

**South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel and Cobia Sub-Panel
Cobia Fishery Performance Report
April 2017**

At their April 2017 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel (AP) and Cobia Sub-Panel reviewed fishery information for cobia and developed a Fishery Performance Report (FPR). The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR for cobia is the first CMP FPR, and will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP). The format of future FPRs may change based on input from the AP, SSC, SEP, and the South Atlantic Council.

Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel

Ira Laks, Chair (*Charter/FL*)
 Stephen Swann, Vice Chair (*Recreational/FL*)
 Stephen Donalson (*Recreational/FL*)
 Steve English (*Commercial/FL*)
 Skip Feller (*Charter/VA/Mid-Atl liaison*)
 David Forcinito (*Dealer/NC*)*
 Manuel Herrera (*Commercial/FL*)
 Ryan Howard (*Charter/GA*)
 Bill Kelly (*Commercial/FL*)
 Selby Lewis (*Commercial/NC*)*
 Robert Olsen (*Charter/SC*)
 Greg Peralta (*Recreational/SC*)
 Gary Robinson (*Commercial/FL*)
 Tom Roller (*Charter/NC*)

*unable to attend

Cobia Sub-Panel

Wes Blow (*VA*)
 Bill Gorham (*NC*)
 Howard Ellis, Jr (*SC*)
 Bill Weeks (*GA*)

Fishery Overview

Based on data through 2011, the SEDAR 28 (2013) stock assessment concluded that Atlantic cobia and Gulf cobia were not overfished (SSB>MSST) and overfishing was not occurring (F>MFMT). SEDAR 28 also incorporated genetic and tagging data, and the stock boundary was set at the Georgia/Florida line. The Councils modified the stock boundary and updated the annual catch limits for Atlantic (GA-NY) cobia and Florida east coast cobia through CMP Amendment 20B. The changes were implemented in March 2015.

In 2015 and 2016, Atlantic cobia landings exceeded the ACL and the overfishing level (OFL) recommended by the SSC after SEDAR 28. As defined by the Council, landings > OFL indicate that overfishing occurred in 2015 and 2016. NMFS reduced the recreational season length of Atlantic cobia in 2016 and 2017. Additional detailed information about Atlantic cobia is available in [Attachment 2](#) in the AP/Sub-Panel April 2017 briefing book.

Detailed landings and economic information was provided to the AP and Sub-Panel. This document is attached at the end of the FPR

Atlantic (GA-NY) Cobia

Stock observations

Chesapeake Bay-

The cobia in the Chesapeake Bay seem to be moving to the northern part of the Bay, further north than they have ever been found. Historically, the cobia have been concentrated in the southern part of the Bay. There has been an increase in availability 40-50 miles north of where the fish are usually found, and there was a tournament there in Maryland recent years¹. AP members pointed out that the increased availability in the northern Bay was in addition to the increased numbers of fish in the southern part of the Bay. There are also more fish available on the ocean front.

AP members report that there have been an increase in the catch in the past 3-4 years, even up to 18 fish in one day, for both private recreational and charter. Some members pointed out that the menhaden stock has increased in recent years due to success in the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC)'s rebuilding plan, and this may be why there are more cobia in the Chesapeake Bay. The increase in catch is due to a combination of more cobia available plus more effective gear and techniques.

Some AP members report a decrease in the larger sized fish of Chesapeake cobia, and the numbers of trophy fish caught have decreased. Some reported that there are still large fish (90-100 lbs) but they are harder to catch because they are not interested in bait. There may be fewer trophy fish because many cobia are caught before they reach the trophy size. Other AP members did not observe the same issue and felt that there were still abundant large fish, and that the number of average size fish has been steady or increasing.

Females with eggs are caught all summer long and the fish may spawn more when they first arrive in the Bay, but will spawn throughout the summer. This may create challenges in developing management measures specific to spawning seasons.

Northeastern North Carolina-

The past years have been great years for catching lots of fish and catching large cobia. The pier fishermen have had good catches. Historically, the cobia show up in this area (Oregon Inlet) when the water temperature hits 68 degrees—this has always been the key water temperature to start seeing cobia. The catch is high for a few weeks each year and then starts to decrease as the cobia move northward. However, in recent years, the cobia are showing up even when the water is still at 61-62 degrees, which is a notable difference that the fishermen have observed.

¹ The Maryland record for largest cobia occurred during an Ocean City tournament in 2016, at 94.6 lbs.

Southeastern North Carolina-

Larger fish of 70-80 lbs were more common several years ago, but they are still catching fish at 50-60 lbs. The menhaden stock has increased, which may contribute to the numbers of cobia. However, larger cobia are less common. A lot of the catch is smaller fish and even some of those populations are decreasing.

Southern South Carolina-

There are cobia that come into Port Royal sound to spawn every year, and there used to be three general areas where fishermen could easily find the cobia. However, those areas are not producing anymore. There seems to be a shift of the cobia from Port Royal to Calibogue Sound (which is further south, between Hilton Head Island and Dafuskie Island), and that area is becoming a more popular fishing area. The size of the fish has drastically reduced, with 80% of cobia caught being at the minimum size limit (33"FL) or slightly above. The historically productive reefs have dropped off in the last few years, and seems to correlate the release of the Waddell stock. Whenever there is Waddell² stock first released, cobia catch will be great for a few years and then drop off abruptly. Fishermen there also notice during the season, cobia may be available in abundance for 1-2 days, and the drop off again.

