Atlantic Cobia Management Measures Designed to Help Extend Season

Council approves new regulations for review, Fishing Year change proposed, ASMFC actions

New management measures may be in place for Atlantic cobia (GA to NY) in federal waters by the 2017 fishing season if all goes as planned. The new regulations, approved by the South Atlantic Council during their September meeting, may help to extend the season by reducing bag limits, increasing the recreational minimum size limit, and modifying accountability measures currently in place. The proposed regulations must be approved by the Secretary of Commerce before being implemented.

The Council reviewed input from public hearings held from Georgia to Virginia in August along with hearings via webinar, written comments, and in-person testimony from fishermen and others attending the September Council meeting. Many of the comments came from charter captains and other businesses impacted when the recreational fishery in federal waters closed on June 20, 2016. NOAA Fisheries estimated that fishermen had landed over twice the annual catch limit of 630,000 pounds the previous year. Accountability measures in place required a shortened season to reduce harvest in 2016.

Fishermen continued to question the landings data collected through NOAA Fisheries’ Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). They asked the Council to treat the 2015 landings estimate of 1,540,779 pounds as an outlier, citing average landings of 706,470 pounds from 2005-2014 as more accurately reflecting the recreational fishery. The analysis was included in Framework Amendment 4 to the Coastal Migratory Pelagics Fishery Management Plan and considered by the Council in September as it modified preferred alternatives.

Fishermen also supported changes to the accountability measures. The new measures would reduce the length of the fishing season and the vessel limit only if the combined commercial and recreational annual catch limit is exceeded.

What’s Next?

In addition to the new regulations in Framework Amendment 4, the Council is also proposing to change the recreational Fishing Year for Atlantic cobia. Amendment 30 would change the current fishing year of January 1-December 31 to May 1-December 5.

(Continued page 6)
Editor’s Note

The South Atlantic Update is published by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. Its purpose is to report developments in fisheries management that would be of interest to its readers. Please credit the Council when reprinting articles used in this newsletter. Submissions may be mailed to Kim Iverson, Editor, South Atlantic Update, 4055 Faber Place Dr., Suite 201, N. Charleston, SC 29405, or may be sent via the internet; Email address: kim.iverson@safmc.net.

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Chairman’s Perspective
Dr. Michelle Duval, Council Chair

“An Opportunity to be Heard”
The Power of Public Involvement

Public input and participation is at the very core of the council process; the third required function listed in the Magnuson-Stevens Act that each Council “shall” do is “conduct public hearings…so as to allow all interested persons an opportunity to be heard in the development of fishery management plans and amendments to such plans…”. Public input has shaped management alternatives, prompted new analyses and resulted in creative solutions. Some recent examples include: the system of seasonal allocations and trip limits for king mackerel in the Southern Zone; a proposed rule by the NMFS HMS Division designed to keep the small coastal shark quota open longer and reduce discards in the Spanish mackerel gillnet fishery; and evaluation of cobia management measures using a longer time series that provided a broader range of harvest scenarios. The importance of bottom-up, grassroots public input is why we have regional advisory panels.

Finally, public input is the reason the Council undertook the snapper grouper visioning process. Along the way, we heard many suggestions for how the Council could improve outreach and communication, so that stakeholders could in turn improve their ability to participate in the process. From increased use of innovative technologies (such as listening stations), to alternative outreach approaches (expansion of the Marine Resource Education Program-Southeast), to maximizing website capabilities, the communication priorities in the Vision Blueprint apply across all the Council’s managed species, not just snapper grouper. We have a broad range of stakeholders in the region, with a variety of communication preferences, and Council staff has been working hard to put those priorities into practice: we have diversified the locations of in-person public hearings, so that we can better reach stakeholders that might be most impacted by issues under consideration; we have expanded the use of live Q&A webinars and posting of narrated presentations on current issues to YouTube; we have implemented a new online comment form that allows instant access to stakeholder input by all members of the public; and finally, a new website will be launched (soon!) that will include separate pages for each issue or amendment the Council is working on. The burden of all these labors falls on Council staff, and they deserve huge kudos for their efforts.

