



South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

News Release

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Council Approves Management Changes for Atlantic Cobia *Proposed transfer of management will affect cobia offshore from Georgia to New York*

Members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council approved an amendment to remove Atlantic cobia from the current federal management plan and transfer management responsibility to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. The amendment is designed to prevent inconsistent regulations in state and federal waters and improve flexibility in the management of Atlantic cobia from Georgia northward to New York. Amendment 31 to the Coastal Migratory Pelagic Fishery Management Plan was approved by the Council during its meeting this week in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, the amendment would allow for the fishery north of Florida to be managed solely by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), an interstate management body that manages shared migratory fisheries.

The majority of Atlantic cobia are harvested in state waters, within 3 miles of shore in North Carolina and Virginia. They can also be found offshore and are found more in federal waters off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina as they migrate northward to spawn. Cobia harvested along the east coast of Florida are considered part of the Gulf of Mexico stock and are managed separately.

The recreational harvest of Atlantic cobia has increased in recent years. The recreational fishery closed in federal waters in June 2016 after landings estimates exceeded the annual catch limit the previous year and closed again in January 2017, as state landings were expected to exceed the federal catch limits. The recreational fishery is currently open in federal waters, but subject to closure by NOAA Fisheries should catch estimates exceed the annual catch limit currently in place. Fish harvested in state waters count against the annual catch limit.

The Council approved the amendment after members reviewed preliminary results from a recent Cobia Stock ID Workshop held in April and considered recommendations from its Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel. The Council delayed a decision on the amendment during its March 2018 meeting in anticipation of the workshop results and advisory panel meeting held in April. The Council also requested more information on how the ASMFC intends to address regulations in federal waters prior to the amendment's approval. Public comments on the amendment were also considered in March and June.

The current management boundary for Atlantic cobia adjacent to the Florida/Georgia state line was established following a 2013 cobia stock assessment, resulting in an annual catch limit of 620,000 pounds. Fishermen and others have expressed concerns about the boundary change since that time and requested the Cobia Stock ID Workshop be held as part of the upcoming stock assessment for Atlantic cobia. During the 3-day workshop that included scientists and fishermen, participants reviewed the cobia stock structure and considered whether changes were required. Several new data sources were considered including additional genetic studies, updated conventional tagging analyses, and new telemetry and satellite tagging data. Preliminary results from the Stock ID Workshop suggest that a change in the management boundary for cobia is not warranted. The benchmark stock assessment is scheduled for completion in late 2019.

The ASMFC implemented an interstate management plan for Atlantic cobia that became effective in state waters from Georgia to New York in April 2018 and aligns with current federal regulations for Atlantic cobia. Under the ASMFC Interstate Plan, state-specific allocations are established based on the current federal annual catch limit, with North Carolina and Virginia receiving the majority of the allocation based on previous landings.

Individual states have submitted plans for Atlantic cobia (including regulations for a minimum size limit, vessel limit, and season) to the ASMFC based on those allocations. The state regulations are designed to keep harvest levels below the allocated state-specific pounds of Atlantic cobia. At their spring meeting, the ASMFC began work on Amendment 1 to their interstate management plan for Atlantic cobia, which will address management measures in federal waters.

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Council Approves Management Changes (*continued*)

Red Snapper

The Council received an update from NOAA Fisheries on the status of Amendment 43, approved by the Council last year with the intent to allow a red snapper season in 2018. The amendment is currently under review by NOAA Fisheries and public comment is being accepted on the proposed rule until June 18, 2018. Over 2,000 comments have been received thus far with the majority in support of opening the fishery. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, NOAA Fisheries indicated the red snapper season could open in August, with a recreational bag limit of 1 fish per person/day, no minimum size limit, and a commercial trip limit of 75 pounds gutted weight. The Council discussed timing for announcing any opening and noted the need to allow more lead-time in announcing the opening of the recreational fishery versus the commercial fishery. Any announcement will come from NOAA Fisheries following the comment period.

Other Business

The Council approved several draft amendments for public scoping. Meetings/webinars will be scheduled for later this year and publicized as they are finalized. The amendments include options for modifications to for-hire charter permits, yellowtail snapper management, recreational permits and reporting, best fishing practices, and other measures.

The Council also received notification during the meeting week that an amendment requiring trip level weekly electronic reporting for federally permitted charter vessels was approved by the Secretary of Commerce. The implementation date for the new requirements will be announced later this year. The Council held an electronic reporting training session for charter captains during its meeting and will continue to offer training via webinar and in-person sessions in Florida this summer. Additional information is available at: <http://safmc.net/electronic-reporting-projects/>.

Final Committee Reports, a meeting Story Map, Meeting Report and other materials from this week's Council meeting are available from the Council's website at: <http://safmc.net/safmc-meetings/council-meetings/>. The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council is scheduled for September 17-21, 2018 in Charleston, SC.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.