

Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council Update and Liaison Report



October 21-25, 2019

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) met October 21-24, 2019 in Galveston, Texas. The Council inducted its newest member, Mr. Troy Williamson, a recreational fisherman from Texas. The Council also populated its [Council Committees](#) through August 2020. The following is a brief summary of the Council's actions:

For-Hire Multi-Day Trip Possession Limits

The Council took final action on a framework action that considers modifying federal for-hire multi-day trip possession limits. The Council recommends allowing anglers on federal for-hire fishing trips that last longer than 30 hours to possess two daily bag or vessel limits at any time during those trips. Currently, anglers on trips exceeding 24 hours in duration are only allowed to possess two daily bag limits (or vessel limits for warsaw grouper and speckled hind) of reef fish and coastal migratory pelagic species, with the exception of cobia, once 24 hours has elapsed. The Council will submit these proposed changes to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation.

Modifications to Commercial Individual Fishing Quota Programs

The Council reviewed a draft of Reef Fish Amendment 36B, which considers requiring individual fishing quota shareholder accounts to be associated with a commercial reef fish permit. At its last meeting, the Council moved the remaining actions of the amendment into a separate document. The Council plans to continue work on this amendment at its January 2020 meeting.

Coral

The Council heard an update on the proposed Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (Sanctuary) expansion. The current preferred alternatives would increase the Sanctuary protections from its current 56 square miles to 160 square miles. The Council will send a letter to the Sanctuary requesting that it clarifies regulations related to the possession of fishing gear while transiting within the No Activity Zones in the Sanctuary.

The Council also received a presentation on the proposed Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary expansion. The Council asked that the interactive map tool being used to display the proposed changes allow users to access the coordinates of the proposed marine zones and fathom lines. Given the complexity of the proposal, the Council decided to request an extension to

submit comments to the Sanctuary. This would allow the Council another opportunity to meet and provide recommendations.

The Council also decided to reconvene its Coral Advisory Panel jointly with its Coral Scientific and Statistical Committee to re-examine priority areas for consideration as Habitat Areas of Particular Concern in light of the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary expansion.

Status Determination Criteria and Optimum Yield for Reef Fish and Red Drum

The Council must define a maximum sustainable yield, a maximum fishing mortality threshold, a minimum stock size threshold, and an optimum yield for all managed stocks. These reference points are the basis for determining the health of each stock and are required under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and National Standard 1 guidelines. The Council looked at a draft of Reef Fish Amendment 48/Red Drum Amendment 5, which aims to define, and in some cases modify, existing status determination criteria for reef fish and red drum. The Council decided to consider the optimum yield for goliath grouper and red drum separately from other reef fish to accurately reflect the unique management strategies for those species. The Council will review a public hearing draft of this document at its January 2020 meeting.

Greater Amberjack

The Council reviewed a draft framework action that considers modifying recreational management measures for greater amberjack with the goal of allowing recreational harvest in both spring and fall. The document includes approaches for recreational zone management along with modifications to the bag limit, fishing year, and season. The Council directed staff to create a decision tool that would compare outcomes for zone management using historical recreational landings for two and three zone alternatives. The Council also decided to add an action to the document that would consider splitting the quota between recreational seasons. Finally, the Council chose to remove an action that would modify the fishing year. The Council will review an updated draft of this document at its next meeting in January 2020.

Red Grouper

The Council was presented with the results of the most recent red grouper stock assessment (SEDAR 61). Based on the Council's current definition of minimum stock size threshold, red grouper is not overfished and is not undergoing overfishing. However, the total biomass of the stock is lower than it has ever been in the observed time series and this stock status determination does not take into consideration the 2018 red tide event. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended setting the overfishing limit at a 50% probability of overfishing (5,350,000 pounds) and the acceptable biological catch at a 30% probability of overfishing (4,900,000 pounds), and assumed that the 2018 red tide event was equivalent in magnitude to the 2005 red tide event which resulted in approximately 34% mortality for Gulf red grouper.