While public participation is one of the cornerstones of the MSA, it can often be a frustrating process for stakeholders, who may feel as though their input is not being considered, or even heard (or read, as the case may be). It is equally frustrating for Council members, who are almost always faced with conflicting public input on a particular issue. Trying to forge some middle ground in the midst of a rainbow of opinions that meets the needs of stakeholders, the resource and the law is difficult at best; most of us walk away feeling as though we have done none of those things well. However, it’s important that we improve stakeholder ability to participate in those decisions, but even more so that we ALL understand, acknowledge, and respect the diversity of public input.

Michelle
In the News:
Council Member Ben Hartig Recognized as Highliner by National Fisherman Magazine

Commercial fisherman and former Council Chair Ben Hartig joined peers from Maryland and Maine as National Fisherman’s 2016 Highliners of the Year. The distinguished award recognizes commercial fishermen across the country that have made personal sacrifices in their contributions to their industry.

According to the magazine, “Hartig’s leadership also has a local effect, but his many terms on the South Atlantic Council have afforded him a widespread influence on the region’s fishery policies and standards for data.” Ben currently serves as an Obligatory representative for Florida and is a full-time commercial fisherman homeported in Port Solerno.

New Regulations for Hogfish and Mutton Snapper Proposed for 2017

Regulations for two popular species harvested in South Florida will likely change in the coming year if proposed management measures go into place for mutton snapper and hogfish in federal waters. Mutton snapper are commonly targeted during the spring spawning season.

### Proposed Measures for Mutton Snapper (Snapper Grouper Amendment 41)
- Specify management parameters and revise the Optimum Yield, annual catch limit and annual catch target.
- Proposed changes would reduce the annual catch limit from 926,600 lbs. (whole weight) to 587,633 lbs. (ww) beginning in 2017.
- Increase the recreational minimum size limit from 16” to 18” (Total Length)
- Designate a spawning season of April through June for regulatory purposes
- Reduce the recreational bag limit from 10 fish to 5 fish per person/day round; included in the 10-snapper aggregate bag limit.
- Establish a commercial trip limit of 500 pounds during the “regular season” and a trip limit of 5 fish per person/day during the spawning season

### Proposed Measures for Hogfish (Snapper Grouper Amendment 37)
- Florida Keys/East Florida Stock
  - Define the management unit from the GA/FL state boundary to a line just south of Cape Sable, Florida
  - Specify a 10 yr. rebuilding plan
  - Recalculate allocations with 9.63% commercial and 90.37% recreational
  - Reduce annual catch limits
  - Decrease the recreational bag limit from 5 fish to 1 fish per person/day
  - Increase the minimum size limit for both sectors from 12” to 16” fork length
  - Establish an annual recreational fishing season from May through October.
  - Establish a comm. trip limit of 25 lbs.
- GA/Carolinas Stock
  - Recalculate allocations with 69.13% commercial and 30.87% recreational
  - Increase the minimum size limit for both sectors from 12” to 17” fork length
  - Establish a recreational bag limit of 2 fish per person/day and a commercial trip limit of 500 lbs.

Americans Added Nearly One Pound of Seafood to Their Diet in 2015

2015 was another above-average year for fishing and seafood consumption, with the average American adding nearly an extra pound of seafood to their diet, according to the annual Fisheries of the United States report released by NOAA in October.

Across the nation, U.S. fishermen landed 9.7 billion pounds of fish and shellfish valued at $5.2 billion, a volume and value similar to recent years. The highest value U.S. commercial species were lobster, crab, shrimp, salmon and Alaska pollock, with pollock being the largest fishery by volume at 3.3 billion pounds.

“Fishing and seafood is big business for our country. Marine and coastal fisheries contribute billions of dollars to the national economy, support 1.8 million jobs and keep our ports and waterways open for business,” said Eileen Sobeck, assistant NOAA administrator for fisheries. “Thanks to longstanding legislation and continued innovation in fisheries science and management, we are seeing real returns on our nation’s efforts to end overfishing and make fisheries sustainable.”