Effort

Chesapeake and Northeastern North Carolina-

Recreational catch estimates in recent years for North Carolina and Virginia have been much higher, which may indicate an increase in available fish and/or an increase in recreational anglers' success. There has been an increase in popularity of the sight cast fishery, in which recreational boats with towers (or skiffs with step ladders) will spot the cobia and throw a jig or bait. Sight cast fishing is increasingly popular in the Chesapeake and also in areas of North Carolina. AP members report that clear water and calm winds are necessary for a good sight cast trip, so not all trips are successful. However, some sight cast fishery participants will go on trips in higher winds.

Previously popular species such as spadefish and flounder are not as available, and there has been a shift to cobia in recent years.

The Chesapeake is larger than Port Royal and it is easier for boats to spread out, but some fishermen feel that effort has increased significantly, especially on the weekends. Cobia fishing is easy to learn and to be successful, and this has contributed to the increase in effort.

Southeastern North Carolina-

In Beaufort Inlet (NC), the number of recreational fishermen has significantly increased, especially on the weekends. Even just a few years ago, seeing 10-15 boats on a weekend was considered 'busy', but in the past few years it is common to see 100+ boats within the same area.

² South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Waddell Mariculture Research and Development Center includes a program to mariculture cobia stock. <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/marine/mrri/waddell/>

The “old school” method is to chum the cobia, and then use hook and line to catch cobia. With the increase in menhaden and the cobia availability, the sight cast fishery is popular in this area. Because cobia fishing is relatively easy with no requirement for special equipment or a big boat, this has resulting in more small part-time for-hire businesses, which can have negative effects on the long-term for-hire businesses. Spring fishing has been bad for the past few years but cobia fishing has been good, and it is easy to fish.

Commercial market observations

The commercial portion of the Atlantic cobia fishery is primarily a bycatch fishery, because the possession limit is 2/person/day. There has been some increased interest and effort in the commercial portion of the fishery. The demand for wild caught cobia has been steady but there appears to be more demand for farmed cobia.

Demand in the Charter/Headboat sector

In Virginia, charter captains reported that there has been a significant increase in demand for trips targeting cobia, with some captains experiencing increases several times over in the last 5-10 years. There has been an increase in the number of charter boats overall.

In North Carolina there is demand for cobia specifically, which may be due to clients’ desire to post a photo on social media of a large fish like cobia and the increase in sight cast fishing popularity.

In South Carolina, there is not necessarily a demand for cobia specifically for charter trips, but when cobia are available they will target them.

Florida East Coast Cobia

Stock observations

In Northeast Florida, the availability has been consistent and are available year-round. The cobia follow the large rays, and are available near shore when the rays are close to shore, and then move to deeper waters with the rays. Sight cast fishing peaks in the early spring but it is only for a short period each year. The rest of the year the cobia are available offshore but primarily as incidental catch. There are no problems with abundance and there are plenty of fish. AP members reported that sizes are the same, although one AP member noted that it did not seem fishermen see the big fish that they used to see (60-70 lbs).

In south Florida, the cobia are starting to occur with bull sharks on the edge of the reef, and it is not uncommon for a shark to eat a large cobia. Females with eggs are seen February through July. The average size of cobia is 18-40 lbs and that has been consistent, although sometimes there are very large cobia caught occasionally.

In the Florida Keys, cobia are found in 25-35 ft. on mostly sand bottom. Cobia may be following mud rays because they stir up the crabs and small fish on the bottom, and the cobia eat those. The size has been consistent but there do not seem to be as many cobia (or rays). There seem to be more cobia on the bay side but water quality issues affect fishing conditions. Cobia can be

caught at any time of the year but are not encountered on every trip, so are primarily incidental catch. Cobia do not aggregate like they do in other areas, and are always on the move.

Effort

The population in NE Florida is growing quickly and the number of private recreational anglers has increased, with boat ramps crowded every weekend. There has been a shift from red snapper to cobia, because they are easy to catch and do not require bottom fishing.

There is less sight fishing in south Florida than there used to be, even though the conditions are ideal. There has been an increase in free divers, who shoot cobia off the backs of bull sharks on the edge of the reef. Recreational fishing overall has increased with the growth of social media.

In the Florida Keys, most cobia fishing is sight fishing in the channels between reef lines and islands on boats with tuna towers. The conditions for sight fishing are not as good on the bayside, and there are water quality issues in Florida Bay. Recreational anglers target cobia on trips targeting tuna, sailfish and other species when the current allows.

Commercial market observations

There is demand for cobia even though there are farm-raised cobia on the market, because wild caught is superior. The price is good because it is a 'boutique product' for local restaurants. When the cobia are in the area for south Florida, commercial vessels will purposely target cobia because there is a good price for them. In the Florida Keys, there is no directed commercial fishery but vessels will catch and sell cobia when they are available.

Demand for Charter/Headboats

Demand for cobia specifically on for-hire trips is consistent, but it is not the only species that people specifically ask for. For some captains, there are clients that return every year when cobia are available in the spring in northeast Florida.

BOTH STOCKS

Management measures

The pending increase for the recreational minimum size limit to 36" FL will allow for an additional year of spawning and this will be beneficial for the stock. The limit for cobia in Virginia state waters to only take one cobia per boat per day over 50" total length should be considered, because it will help protect the spawning stock biomass and is supported by the public. Gaffing should not be allowed because cobia can be netted safely, and there are too many inexperienced cobia anglers that do not know how to gaff without losing the fish.

The AP raised concerns about the inconsistency with units for tracking ACLs and landings ('as reported' and 'whole weight').

Research Recommendations

Additional research on the Chesapeake Bay being a unique group (like Port Royal) and could be negatively affected by current effort and harvest levels. The AP also recommended more research on spawning.