

MEETING REPORT
MACKEREL COBIA ADVISORY PANEL
SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL
via Webinar
Friday, April 21, 2023

The Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel (AP) met to discuss topics supporting management of the coastal migratory pelagics fishery, including Florida east coast zone cobia, Atlantic Spanish mackerel, and Atlantic king mackerel. Below is a summary of the group’s discussions and recommendations. The AP approved motions for recommendations to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (South Atlantic Council), but a summary of all viewpoints relevant to each motion/recommendation are included.

AP Members in Attendance

Ira Laks, Chair
Stephen Donalson
Keith Bowen
Steve English
Rusty Hudson
Aaron Kelly
Thomas Newman
Charlie Locke
Tony Benevento
William Palmer
William Jones

Council Members

Tom Roller
Spud Woodward
Trish Murphey

Council Staff

Christina Wiegand, CMP Lead
John Carmichael
Myra Brouwer
John Hadley
Julia Byrd
Dr. Mike Schmidtke
Dr. Chip Collier
Dr. Judd Curtis
Ashley Oliver
Meg Withers

The Mackerel Cobia AP approved minutes from the October 2022 meeting and the agenda.

Report from the Council’s Mackerel Cobia Committee Chair

Tom Roller, chair of the Council’s Mackerel Cobia Committee, addressed the AP. He provided updates on recent Council discussions relevant to Coastal Migratory Pelagics (CMP), many of which were discussed during the meeting. He thanked the AP members for taking the time to provide the Council with their expert feedback.

Update on Recently Submitted Amendments

At the March 2022 meeting the Council approved CMP Amendment 34 (Atlantic king mackerel catch levels and management measures) for formal review. The document was transmitted to NMFS on August 5, 2022. The request for comments was posted on January 30, 2023 with comments due by March 31, 2023. The final rule was published on May 9, 2023 with regulations effective June 8, 2023.

Citizen Science Update

Staff presented a brief update on the Council's Citizen Science Program and pilot projects highlighting activities that have occurred since the Fall 2022 Mackerel Cobia AP meeting, including upcoming FISHstory scanning nights and the Citizen Science projects and programs evaluation project.

- AP members were excited to hear that the FISHstory project would be continuing, and many offered to bring photos to the summer AP meeting for Citizen Science Program staff to scan for the project.
 - AP members recommended reaching out to several fishing clubs and associations in their areas that might be able to provide photos.
- AP members were interested in using FISHstory to look at where and when recreational fish were being landed over a broader geographic range, especially expanding the project farther north into the Mid-Atlantic range.
- AP members recommended using the MREP attendee database when looking to recruit fishermen to participate in the Citizen Science projects and programs evaluation project.
- AP members mentioned email and text message as the best way to get in contact with fishermen during the fishing season.

Mackerel Port Meetings

Based on recommendations from the Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel, the Council directed staff to begin work on a plan to conduct port meetings for king and Spanish mackerel. The purpose of these port meetings will be to gain a comprehensive understanding of the mackerel fisheries to improve management efforts. Port meetings will tentatively be conducted in key communities along the Atlantic coast up to the southern end of Massachusetts in cooperation with other councils, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and state agencies. After port meetings have been conducted, staff will develop a final report that includes notes from all conducted port meetings and an analysis identifying patterns and themes among the different meetings. AP members provided the following feedback:

- King and Spanish mackerel are subject to range shift/expansion, which is going to require significant management considerations, especially considering the current permit system, available infrastructure, and unknown recreational effort.
 - AP members are interested in hearing from a wide variety of stakeholders on how they are changing their fishing behavior as Spanish mackerel move farther north and what is needed for their fishery to thrive. Are they capitalizing on the fishery? How many fish do they feel like they could land?
 - The king mackerel fishery (commercial) is currently managed well, but it will be important to talk about fish moving north and what changes might be needed in the future to address those changes.
- AP members would like port meetings to result in every state having identical regulations for commercial Spanish mackerel management, in particular bycatch limits after the commercial quota is met.
 - It is crucial that representatives from ASMFC and state agencies be included in port meeting discussions.