Saltwater recreational fishing remained strong with 8.9 million anglers making nearly 61 million trips, resulting in a catch of more than 350 million fish with 57% reported released. Stiped bass remains the top harvested catch among saltwater anglers, followed by yellowfin tuna, dolphin (mahi mahi), bluefish and red drum.

The Council is considering management alternatives to allow for temporary or permanent reallocation between commercial and recreational sectors in the dolphin (mahi-mahi) and yellowtail snapper fisheries.

In 2015, the commercial dolphin fishery in the Atlantic and commercial yellowtail snapper fishery in the South Atlantic Region met their sector annual catch limit (ACL) and were faced with early season closures. Alternatives for modifying allocations are being considered to optimize harvest. In 2015, the dolphin recreational sector harvested a little over half of the recreational ACL leaving approximately 6.8 million pounds of the total ACL for dolphin unharvested. The Council will also consider how Optimum Yield is defined for the dolphin fishery.

Alternatives for allocation include: temporary or permanent shifts in allocation; use of a “common pool” to set aside a portion of the ACL to be used by either sector; a reserve category with a rollover credit; and temporary allocation shifts similar to those used for bluefish in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

The Council had considered allocations between gear types for the commercial fishery (longline and hook-and-line) but decided against the option during discussions at its September meeting. A new measure, approved by the Council earlier this year, will reduce the commercial trip limit to 4,000 pounds after 75% of the commercial ACL has been reached. The measure is currently under review by NOAA Fisheries.

Changes in allocations for yellowtail snapper, a popular target for fishermen off the southern coast of Florida, are also being considered. After the 2015 commercial fishery closed, the Council approved changing the fishing year to begin August 1st in order to help extend harvest through the winter season.

The Council’s intent is to move forward with the development of an allocation policy and have the policy in place before considering allocations for other species. Allocation guidelines from NOAA Fisheries will be considered in the policy development.

**Allocations for Dolphin and Yellowtail Snapper**

- **Dolphin Wahoo Amendment 10 / Snapper Grouper Amendment 44**
- **Allocations for Dolphin and Yellowtail Snapper currently under review by NOAA Fisheries.**
- **75% of the commercial ACL has been reached.**
- The measure will reduce the commercial trip limit to 4,000 pounds after the Council earlier this year, decided against the option during discussions at its September meeting. A new measure, approved by the Council earlier this year, will reduce the commercial trip limit to 4,000 pounds after 75% of the commercial ACL has been reached. The measure is currently under review by NOAA Fisheries.
- **Alternatives for allocation include:** temporary or permanent shifts in allocation; use of a “common pool” to set aside a portion of the ACL to be used by either sector; a reserve category with a rollover credit; and temporary allocation shifts similar to those used for bluefish in the Mid-Atlantic Region.
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**Red Snapper**

- **Snapper Grouper Amendment 43**
- Options to substantially reduce discards while allowing a limited harvest of red snapper are being considered. The fishery remains closed to harvest primarily due to the estimated number of dead discards in the recreational fishery as the stock continues to rebuild. The stock remains listed as undergoing overfishing following a benchmark stock assessment completed earlier this year. Amendment 43 includes an Adaptive Management Approach that includes options to:
  - Open limited seasons with various size and bag limits
  - Require recreational permit or tag program
  - Recreational reporting requirements
  - Modify accountability measures
  - Require the use of best fishing practices to reduce discard mortality, e.g. descending devices, single hooks, etc.
  - Establish an allowable year-round recreational fishing area for snapper grouper species based on depth

**Snapper Grouper Visioning Amendments**

- For commercial and recreational sectors
- Management measures are being considered as part of the 2016-2020 Vision Blueprint long-term strategic plan for managing the snapper grouper fishery. Individual amendments are being developed for each sector. Prioritized options include:
  - **Recreational:** modifying aggregate bag limits and re-evaluation of the shallow water grouper closure (note that other items are included in Amendment 43 above).
  - **Commercial:** split seasons for deepwater species to help reduce discards, modifications to trip limits and step-downs, changes to the current shallow water grouper closure, and modifying the fishing year for the golden tilefish hook-and-line sector.

