

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report

October 2018

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met in Mobile, Alabama, October 22-25, 2018. The following is a brief summary of the Council's actions:

Cobia

After hearing public comment at its October meeting in Mobile, Alabama, the Council took final action to modify the commercial and recreational minimum size limit for Gulf cobia in federal waters. **The Council selected to increase the cobia minimum size limit to 36 inches fork length.** The Council decided to address Gulf cobia management measures after numerous anglers expressed concern about a decline in the Gulf cobia population. Increasing the Gulf cobia minimum size limit to 36 inches fork length is expected to reduce landings by 10.3% for the commercial sector and 26.1% for the recreational sector. This action is intended as a proactive management measure to reduce fishing mortality until updated advice is provided from the next stock assessment currently scheduled to begin in 2019. The changes to Gulf cobia management will be finalized and transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation.

Red Grouper

The Council was presented with the results of an interim analysis that could be used to provide updated harvest recommendations for red grouper while awaiting the results of the next stock assessment. Landings in recent years have been significantly below the annual catch limits, indicating that the stock may not be large enough to sustain current harvest levels. After hearing recommendations from its scientific advisors and listening to public testimony that indicated the stock size has declined, the Council requested that the National Marine Fisheries Service implement an interim or emergency rule. This rule would establish an annual catch limit equal to the total 2017 landings. The Council will initiate a framework amendment to reduce the catch limits beyond the expiration of the 180-day period covered by the interim or emergency rule.

Historical Captain Permits

The Council reviewed an abbreviated framework action that considers converting historical captain for-hire permits into standard federal for-hire permits. In contrast to federal for-hire permits, the historical captain permits are not transferable and require the captain to be onboard the vessel. This action would affect 32 historical captain coastal migratory pelagic and 31 historical captain reef fish permits. Because 31 captains possess both a historical captain coastal

migratory pelagic and a historical captain reef fish permit, this action would potentially affect 32 captains.

Each newly issued standard for-hire permit would have the same permit capacity as the historical captain permit it would replace. The Council discussed the outstanding letters of eligibility for historical captain permits and approved a motion that renders these letters invalid as of the implementation date of this action. The Council also stated that if historical captains redeem outstanding letters of eligibility before the implementation of this action, they would receive historical captain permits but would not be allowed to convert these permits into standard for-hire permits. The Council plans to gather public comment on this document before taking final action at its January 2019 meeting.

Carryover of Unharvested Quota

The Council reviewed a draft amendment that considers carrying over uncaught quota from one year to the next when harvest does not reach the annual catch limit. The Council is considering which criteria would exclude a stock from carryover, how to adjust for management uncertainty, and how to modify the framework procedure to allow for carryover of unused quota. Staff will present the Council with a public hearing draft of this document at its next meeting.

Allocation Review Triggers

The Council heard a presentation on National Marine Fisheries Service's Allocation Review Policy and the different types of criteria that could be used to trigger an allocation review. Allocation is defined as a direct and deliberate distribution of the opportunity to participate in a fishery among identifiable, discrete user groups or individuals. The Council must select review triggers by August 2019, or as soon as practicable. At its next meeting, the Council will discuss a draft letter specifying which triggers would initiate review of Gulf allocations subject to the review policy.

State Management of Red Snapper

The Council reviewed draft amendments for establishing state management programs for recreational red snapper. The current preferred alternatives would allow each state to manage its private angling component of the recreational sector using the allocations set in the exempted fishing permits approved for 2018 and 2019. The Council added a new alternative for allocating the private angling annual catch limit that uses the quota initially requested by each state in its exempted fishing permit application, plus the remaining 3.78% distributed to each state proportionally based on the amount of quota each state requested for its exempted fishing permit. Those values are as follows:

Alabama	Florida	Louisiana	Mississippi	Texas	Total
26.298%	43.730%	19.843%	3.684%	6.445%	100%

The Council also modified the management measures that could be delegated to each state. It created a new action that would establish a procedure for states to use area or depth-specific regulations by requesting NMFS to implement closures in federal waters adjacent to the state. The Council also removed harvest gear requirements and requirements for release gear from the list of management measures that may be delegated. The Council added preferred alternatives in the individual state amendments for Florida to be delegated the authority to modify the bag limit and size limits, and for all states to have a quota adjustment (overage and underage) that would be applied only to the component that exceeded (or did not meet) its annual catch limit. The underage adjustment is contingent on the Council implementing the Carryover of Unharvested Quota Amendment. Before taking final action, the Council plans to gather comments at public hearings on the following dates and locations:

