

# Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

## Update and Liaison Report



### Fall 2021 Update

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) met in Orange Beach, Alabama October 25-28, 2021. The meeting began with the Council populating its [Council Committees](#) through August 2022. The following is a brief summary of the Council's actions:

#### **Cobia**

The Council took **final action on Coastal Migratory Pelagic Amendment 32**: Modifications to the Gulf of Mexico Migratory Group Cobia Catch Limits, Possession Limits, Size Limits, and Framework Procedure. Cobia is jointly managed with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and all of the selected alternatives will need to be agreed upon by the South Atlantic Council before the management changes are submitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation.

A recent Update Stock Assessment (SEDAR 28 Update) showed that the Gulf Group cobia stock, which includes the Gulf Zone and Florida East Coast (FLEC) Zone, is not overfished but is currently experiencing overfishing. The assessment used the new Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) estimates which increased the estimates of recreational catch and effort.

The Council chose to reduce Gulf Group Cobia stock overfishing limit, acceptable biological catch, and annual catch limits with an increasing yield stream for the years 2021-2023. The Council also chose to modify the stock apportionment between Gulf and Florida East Coast Zones to 63% and 37% respectively. The Council chose to modify the Coastal Migratory Pelagic framework procedure to match our current management practices and expand the South Atlantic Council's responsibilities in managing cobia in the Florida East Coast Zone.

In the Gulf Zone, the Council chose to use its Annual Catch Limit/Annual Catch Target (ACL/ACT) control rule to calculate the ACT buffer. The Council also chose to retain the 36-inch fork length minimum size limit, reduce the daily possession limit to 1-fish per person, and create a 2-fish vessel limit for both commercial and recreational sectors.

In the FLEC Zone, the Council chose to retain the current 8% commercial, 92% recreational allocation and update corresponding catch limits using MRIP-FES landings. The Council chose

to use the Gulf Council's ACL/ACT Control rule to calculate the ACT for the recreational sector. The Council also chose to increase the minimum size limit to 36-inches fork length, reduce the daily possession limit to 1-fish per person, and create a 2-fish vessel limit for both commercial and recreational sectors.

The Council also directed staff to develop a Framework Action that considers prohibiting the sale of cobia caught under the recreational bag limit in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico or South Atlantic.

### **King Mackerel**

The Council reviewed a draft of **Amendment 33: Modifications to the Gulf of Mexico Migratory Group King Mackerel Catch Limits and Sector Allocations**. A recent update stock assessment for king mackerel (SEDAR 38 Update) determined that king mackerel is not overfished or experiencing overfishing. However, the spawning stock biomass was found to be below the biomass necessary to achieve maximum sustainable yield. Additionally, the assessment incorporated new recreational catch and effort estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES). The Council modified alternatives to remove consideration of using a longer time series to determine future commercial and recreational king mackerel allocations. The Council will continue work on this document at the next Council meeting.

The Council also reviewed the **Amendment 34: Atlantic Migratory Group King Mackerel Catch Levels and Atlantic King and Spanish Mackerel Management Measures**. Amendment 34 is being developed by the South Atlantic Council and, because coastal migratory pelagic species are managed jointly, reviewed by the Gulf Council. The Gulf Council selected its current preferred alternatives, which were to retain the current 24-inch minimum size limit for recreational and commercial king mackerel. The South Atlantic Council has currently selected preferred alternatives for a 22-inch fork length minimum size limit for both sectors. Both Councils will have to reach an agreement on the minimum size limit actions before taking final action. The Gulf Council approved the document for public hearings. The South Atlantic Council is expected to take final action on the document during its December 2021 meeting, after which the amendment will come back to the Gulf Council for final approval in January 2022.

### **Red Grouper**

The Council took **final action on a Framework Action** to increase the red grouper overfishing limit (OFL), acceptable biological catch (ABC), annual catch limits (ACL) and annual catch targets (ACT). Increases to catch levels from the Framework Action are contingent on approval and implementation of Amendment 53 by the Secretary of Commerce. The newly recommended catch levels in this action are based on the sector allocations and ACT buffers in Amendment 53 and are shown in pounds gutted weight in this table:

	OFL	ABC	Total ACL	Commercial ACL	Recreational ACL	Commercial ACT/Quota	Recreational ACT
<b>Amendment 53</b>	4,660,000	4,260,000	4,260,000	2,530,000	1,173,000	2,400,000	1,570,000
<b>Recommend in Current Framework Action</b>	5,990,000	4,960,000	4,960,000	2,940,000	2,020,000	2,790,000	1,840,000

An adjustment to the recreational landings in weights provided by the most recent stock assessment (SEDAR 61) were incorporated into an interim analysis based on National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Bottom Longline Survey that resulted in an increased OFL and the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommendation. This recommendation from the SSC allows the Council to increase catch limits accordingly.