**Limited Entry for Federally Permitted Charter Vessels?**

- In anticipation of implementing an electronic reporting requirement for federally-permitted charter/for-hire vessels, the Council has requested a Control Date of June 15, 2016 for Atlantic Dolphin/Wahoo, Atlantic Coastal Migratory Pelagic, and South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Charter/For-Hire permits. The Control Date provides notice that the Council is considering restricting participation in the fisheries. Fishermen who enter the for-hire fishery after that date will not be assured of future access should a limited entry program be implemented. The Control Date is being reviewed by NOAA Fisheries and may be modified in the future at the request of the Council.
- During its September meeting, the Council discussed the pros and cons of implementing a limited entry program for the for-hire fishery and will continue discussions during its December meeting.
Amendments at a Glance - A quick reference for proposed and recently implemented measures

Keeping track of the various amendments to fishery management plans as they are being developed and subsequent regulation changes can be a challenge. Below is a brief overview of amendments in various stages of development and implementation. Draft copies of the amendments are available in the briefing book materials for each Council meeting. Public hearing summaries and scoping documents outlining proposed management measures are also available prior to scheduled meetings. Materials are posted on the Council’s web site at www.safmc.net as they become available. Information on all amendments is available from the “Fishery Management Plan” page of the website.

Currently Under Development by the Council

South Atlantic For-Hire Electronic Logbook Amendment Requirement for Weekly Reporting by Charter Vessels
The amendment would require weekly trip-level electronic reporting for charter (6-pack) vessels to better monitor landings and discards, and better assess the impacts of regulations on the for-hire industry fishing in federal waters. The amendment would also modify the current timing of headboat reporting. Status: Public hearings were held in Jan/Feb 2016. The Council is scheduled to approve the amendment for Secretarial review during its December 2016 meeting.

Snapper Grouper Amendment 41 – Mutton Snapper
The amendment revises biological parameters, catch levels, and management measures for mutton snapper. Actions include reducing the recreational bag limit and commercial trip limit and increasing the minimum size limit (see p.3). Scoping meetings were held in Jan/Feb 2016 and public hearings August 2016. Status: The Council is scheduled to approve the amendment for Secretarial review during its December 2016 meeting.

Allocations for Dolphin and Yellowtail Snapper – Dolphin Wahoo Amendment 10/Snapper Grouper Amendment 44
The joint amendments would modify allocations between the commercial and recreational sectors for the Atlantic dolphin fishery and the South Atlantic yellowtail snapper fishery. Alternatives in the amendment include temporary and permanent allocation shifts, establishing a common pool for the annual catch limit to be used by either sector, and a reserve category with a roll over credit. Status: If approved by the Council in December, public hearings will be held in Jan/Feb 2017.

Snapper Grouper Amendment 43 – Red Snapper
The amendment includes options to reduce discards of red snapper while allowing access to the fishery as the stock continues to rebuild. Status: The Council is scheduled to approve the amendment for public scoping during its December 2016 meeting. Scoping is planned in Jan/Feb 2016.

Snapper Grouper Visioning Amendments – Commercial and recreational measures in separate amendments
The Council is developing two sector-specific amendments that include options for management measures identified as part of the Council’s 2016-2020 Vision Blueprint for the Snapper Grouper Fishery. Status: The Council is scheduled to approve the amendments for public scoping during its December meeting. Scoping is planned in Jan/Feb 2016.