- AP members would like to learn more about king mackerel tournaments along the coast, how many take place annually, and their relative importance to communities.
- AP members recommended holding port meetings in the following areas:
- To facilitate discussion, AP members recommended that staff create a handout for port meetings. The handouts should cover both fisheries overall, but also cover the specific area a meeting is being held.
 - The handout should include a series of discussion questions and, if possible, be provided at least a week in advance of the port meeting.
- Additionally, AP members recommend having both commercial and recreational fishermen attend the same port meeting. Having both sectors present allows the two groups to learn from each other and come to an understanding on how the fisheries should be managed moving forward.
- AP members were concerned about bringing Objective 5 in the CMP FMP for discussion during port meetings because it requests data that is considered unreliable and does not reflect the current makeup of the fishery.

MOTION: ELIMINATE OBJECTIVE 5 FROM THE CMP FMP.

To distribute the total allowable catch of Atlantic migratory group Spanish mackerel between recreational and commercial user groups based on the catches that occurred during the early to mid-1970s, which is prior to the development of the deep-water run-around gillnet fishery and when the resource was not overfished.

MOTION APPROVED (7-0-1)

South Atlantic Research Recommendations

The Council revises their research and monitoring plan every two years. The research and monitoring plan is used by Council and NOAA Fisheries staff to develop research concepts that are intended for use in management, provided to NOAA Fisheries for potential inclusion in research grants as priorities, and used by other researchers during development of research proposals. The AP was provided an opportunity to review the 2023-2027 South Atlantic Research and Monitoring plan.

- Prior to WWII, Spanish mackerel was an incredibly important species along the South Atlantic Coast, however when the inlets were closed because of the war landings changed significantly. It would be helpful to have that historical perspective when considering landings throughout time.
- It is becoming increasingly important to utilize data streams from the Mid-Atlantic and New England region for Spanish mackerel stock assessments.
 - North Carolina observer program.
 - NEMAP surveys.
- Overall, there is a need for more fishery independent surveys for pelagic species.
- There should be consideration as to how mixing of year two king and Spanish mackerel and the challenge of identifying each species impacts the stocks.
- The Council needs to get a handle on recreational landings of king and Spanish mackerel and consider adding the CMP FMP to Snapper Grouper FMP recreational reporting amendment under discussion.

Effects of Space Related Actions on Fishing Activities

At recent meetings, the Council has acknowledged an increase in activity related to space exploration and research, including area closures and debris in the exclusive economic zone, that may be affecting fishing activity, especially off Florida. The AP provided the following input on how such space-related activities are affecting fishing opportunities for Council managed species.

- Fishermen are regularly getting blocked out of prime fishing grounds whenever there is a launch. Key fishing areas for both king and Spanish mackerel are affected.
 - Some fishermen are considering moving their fishing operations because finding time/area to fish has become such a task. Additionally, launches often change at the last minute making it challenging to plan fishing trips.
- Launches and fishing both need to occur on nice weather days, which don't occur often, resulting in increasing conflict.
- If a launch is set to occur during a weekend tournament, which would then have to be moved/canceled, a significant economic contribution to the local community is lost.
- Fishermen have learned to address debris associated with the space program. They simply mark the location and work around it as necessary.
- AP members noted that Spanish mackerel are not using the shoals as much as they did in the past due to the noise associated with launches.

Other Business

Election of a MC AP Vice Chair

MOTION: ELECT STEVE DONALSON AS VICE-CHAIR OF THE MACKEREL COBIA ADVISORY PANEL.

APPROVED (UNANIMOUS)

Marine Resource Education Program

- AP Chair, Ira Laks, reminded AP members of opportunities provided by the Marine Resource Education Program and encouraged those who had not already attended to apply for future workshops.