the appropriateness of current regulations and catch limits for each species:

- a) King mackerel
- Limits are fine.



- b) Spanish mackerel
- Limits are fine.

- c) Cobia
- Support for increasing the minimum size limit to 40 inches as long as there is a concurrent outreach campaign to stop anglers from gaffing small fish.
  - The 2-per boat limit has made it less feasible for people to go offshore and fish when nothing else is open. When red snapper is closed it's not worth going out that far for cobia.

8) Are there any environmental or ecological factors or recent events that are influencing each of the species?

- a) King mackerel
- The bait isn't around like it used to be.
    - Hardtails used to draw the kings in to Mississippi.
    - Thread herring and cigar minnows are missing off Southwest Florida.
  - Discharge from the Caloosahatchee River is negatively impacting water quality in Southwest Florida.
  - The removal of offshore structure off Mississippi has impacted their population.
  - Red tide is causing problems in Florida.

- b) Spanish mackerel
- N/A

- c) Cobia
- The red anchovy balls aren't showing up off Mississippi.
  - The removal of offshore structure off Mississippi has impacted their population.
  - Area/Zone based management should be considered because the stock seems healthier in some places than others.
  - Off Mississippi the river diversions are negatively impacting stocks. The Fresh water pushes them offshore.

### Coastal Migratory Pelagic Virtual Public Engagement Summary

A series of Special Engagement Sessions designed to gather feedback from the public on Coastal Migratory Pelagic species were held virtually in the fall of 2024. During the sessions, the public was asked a series of questions designed to gather broad input on movement and health, dynamics of fishing behavior, and ecosystem interactions of coastal migratory pelagic species which includes king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia.

The following is a list of main themes that emerged during three sessions:

- The king mackerel stock has been in decline for a number of years, but some indicated that the last year was a bit better than it has been.
- Spanish mackerel stocks seem to be stable.
- Cobia have disappeared in the Northern Gulf with the exception of some spots off Louisiana. Cobia populations are healthy in South Florida.
- The fall cobia run has been improving in recent years.
- You have to run further and spend more time and money to find keeper king mackerel and cobia.
- Cobia tournaments are all but gone and participation in king mackerel tournaments is in decline in the Northern Gulf.
- Charters can't sell targeted king mackerel or cobia trips in the northern Gulf like they used to.
- Cobia fishing is nearly non-existent in the Florida panhandle where it was formally a way of life.
- The king mackerel migration has steadily moved north in the Keys.
- Rig removal has impacted king mackerel and cobia migration in the Northern Gulf.
- Current catch limits are appropriate for all species however, some regulatory changes were suggested.
- The loss of bait, poor water quality, and removal of structure are all thought to contribute to the decline in king mackerel and cobia populations.

The following is a detailed summary of each separate session:

### September 25, 2024

#### **Three members of the public attended, two spoke.**

- 1) Have there been substantial changes in the fishery in recent years. If so, describe the timing, location and reason for the change for:
  - a) King mackerel
    - Used to catch hundreds every summer off the coast of Texas, but now it's just a handful.
    - There is a small uptick in available fish this summer off Texas, but not much.
    - The commercial annual catch limit in the western zone used to be caught regularly but now it's not.
    - King mackerel tournaments aren't catching them anymore even with increased effort and distance covered to find them.
    - It's the worst it's ever been in deep and in shallow.
    - Some are still caught off of Port Fourchon, Louisiana in 400 feet , off Sonnier Bank, and at the West 21 Bank off of Freeport, Texas but that's the only place to find them.

