



SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

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News Release

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Federal Managers Continue to Address Red Snapper and Cobia Management *Efforts underway to allow limited red snapper harvest in 2018; cobia stock assessment scheduled*

Members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council gathered in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida this week, where red snapper and cobia fisheries continued to dominate discussions. The harvest of red snapper is currently prohibited in federal waters ranging from three to 200 miles off the South Atlantic coast as the stock continues to rebuild. The recreational fishery for Atlantic cobia (Georgia to New York) closed in federal waters earlier this year as a result of harvest estimates from NOAA Fisheries showing the annual catch limit was exceeded in 2016.

The Council received a presentation by NOAA Fisheries during this week's meeting showing that the estimated number of red snapper removed (landings plus dead discards) exceeded the acceptable biological catch in 2016, a situation that has kept the fishery closed for the past two years under the current management plan. The removals are primarily associated with the recreational fishery where red snapper are captured and released while fishermen target other co-occurring species. Approximately 28% of the fish released by recreational anglers are estimated to die primarily due to barotrauma, the physical damage to body tissues caused by differences in pressure as the fish is being retrieved.

Meanwhile, Council members, with representatives from both commercial and recreational fisheries, focused on how to allow limited harvest of red snapper beginning in 2018. "Council members and members of the public have repeatedly expressed their frustration at the increasing numbers of red snapper that are being released as this stock recovers," said Council Chair Dr. Michelle Duval. "While we explore measures to allow limited harvest we must also be cautionary in our approach to not allow overfishing to occur should the fishery reopen next year."

After lengthy discussion, the Council approved modifying draft Amendment 43 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan to include a single action to revise annual catch limits for red snapper. The draft amendment would remove the current process and equation used to specify the annual catch limit and includes alternatives for establishing an annual catch limit for 2018 ranging from approximately 23,600 to 76,000 fish. The intent is to expedite the amendment by holding public hearings via webinar in August, in-person hearings at the Council's September meeting, and approving the amendment for Secretarial review at that time. The new measures could be in place in time to allow limited harvest beginning in July of 2018.

Earlier in the week, the Council hosted a workshop on "Improving the Survival of Released Fish". Eight speakers presented on best practices for reducing discard mortality, including the use of various descending devices, minimizing handling, and other practices. "These best fishing practices show the cumulative positive affects recreational anglers can have in reducing mortality of fish that are released," stated Council member Chester Brewer, a recreational representative from West Palm Beach, Florida. "It is imperative that anglers learn about these tools and put them to good use." Workshop information and the presentations are available from the Council's website at: <http://safmc.net/briefing-books/2017-june-council-meeting-briefing-book/>.

Council members continued to address management of Atlantic cobia, including a request from the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission that the Council consider transferring management authority to the Commission. The move would allow additional flexibility between the states for management of the fishery, which primarily occurs in state waters off the northeastern coast of North Carolina and Virginia. The Council decided to move forward to develop an amendment with options for transferring management authority as well as complementary management with the ASMFC.

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Red Snapper and Cobia *(continued)*

The Council decided not to pursue taking emergency action to change the management boundary and annual catch limits for Atlantic cobia but did request that NOAA Fisheries recalculate the recreational harvest estimates for 2015 and 2016 as reported through the Marine Recreational Information Program. Fishermen and others have expressed considerable doubt in the estimates, especially for landings off the coasts of North Carolina and Virginia. The Council plans to hold a workshop in collaboration with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council in November of this year to address recreational data collection and estimates. A stock assessment for cobia is scheduled to begin in 2018.

Other Business

The Council approved measures that will allow increases in the harvest of spiny lobster in both the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico following a recent stock assessment. Spiny Lobster Regulatory Amendment 4 would increase the acceptable biological catch from 7.32 million pounds to 9.6 million pounds. The amendment would also prohibit the use of traps for recreational harvest of spiny lobster. The amendment will be submitted to the Secretary of Commerce for formal review and approval.

After reviewing a white paper, recommendations from its advisory panel, and public comment, the Council approved a motion to begin work on an amendment to establish a moratorium on the issuance of Federal For-Hire Snapper Grouper Permits.

The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council will be held September 11-15, 2017 in Charleston, SC. Additional information about this week's meeting, including an interactive story map, meeting report and summary reports from each committee are available from the Council's website at:

<http://safmc.net/2017-june-council-meeting/>.

<p>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.</p>
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