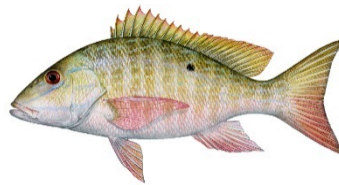


Summary of Public Comment on Changing Mutton Snapper Regulations Received after the June 2016 Commission Meeting

September 3, 2016



After reviewing the status and management of mutton snapper and public feedback from February 2016 public workshops, Commissioners of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) approved proposed rules for mutton snapper at their June 2016 meeting. The proposed rules would increase the minimum size limit for harvest and sale, reduce the recreational bag limit, and modify commercial trip limits. Commissioners directed staff to hold additional public workshops to gather public feedback on the proposed rules and to gather additional information on the area known as Western Dry Rocks.



During August 2016, FWC held six public workshops to solicit input on the proposed rules for mutton snapper. Three of the workshops were held jointly with the South Atlantic Council. (Both the South Atlantic Council and Gulf Council are also considering changes to mutton snapper regulations.) In addition, several members of the public sent letters regarding the proposed rules to FWC and the South Atlantic Council.

Over 90 people attended the public workshops and 50 participants gave public comment. Since the June Commission meeting, FWC and the South Atlantic Council received 11 letters regarding mutton snapper regulations. A

diverse group of stakeholders provided comment, including recreational anglers, fishing clubs, for-hire captains, commercial harvesters, seafood dealers, and conservation groups. Those who provided feedback expressed comments similar to what was heard before the proposed rules were approved in June, with an almost universal request for a sustainable, year-round mutton snapper fishery. Comments mainly reflected a desire to find the proper balance between allowing public access to the resource while preventing potential overharvest in the future. This document summarizes the public comments received between June 22 and September 3 of 2016.

Minimum Size Limit

There was overwhelming support from both the recreational and commercial sectors for the Commission's proposed mutton snapper minimum size limit increase from 16 inches to 18 inches. Many stakeholders claimed they were compelled to support this change because it would increase the likelihood of individual fish to spawn at least once before harvest since the length at 50% maturity for female mutton snapper is 18 inches. A few people recommended an even larger minimum size limit as a conservation measure.

There was some opposition to the proposed size limit increase. Several recreational anglers, most of whom fish north of West Palm Beach, opposed the increase because mutton snapper in excess of 16

inches are less common north of the Keys. However, a few charter captains and anglers noted that while anglers from the Florida peninsula may have a hard time finding legal mutton snapper during the first few years, they expect that would change as more fish grow to harvestable size.

Recreational Bag Limit

With few exceptions, there was continued support for a recreational bag limit reduction. These stakeholders stated a bag limit reduction would reduce harvest pressure on mutton snapper during the spawning season, and a 10-fish bag limit is too high for the second-largest snapper in the aggregate bag limit.

Because a bag limit reduction is not expected to reduce recreational harvest significantly and large reductions in harvest are expected from a size limit increase, many recreational anglers requested a five-fish bag limit instead of the proposed three-fish bag limit. Those who requested a five-fish bag limit believe that this lower limit is still conservative, yet also preserves fishing opportunities for anglers who are able to catch five fish. Others supported maintaining the current 10-fish bag limit for these same reasons.

However, there was still support for a three-fish bag limit amongst many recreational anglers and charter captains. A few people asked for a further reduction to a two-fish bag limit year-round or a seasonal closure during spawning months.

There were a handful of comments recommending a vessel limit to constrain recreational harvest. A small group of anglers from Miami asked for an allowance to possess double the daily bag limit when camping in the Tortugas.

Commercial Harvest Limits

Fewer people addressed commercial trip limits, compared to recreational bag limits. Most of the comments on commercial trip limits were opposed to the proposed regulations to restrict commercial harvest to three fish per person per day or trip in the Atlantic from April through June. They preferred maintaining a 10-fish per person per day or trip limit from May through June. These stakeholders claimed the current regulations are restrictive enough to protect mutton snapper during the spawning season. They also noted the commercial fishery is not expected to meet the proposed federal quotas.

The other commenters who addressed the proposed April through June commercial harvest limits requested the limit in the Atlantic continue to be the same as the recreational bag limit during those months. They asked for either a three or five fish per person commercial limit from April through June. Several commenters proposed commercial harvest be banned during the spawning season.

Recreational anglers and most commercial harvesters supported the proposed 500-pound per vessel commercial trip limit from July through March. They noted it would not likely lead to commercial discards because few harvesters take more than that amount each trip, but it would have the benefit of preventing future expansion of the commercial sector. This would address their concerns about the possibility of future overharvest by the commercial fishery.

Western Dry Rocks

Public opinion on management of the Western Dry Rocks multi-species spawning aggregation site remains split. The majority of comments support a closure at Western Dry Rocks; however, most stakeholders from Key West requested Western Dry Rocks remain open to fishing.

Those who asked FWC to keep Western Dry Rocks open-access justified their argument by noting it is a popular destination for half-day fishing charters and private anglers. They claimed it is the only location for a half-day fishing trip in the lower Keys where you are guaranteed to catch fish. Charter captains in Key West noted they visit Western Dry Rocks to target mutton snapper, yellowtail snapper, gray snapper, black grouper, permit, king mackerel, cero mackerel, sailfish, and barracuda.

Most stakeholders asked for a closure at Western Dry Rocks. There were recommendations for either a year-round closure or a seasonal closure. Several people recommended that whether it is year-round or seasonal, a closure at Western Dry Rocks should be just for bottomfishing, so that people could still troll for species like mackerel and sailfish. All of these stakeholders believed that protection of aggregating fish at Western Dry Rocks would lead to increases in the abundance of those species' populations throughout the Keys and provide a "savings account" to prevent future reductions in the fishery.

Water Quality

Public comments sharing concerns about pollution, poor water quality, and their impact on fish populations were common. Commenters shared observations of large amounts of algae in the Keys and Florida Bay and cited the effect Lake Okeechobee discharges have had in Port St. Lucie. They expressed concern that if water quality and pollution problems are not addressed, there will be harmful consequences for all fish stocks that cannot be addressed through traditional fisheries management.