- It's amazing how fast the populations declined in the past 5-6 years.
  - In the past few years, they've shown up like they used to near Panama City, Florida.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- Spanish mackerel fishing is the same as it's always been off the panhandle of Florida. Some years its great and some years it's not.
- c) Cobia
- Cobia has been steadily declining in the past 10-years. There used to be a migration from the keys to the panhandle of Florida with bods of 10-20 fish traveling together but now, it's rare for the entire fleet in Panama City to catch more than a dozen in a season.
  - There is a small uptick in available fish this summer off Texas, but not much.
- 2) Have there been changes in the effort and/or fishing techniques used to target each species:
- a) King mackerel
- Tournament anglers are covering more territory and still aren't finding fish. Changing location and tactics isn't producing more fish.
  - No body fishes commercially for them off Texas anymore. There are a few guys out of Louisiana that target them off the Midnight Lump and Sonnier Banks in the winter, but that's it.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- The commercial quota will never be met for Spanish mackerel unless net's are allowed again.
  - There are plenty of Spanish off of Galveston, Texas.
- c) Cobia
- People used to cruise up and down the beach and sight cast them but it rarely happens anymore because they're not there.
- 3) Have there been changes in the migratory patterns or behaviors of each species as they relate to time, area, and depth?
- N/A
- 4) Have there been changes in discard trends for each of the species?
- N/A
- 5) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your economic performance for each species?
- a) King mackerel

- Price per pound is up on the commercial side.
  - You need to spend more money on fuel to chase them.
  - Targeted charter trips aren't sold for kings anymore.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- N/A
- c) Cobia
- There is a clear economic disruption in Panama City because people aren't spending the money to target fish that aren't there.
- 6) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your behavior or your lifestyle as it relates to each species?
- a) King mackerel
- It used to be a regular thing to stop for king mackerel on the way out to reef fish but, it's not even worth it yet.
  - The fish houses in Cameron, Louisiana are all gone since the storm so, there is nowhere to sell or offload fish.
  - There are no more single species fishermen anymore.
  - Off Galveston, Texas there are more shark excursions and jetty trips being sold because people don't want to pay for an offshore charter just to keep two red snapper.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- N/A
- c) Cobia
- People used to take the months of March and April off work to fish every day for cobia but that doesn't happen anymore.
- 7) Provide feedback on the appropriateness of current regulations and catch limits for each species:
- a) King mackerel
- The regulations are appropriate. There is no reason to change anything. Reducing limits won't change the abundance and everything is as low as possible already.
  - The limit could go back down to two because people don't catch three.
  - The 3-fish limit made it harder on charters because clients expected to land and keep all three and are dissatisfied when they don't.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- Dropping the bag limit won't change a thing.

- c) Cobia
  - The regulations are appropriate. There is no reason to change anything. Reducing limits won't change the abundance and everything is as low as possible already.

8) Are there any environmental or ecological factors or recent events that are influencing each of the species?

a) King mackerel

- There is so much nutrient loading and low dissolved oxygen. The fish at the bottom of the water column are plentiful but not the mackerels.
- There is a lack of forage fish.
- Sea surface temperature and salinity changes must be impacting the fish.
- The big red tide event off of Florida must have affected them.
- The dispersant used during the oil spill could have impacted the bait lava.

b) Spanish mackerel

- Spanish seem less susceptible to whatever changes are impacting kings and cobia.

c) Cobia

- The oil industry has been moving platforms further offshore in Louisiana, Alabama, and Texas. This has changed the migratory pattern of the cobia.
- The fish are following the bait and proper temperature in deeper areas than before.

**October 28, 2024**

**Six members of the public attended none spoke.**

**November 16, 2024**

**8 members of the public attended, 6 spoke.**

1) Have there been substantial changes in the fishery in recent years. If so, describe the timing, location and reason for the change for:

a) King mackerel

- In recent years, the wind off central Florida has made it difficult for small boats to fish regularly
- Since the 1970's fish have been slowly moving north. They used to be found 40-50 miles south of Key West and now the run takes place north.