Approved by Council/Under Secretarial Review

Snapper Grouper Amendment 37 – Hogfish
Recent studies indicate there are two separate genetic stocks of hogfish in the South Atlantic. The amendment specifies two separate stocks: 1) the Florida Keys/East Florida stock and 2) the GA/NC stock. A 2014 benchmark stock assessment was completed for hogfish and it was determined that the FL Keys/EFL stock was overfished and undergoing overfishing. The amendment establishes a rebuilding plan for the FL Keys/EFL stock and would reduce bag limits and commercial trip limits, increase minimum size limits, implement a recreational season of May - October for the FL Keys/E FL stock, and other measures. Public hearings were held in Jan/Feb 2016. Status: The Council approved the amendment for Secretarial review during its September 2016 meeting.

Coastal Migratory Pelagics Framework Amendment 4
Atlantic Migratory Cobia
In March 2016, the Council began development of this framework amendment with actions intended to lengthen the recreational season for Atlantic cobia (GA through NY) beginning in 2017. The recreational season closed in Federal waters on June 20, 2016 due to the landings in 2015 exceeding the recreational annual catch limit. Actions include changes to bag limits, vessel limits, minimum size limits, and accountability measures. Status: Public hearings were held in August 2016. The Council approved the amendment during its September 2016 meeting.

Snapper Grouper Amendment 36
Spawning Special Management Zones
The amendment would establish Spawning Special Management Zones to help protect spawning snapper grouper species. Status: Approved by Council in March 2016 and sent to NOAA Fisheries in August 2016.

Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 16
Commercial black sea bass pot closure and gear markings
The amendment would allow a winter season for the pot fishery within designated depth contours and specific gear marking. Status: Approved by the Council in December 2015 and sent to NOAA Fisheries in March 2016. Implantation pending.

Photo credit: Harbor Light Software

Note: This listing is an overview and is not all-inclusive. For a complete list of amendments, visit www.safmc.net.
Atlantic Cobia (Continued from page 1)

1-April 30 to ensure that in the event of a future overage of the annual catch limit and implementation of associated accountability measures, the fishing season would be open long into the fishing year to allow for fishermen in all states to have the opportunity to catch cobia. The Council will review public comments and is scheduled to approve the amendment during its December meeting.

The majority of Atlantic cobia are landed in state waters off the coasts of northeastern North Carolina and Virginia. To allow additional management flexibility, at the Council’s request, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission is developing a complementary plan for the Atlantic cobia stock. The Commission approved the Public Information Document for the Interstate Fishery Management Plan for Cobia during its October meeting. A copy of the document is available via the Commission’s website at www.asmfc under “Public Input”.

During its September meeting, the Council approved the addition of a Cobia Sub-panel to its Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel, adding fishing representatives from each of the four southeastern states and Virginia. The sub-panel will provide recommendations specific to Cobia as management needs arise.

From The Executive Director’s Desk

Gregg Waugh

Our September 2016 meeting was another very busy week. Amendments addressing hogfish and cobia were approved for formal review, and the Council further developed an adaptive management approach that could lead to a red snapper opening of some length in 2018.

For information about what happened at each Council meeting, please look for the Council’s Press Release on the Friday afternoon after each meeting. The press release includes a link to an interactive Story Map that covers the major items. For those interested in the details, they are included in the Meeting Report. These items for the September meeting are available at: http://safmc.net/meetings/september-2016-council-meeting. Please take a look and give us your feedback on these methods to get information out to you quickly.

The Council is partnering with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP) on the following proposals to address the public’s concerns about data:

1. **Electronic Reporting Mobile Application for Scamp** – A pilot project to use an electronic reporting app to collect fishery dependent information on discards for Scamp grouper.

Information on discarded fish and fishing practices will be used to inform the 2018 SEDAR stock assessment. Outcomes of the project will be evaluated to determine if this approach can provide reliable and useful discard information for other stocks.

2. **Outreach for Electronic Reporting**

– Conduct training and outreach programs about electronic reporting systems targeting charter captains and law enforcement officers throughout the region. The project will also develop a customer service support system to provide real-time troubleshooting guidance on issues that may arise with the electronic reporting system.