Florida

Pensacola - December 3, 2018

Sanders Beach-Corrine Jones Center
913 South I St.
Pensacola, FL 32502

Destin - December 4, 2018

Destin Community Center
101 Stahlman Ave.
Destin, FL 32541

Fort Myers - January 7, 2019

Hyatt Place Fort Myers at the Forum
2600 Champion Ring Rd.
Ft. Myers, FL 33905

Saint Petersburg - January 8, 2019

Hilton St Pete Carillon Park
950 Lake Carillon Dr.
St. Petersburg, FL 33716

Alabama

Mobile - December 5, 2018

Renaissance Riverview Plaza Hotel
64 South Water St.
Mobile, AL 36602

Mississippi

Biloxi - December 11, 2018

IP Casino Resort and Spa
850 Bayview Ave.
Biloxi, MS 39530

Louisiana

Baton Rouge - December 10, 2018

Embassy Suites
4914 Constitution Ave.
Baton Rouge, LA 70808

Texas

Brownsville - January 14, 2019

Courtyard by Marriott Brownsville
3955 N Expressway
Brownsville, TX 78520

Corpus Christi - January 15, 2019

Omni Hotels Corpus Christi
900 North Shoreline Blvd.
Corpus Christi, TX 78401

League City - January 16, 2019

League City Civic Center
400 West Walker St.
League City, TX 77573

Webinar

January 17, 2019

<https://attendeegotowebinar.com/register/2288573373994739724>

Gray Snapper Status Determination Criteria and Annual Catch Limits

The Council reviewed an amendment to define or modify the status determination criteria for gray snapper, and an action to modify the annual catch limits. A recent gray snapper stock assessment determined that gray snapper is experiencing overfishing and may be overfished. The actions in the document will establish maximum sustainable yield (MSY), minimum stock size threshold (MSST), and optimum yield (OY) for gray snapper. The amendment also considers an action that could modify the maximum fishing mortality threshold (MFMT) that is currently set equal to $F_{30\% SPR}$ for gray snapper. The Council is also considering alternatives that would reduce the annual catch limits necessary to end overfishing. The Council will review a public hearing draft at its next meeting.

Reef Fish Management Objectives

The Council reviewed the 18 objectives that have been included in the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan that formally identify the goals of reef fish management. The Council made modifications to the objectives and agreed upon 11 objectives that will be used moving forward. The following revised Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan objectives will be finalized in a future amendment:

	Objective
1	To prevent overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks.
2	To maintain robust fishery reporting and data collection systems for monitoring the reef fish fishery.
3	To conserve and protect reef fish habitat.
4	To minimize conflicts between user groups.
5	To minimize and reduce dead discards.
6	To manage Gulf stocks at OY as defined in MSA.
7	To revise the definitions of the fishery management unit and fishery to reflect the current species composition of the reef fish fishery.
8	To encourage and periodically review research on the efficacy of artificial reefs for management purposes.
9	To promote stability in the fishery by allowing for enhanced fisher flexibility and increasing fishing opportunities to the extent practicable.
10	To avoid to the extent practicable the "derby" type fishing season.
11	To provide for cost-effective and enforceable management of the fishery.

Fishery Ecosystem Plan

The Council asked staff to begin development of a fishery ecosystem plan which will serve as a strategic plan to integrate ecosystem considerations into the Council decision making process. The Fishery Ecosystem Plan will provide a comprehensive review of the Gulf ecosystem. It will provide an overview of physical, biological, social, economic, and historical environments pertinent to federal fisheries management. The document will also identify changes in the ecosystem and discuss the effects of fishing and non-fishing activities on the system. Finally, the document will identify research priorities and suggest how the science should be used in the Council process. The Council decided to establish an Ecosystem Technical Committee composed of scientists from the Science Center, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee, and other stakeholders to assist the Council on the development of the fishery ecosystem plan.

Shrimp

The Council reviewed an options paper that considers increasing the amount of shrimp effort allowed in the area that is monitored for juvenile red snapper bycatch. Analysis shows that the effort reduction threshold, which currently requires that shrimp effort in the area monitored for juvenile red snapper be 67% below the effort in the baseline years of 2001-2003, can be reduced to 60% without affecting the rebuilding of the red snapper stock. The Council removed alternatives that would allow shrimp effort to increase incrementally until it reaches the new bycatch reduction goal. The Council also added an action that would allow future changes for shrimp effort reduction to occur through a framework procedure. The Council will review an updated draft of this document at its next meeting.

Stock Assessment Schedule

After hearing a presentation from NOAA staff on the new sampling methods used by the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) to collect harvest data from recreational anglers, the Council decided not to proceed with the MRIP-Lite assessments. This plan will reduce the burden on the stock assessment program and provide additional time to develop appropriate calibration factors. The Council has decided to consider the changes to the recreational species during the next stock assessment for each species.