- The fish schools off the Florida Keys are there. Last year, there were smaller schools, they showed later, and the fish were smaller. After the cold fronts, they seem to come together and show up like normal.
- Off Alabama, the population is down, and large fish are non-existent. The ones that are moving through follow the normal migratory pattern but they're small schoolies. There is rarely a big, 30-pound fish.

b) Spanish mackerel

- In recent years, the wind off central Florida has made it difficult for small boats to fish regularly
- The stock of the Florida Panhandle is as healthy as it's ever been.
- They're no longer found inshore in the Florida Keys, they've moved offshore to deeper waters.
- Gillnetters have put a hurting on them off Alabama. Just to the east, they're offshore of Pensacola, Florida but as soon as they hit Alabama they're harvested.

c) Cobia

- You used to be able to target them off central Florida but now they're a rare occasion fish.
- In the keys, the fishery is better in the past 10-years than it's ever been.
- In the Florida Panhandle, they are tiny and the fishery is overfished compared to how it's been historically.

2) Have there been changes in the effort and/or fishing techniques used to target each species?

a) King mackerel

- In the southern zone the hook and line fleet has made a major transition away from large inboards to smaller outboard boats because they have to run longer which takes more time and is more expensive.
- Recreational fishermen off Alabama have started to deep drop. Since mackerel are a good bait, they start their trips trolling for them and then go deep to use them.
- The number of king tournaments off Florida has increased in the past 10-years.
- Technology keeps improving to make fishermen more efficient.

b) Spanish mackerel

- Recreational fishermen off Alabama have started to deep drop. Since mackerel are a good bait, they start their trips trolling for them and then go deep to use them.

c) Cobia

- Cobia has become a bycatch fishery and is no longer a target species in the Panhandle of Florida.

- 3) Have there been changes in the migratory patterns or behaviors of each species as they relate to time, area, and depth?
- a) King mackerel
    - Kings seem to be coming back to the Florida Panhandle a little bit, but nowhere near what it used to be. March – May the groups of 15 or 20 big breeders used to cruise the beach regularly but they've disappeared.
    - In the Keys, fish are moving north and don't run as south as they used to.
  - b) Spanish mackerel
    - Spanish are farther offshore than they used to be in the Florida Keys.
  - c) Cobia
    - The spring migration off Destin, Florida is non-existent. He used to catch 200-250 fish in a good year and every year since the B.P. Oil Spill that has declined steadily. Now, he catches a handful a season.
- 4) Have there been changes in discard trends for each of the species?
- a) King mackerel
    - Sharks are worse than ever.
    - Dolphin depredation is an issue off the Florida Panhandle.
- 5) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your economic performance for each species?
- a) King mackerel
    - The bait fish, like cigar minnows, sardines, and threadfin are all more profitable than ever. They used to cost \$3.00 a box and now fetch \$22.00.
    - They're showing up later off Alabama and they're more sporadic so they can't book for-hire trips for them in March and April and income is down.
    - Since fishing starts later in the Florida Keys, gas is more expensive.
  - b) Spanish mackerel
    - They're not booking for-hire trips off Alabama for them in March and April anymore so income is down.
  - c) Cobia
    - Fish markets off the Florida Panhandle have stopped buying cobia to deter folks from catching them just to sell them.
- 6) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your behavior or your lifestyle as it relates to each species?

- a) King mackerel
  - The fish aren't around and the wind has been bad out of central Florida so, the small commercial boats are not making the money they used to.
  - They're showing up later off Alabama and they're more sporadic so they can't book for-hire trips for them in March and April and have shifted to selling vermilion snapper trips.
  - Fishing starts later in the Florida Keys.
  
- b) Spanish mackerel
  - They're not booking for-hire trips off Alabama for them in March and April anymore and instead shifted to selling vermilion snapper trips.
  - Off the Panhandle, they've shifted to trolling for them and bonita and then using them as shark bait to sell for-hire trips.
  