This Framework Action to Modify Gulf of Mexico Red Grouper Catch Limits will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.

### **Shrimp**

The Council heard a summary of its Shrimp Focus Group meeting that was held to reconcile issues with the technical specifications, data collection and security needs, and the needs of the industry before moving forward with a draft Framework Action that aims to transition the federally permitted Gulf shrimp fleet to a new platform for vessel position data collection and transmission. The Council recommended that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) evaluate and consider paths for reinstating the historical cellular electronic logbook (cELB) program, since it is a scientific data collection program and not a law enforcement program. The Council also recommended that NMFS test approved cellular Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) units on federally permitted commercial shrimp vessels in the Gulf. The Council plans to continue work on the Framework Action during its January 2021 Council meeting.

### **Greater Amberjack**

The Council was presented with results of the recently completed greater amberjack stock assessment (SEDAR 70). The assessment showed that greater amberjack is both overfished and experiencing overfishing. NOAA’s Southeast Fisheries Science Center will complete projections for different allocation scenarios being considered by the Council, and the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee is expected to consider catch limit recommendations during its November 2021 meeting.

### **Gag**

The Council was presented with results of the recently completed gag stock assessment (SEDAR 72). The assessment showed that gag is both overfished and experiencing overfishing. The assessment indicated that a lack of males may be having an effect on the productivity of the stock. The Council indicated that it wants to see the assessment run with data from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission’s State Reef Fish Survey. The Council also expressed a clear desire to avoid a total closure of any species to ensure that fishery-dependent data streams are maintained. The Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee is expected to consider catch limit recommendations during its November 2021 meeting.

### **Commercial Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Programs**

The Council reviewed a proposed process for forming a focus group to address changes to the IFQ programs. The Council expanded the charge of the group to include review of the current IFQ programs' goals and objectives and recommend their replacement or retention. The Council also decided to expand the potential membership positions of the group to include a person who is well versed in the program but does not hold shares or allocation. The Council will solicit members for the focus group in the coming weeks and appointments will be made during the January 2022 Council meeting.

### **Vermilion Snapper**

The Council reviewed a framework action that considers increasing vermilion snapper catch limits. A recent stock assessment (SEDAR 62), which used the new Marine Recreational Information Program Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) data and identified exceptional recruitment in 2015 and 2016, determined that vermilion snapper is neither overfished or experiencing overfishing. After hearing public comment which cautioned against increasing catch limits dramatically, the Council recommended that staff include catch limit alternatives that would make smaller increases to catch limits than recommended by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). The Council selected a preferred alternative that would increase the vermilion snapper overfishing limit, acceptable biological catch, and annual catch limit based on recommendations from the Council's SSC for 2021-2025. The Council will solicit public comment before taking final action on this framework action at a future meeting.

### **For-Hire and Commercial Electronic Reporting**

The Council continued work on a Framework Action to ensure that for-hire and commercial trips are not delayed or canceled in the event of Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) equipment failures. Vessels with commercial reef fish permits are currently required to be equipped with satellite VMS systems that transmit location data to NOAA Fisheries. Beginning on December 13, 2021, vessels with Charter/Headboat permits for reef fish or coastal migratory pelagics must be equipped with a satellite or cellular position reporting unit that operates 24-hours a day, collects location data once an hour, and automatically transmits data to NOAA Fisheries. The Council heard recommendations from its Data Collection Advisory Panel and Law Enforcement Technical Committee. The Council decided to remove consideration of commercial exemptions in the document and chose to focus solely on exemptions for for-hire vessels at this time. The Council also modified alternatives to extend the number of days a vessel can seek an exemption from reporting requirements if their VMS equipment fails. The Council plans to continue work on this document during its January 2022 meeting.

### **Managed Species Without Stock Assessments**

There are new recreational harvest estimates collected through the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) for all species managed by the Council. In most cases, these new harvest estimates are integrated into the science and management when stock assessments are performed for each species. However, there is no defined process for integrating the new landings data for species without stock assessments. The Council directed staff to develop a document to update annual catch limits for unassessed

species. The Council also expressed its intent to evaluate whether these unassessed species are still in need of federal management.

### **Gray Triggerfish**

The Council heard an overview of the commercial gray triggerfish landings and current management measures and directed staff to add an action, to an ongoing framework action, that considers increasing the commercial trip limit for gray triggerfish.