This assessment used the new Marine Recreational Information Program's recreational landings and effort estimates, which more than doubled the estimates of recreational harvest compared to

the previous effort survey. This results in a higher estimate of total biomass based on the increase in landings and effort from the recreational sector. Also, applying the new landings data to the time series used to determine sector allocations would result in different sector allocations. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee will review the red grouper projections based on a 59.48% commercial and 49.52% recreational allocation that would result by applying the existing method to determine allocation on the most recent landings data. The Council instructed staff to begin work on an amendment that could modify the red grouper allocation and catch levels based on the new assessment. The Council also asked the Southeast Regional Science Center to conduct interim analyses of red grouper annually starting in 2020.

Lane Snapper

The Council was presented with results from updating the headboat index for lane snapper, as was previously done in SEDAR 49. This update to a data-limited assessment uses headboat landings to inform lane snapper abundance. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee accepted the assessment as the best scientific information available and recommended a new acceptable biological catch of 588,965 pounds. The Council's Reef Fish Advisory Panel recommended setting the annual catch limit equal to the newly recommended acceptable biological catch. New data using the Fishing Effort Survey-adjusted MRIP data are now available, and the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee will review these data and provide guidance to the Council for its next meeting in January.

Steamboat Lumps and Madison Swanson Trolling

The Council's Reef Fish Advisory Panel expressed concern that illegal recreational bottom fishing is occurring in Steamboat Lumps and Madison Swanson Marine Protected Areas. Regulations in those areas were created to protect grouper spawning aggregations. Currently, no bottom fishing is allowed in the areas, but trolling is permitted during part of the year. However, it is difficult to enforce the no-bottom-fishing regulation when trolling is allowed. The Council initiated a framework action that would consider eliminating all fishing in the Steamboat Lumps and Madison Swanson Marine Protected Areas.

Recreational Harvest Data Collection

The Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), the federal program collecting data on recreational harvest, has undergone substantial modifications from the previous program. Also, the Gulf states have developed either supplemental or standalone recreational harvest surveys, which are designed to contribute data to stock assessments and monitor catches. NOAA Fisheries is currently conducting stock assessments using the new MRIP data only because the state surveys have not yet been calibrated with the new MRIP survey. The Council recognizes that this is necessary in the interim, but ultimately would like to expedite the incorporation of state survey data. The Council will explore hosting an in-person workshop to address MRIP data stream conversions and their calibration with state survey data collection for inclusion in future stock assessments.

Release Mortality Symposium

The Council recently hosted a Release Mortality Symposium with the goal of reducing discard mortality from recreational fishing efforts. Private, charter, and headboat representatives uniformly recommended that anglers should retain flexibility to choose the best release mortality mitigation measures for their circumstances and asked for best practice recommendations to guide angler choice. It was recommended that current monitoring programs collecting data relevant to discards and discard mortality should ask for consistent information on discards including the number, species, mitigation technique used, condition upon release, and depth of capture. Additionally, current gaps in discard data were identified and prioritized. Finally, achieving consistent messaging to anglers was recommended. The Council should remain the point agency in control of release mortality communications to continue updating research, recommendations, and messaging. The Council's "Fishing for Our Future" website will be periodically updated with new research recommendations and best practices messaging. The full Symposium report is attached and can be found at <http://gulfcouncil.org/fishing-for-our-future/>. The Council recently provided the report to the Open Ocean Restoration Trustee Implementation Group for their consideration as they work on the "Post-Release Mortality Reduction Project" in the Gulf of Mexico.

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing

The Council heard presentations from the Coast Guard and Texas Parks and Wildlife that highlighted that the number of interactions with Mexican lanchas illegally fishing in United States waters has not declined over time. The Council's Law Enforcement Technical Committee asked for Council support and the Council will write a letter to request an annual report regarding the specific impacts and measures taken by Mexico to address the illegal Mexican fishing issue. This report should include the estimated take of red snapper and the economic impact that it poses against the recreational and commercial fishermen in the United States. There was recent testimony held in Capital Hill on the report before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee Water, Oceans, and Wildlife. https://naturalresources.house.gov/hearings/wow-oversight-hearing_november-14-2019