- c) Cobia
  - In Alabama, they used to book 25 – 50 for-hire trips for cobia on their 6-pack charter vessel but they've lost that fishery entirely.
  - In the Panhandle of Florida, his business was based off spring cobia trips but it's so bad he's stopped even taking targeted trips and targets vermilion snapper instead.
  - In the norther Gulf they're doing much more bottom fishing than trolling.
  - There are no cobia tournaments anymore.
  
- 7) Provide feedback on the appropriateness of current regulations and catch limits for each species:
  - a) King mackerel
    - The Southern Zone Hook and Line trip limit needs to be larger.
    - Current regulations are fine.
    - The commercial and for-hire fisheries are under limited entry, this needs to be considered for the private boat fleet as well.
  
  - b) Spanish mackerel
    - Current regulations are fine.
  
  - c) Cobia
    - The allowable sale of recreationally caught cobia in Florida adds unnecessary pressure to the stock.
    - The stock needs more relief. The possession limit could be lowered, a closed season would be ok, or they could be managed with a tag system.
    - A total 5-year closure during spawning in the Panhandle would be acceptable.
    - The minimum size limit could be increased to 45- inches to allow them to spawn a few more years before harvest. Most tournaments didn't used to let you weigh them in below that size anyway.



- 8) Are there any environmental or ecological factors or recent events that are influencing each of the species?
- a) King mackerel
- There are less forage fish/bait.
  - Red tide is an issue and it seems to be happening more and more.
  - Waters are warmer and it's changing migration patterns.
  - More and more people are fishing.
  - The private boat fleet has been increasing.
  - More fishermen focus on maximizing harvest when they fish.
  - Poor water quality is impacting the fish.
  - Water releases from the everglades seems to be resulting in algal blooms and very little life.
  - Global warming is changing the stocks.
  - There is a major increase in sharks.
- b) Spanish mackerel
- N/A
- c) Cobia
- N/A

**Coastal Migratory Pelagic Written Public Engagement Summary**  
**Summary of Written Comment Received**  
**September 9, 2024 – December 9, 2024**

**45 comments were received.**

- 1) Have there been substantial changes in the fishery in recent years. If so, describe the timing, location and reason for the change for:
- d) King mackerel
- King mackerel disappeared off Louisiana after the BP oil spill.
  - The king mackerel run is now just small fish.
  - King mackerel are harder to find in the western zone because there are less commercial boats looking for them.
  - King mackerel are more abundant in the western Gulf than they were last year. The fishery seemed to bottom out 2-years ago and is increasing.
  - There are less kings off the rigs in South Alabama than there were five years ago.
  - Fish are smaller and schools are smaller off zones 1-9.
  - The last few years have been some of the best king fishing years he's seen off Texas.
  - Populations are healthy off Sarasota, Florida.

- Kings are abundant offshore of the Florida Panhandle but not near the piers and the shore like they were in the past.
- Schools of king mackerel are seen on artificial structure while diving off (zone 19) but they're not caught while trolling.
- Kingfish are not as plentiful as they have been off central Florida.
- Hard if not impossible to catch trophy Kings during tournaments.
- Kings have been consistent off the Florida panhandle with little change in size or behavior.

e) Spanish mackerel

- Spanish are healthy off Louisiana.
- There were less Spanish along the Alabama coast than normal this year.
- Spanish are abundant off South Alabama.
- The Spanish population off central Florida is healthy.
- Less Spanish being caught off Mississippi.
- Spanish are scarce off of central Florida.
- Lots of Spanish mackerel harvested off of jetties in central Texas.
- Spanish mackerel numbers are down off the Florida panhandle.

f) Cobia

- Cobia has decreased off Louisiana due to commercial spearfishing and charter vessels targeting them behind shrimpers.
- Cobia has declined off Alabama.
- More cobia harvested this year than in the previous 5 years off Alabama and Mississippi.
- Cobia has been overfished for years off Alabama.
- Cobia are plentiful off central Florida.
- Fish are smaller and schools are smaller off Florida.
- Cobia don't exist off of Texas any longer. They used to be harvested regularly off shrimp boats and on channel markers.
- Cobia are scarce compared to previous years off central Florida.
- Cobia are plentiful off Naples, Florida.