3. **Recreational Stamp/Logbook**

– Data are limited on the number of participants, catch and harvest, and the size distribution of discards in the private recreational fishery. Of particular concern is red snapper, which has not had an open season since 2014. A pilot project would create a recreational snapper grouper stamp/permit for selected individual fishermen to report recreational catch and discard data via a mobile app. The data would then flow through an application program interface to the Atlantic Coast Cooperative Statistics Program where the public and managing partners could access the data. The application would also collect information on the size composition of discards and alert fishermen of managed areas.

The Council remains concerned about our data shortcomings and intends to continue working to fill the data gaps.

Gregg
**Acronyms**

ABC - Acceptable Biological Catch  
ACCSP - Atlantic Coast Cooperative Statistics Program  
ACL - Annual Catch Limit  
AM - Accountability Measure  
ACT - Annual Catch Target  
AP - Advisory Panel  
ASMFC - Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission  
BRD - Bycatch Reduction Device  
EEZ - Exclusive Economic Zone  
EFH - Essential Fish Habitat  
EFH/HAPC - Essential Fish Habitat/Habitat Area of Particular Concern  
FMP - Fishery Management Plan  
HMS - Highly Migratory Species  
ITQ - Individual Transferable Quota  
MSA - Magnuson-Stevens Act  
MSY - Maximum Sustainable Yield  
MRIP - Marine Recreational Information Program  
NMFS - National Marine Fisheries Service  
OY - Optimum Yield  
SEDAR - Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (stock assessment process)  
SSC - Scientific & Statistical Committee  
TAC - Total Allowable Catch  
VMS - Vessel Monitoring System

**South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meeting**

**December 5-9, 2016**

DoubleTree by Hilton  
2717 West Fort Macon Road  
Atlantic Beach, NC 28512  
Phone: 252/240-1155

A detailed agenda is posted on the Council’s website at www.safmc.net or contact the Council office toll free at 1-866/SAFMC-10 or 843/571-4366.

**MEETING AGENDA**

**Monday**  
8:30 - 9:30 Advisory Panel Selection Committee  
9:30 - 10:30 Law Enforcement Committee  
10:30 - 12:00 SSC Selection Committee  
1:30 - 2:30 Protected Resources Committee  
2:30 - 5:00 Habitat & Ecosystem-Based Mgmt. Committee

**Tuesday**  
8:30 - 10:30 SEDAR Committee  
10:30 - 11:30 Spiny Lobster Committee  
1:00 - 4:00 Jt. Dolphin Wahoo/Snapper Grouper/Mackerel Cobia Committees  
4:00 - 5:00 Information & Education Committee  
5:00 - 6:00 Executive Finance Committee

**Wednesday**  
8:00 - 4:30 Snapper Grouper Committee  
4:30 Formal Public Comment

**Thursday**  
8:00 - 9:00 Personnel Committee  
9:00 - 10:00 Snapper Grouper Committee (continued)  
10:00 - 11:00 Highly Migratory Species Committee  
11:00 - 12:00 Mackerel Cobia Committee  
1:30 - 2:30 Citizen Science Committee  
2:30 - 4:30 Data Collection Committee  
4:30 - 5:30 Executive Finance Committee

**Friday**  
8:30 - 1:00 Council Session

**Note! Follow the Council meeting live online**

Watch the Council meeting from Atlantic Beach, NC via webinar. Registration information is available from the December 2016 Meeting Information page at www.safmc.net.
Mark your calendar...

Jan 18-Feb 8  SAFMC Public Hearing/ Scoping Meetings  
Region-wide  www.safmc.net

Jan 30-Feb 1  Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council Meeting  
New Orleans, LA  www.gulfcouncil.org

Jan 23-27  SEDAR 50 Data Workshop for Blueline Tilefish  
Charleston, SC  sedarweb.org

Jan 31-Feb 2  Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission Meeting  
Alexandria, VA  www.asmfc.org

Feb 14-16  Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meeting  
Kitty Hawk, NC  www.mafmc.org

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