2) Have there been changes in the effort and/or fishing techniques used to target each species:

a. King mackerel

- The fleet of commercial boats fishing the western zone has diminished from 42 to 12 because hurricanes have impacted infrastructure and working waterfronts are in decline.

b. Spanish mackerel

- N/A

- c. Cobia
    - N/A
- 3) Have there been changes in the migratory patterns or behaviors of each species as they relate to time, area, and depth?
- a. King mackerel
    - Water quality, the oil spill, and removal of habitat are causing the fish to move.
    - Since 2014 kingfish populations have become non-existent from June through October in the central, northern Gulf and has transitioned to a winter fishery as water temperatures have increased.
    - Migration off central Florida is occurring about a month later due to warmer waters.
  - b. Spanish mackerel
    - N/A
  - c. Cobia
    - N/A
- 4) Have there been changes in discard trends for each of the species?
- a. King mackerel
    - Sharks are a huge problem.
    - Dolphin are eating them in nearshore waters off the Panhandle of Florida. They've changed their behaviors and are teaching it to their young. Dolphins aren't catching their own fish, instead they rely primarily on feeding on fish that are hooked.
  - b. Spanish mackerel
    - Sharks are a huge problem.
  - c. Cobia
    - Sharks are a huge problem.
- 5) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your economic performance for each species?
- a. King mackerel
    - Income from commercial fishing has been the same or a little better for kings in the last few years.
  - b. Spanish mackerel
    - N/A
  - c. Cobia

- N/A
- 6) In your sector, how have recent changes to the stock affected your behavior or your lifestyle as it relates to each species?
- N/A
- 7) Provide feedback on the appropriateness of current regulations and catch limits for each species:
- a. King mackerel
    - Increasing the catch limits didn't make sense.
    - Net fishing should be illegal because it's diminishing the population.
    - The bag limit is too high.
    - The current size limit is appropriate.
    - Catch limits should be reduced.
  - b. Spanish mackerel
    - Nearshore gillnetting is putting too much pressure on Spanish and should be stopped.
    - The bag limit should be decreased to 5 per person.
    - The size limit should be decreased so fishermen can use them as bait at the smaller size and because they have high mortality from catch and release at smaller sizes.
    - Gillnetting for Spanish should be eliminated.
    - Catch limits should be reduced.
  - c. Cobia
    - Cobia requires complete closure or severe cut to the annual catch limit.
    - Cobia should be closed for a few years.
    - Investments in growing and releasing cobia must be made.
    - Fines need to be much higher for fishing violations to deter poaching.
    - The minimum size limit needs to be increased.
    - Cobia harvest should not be allowed within a mile of the beach because that's where big females lay eggs.
    - Louisiana cobia regulations need to mirror Mississippi regulations.
    - The two-fish per boat rule should be implemented in state waters as well.
    - The bag limit should be increased to 2-per person with the 2-vessel limit to allow solo fishermen to keep them both.
    - Cobia limits need to be left along for a few years since we've made so many recent changes.
    - Consider a slot so big females can be left to spawn.
    - The state of Mississippi should make regulations consistent with the federal regulations.
    - Catch limits should be reduced.

- 8) Are there any environmental or ecological factors or recent events that are influencing each of the species?
- a. King mackerel
    - Water quality, the oil spill, and removal of habitat are impacting the fish.
    - Pogy boats are decimating the bait populations.
    - There is too much effort and it's hurting the fish populations.
    - The lack of baitfish is harming the population.
  
  - b. Spanish mackerel
    - Red minnow bait is gone off Mississippi and it's causing the Spanish to decline.
  
  - c. Cobia
    - Loss of rigs and structure is impacting fish.
    - Pogy boats are decimating the bait populations.
    - The population declined due to the BP oil spill.