



Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

Managing Fishery Resources in the U.S. Federal Waters of the Gulf of Mexico

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Gulf Council Update – June 2017

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council met in Naples, Florida, June 5 – 8, 2017, to discuss a number of fishery issues. The following is a summary of the Council's actions:

Appointments for Coastal Migratory Pelagics and Red Drum Advisory Panels

The Council appointed 16 members to the Coastal Migratory Pelagics Advisory Panel and 14 members to the Red Drum Advisory Panel. Advisory Panel appointees are listed on our website at: <http://gulfcouncil.org/committee-panel-membership/advisory-panels/>

Requirement to Possess Descending Devices or Venting Tools Onboard

The Council reviewed a framework action that considers requiring vessels fishing for reef fish to possess descending devices or venting tools onboard. The intention of this action is to reduce the mortality of fish that are caught and discarded. The Council discussed promoting the use of descending devices and venting tools through outreach efforts and plans to address this document at a future meeting.

Carryover of Unharvested Quota

The Council reviewed a generic amendment that considers modifying the acceptable biological catch control rule by allowing the unharvested portion of the annual catch limit in a year to be added to the following year's acceptable biological catch. The Council plans to present a draft of this document to the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee before bringing it back to a future Council meeting.

Stock Assessment Schedule

The Council is asking Southeast Data Assessment and Review (SEDAR) to prioritize

the 2018 and 2019 stock assessment schedule as follows. For 2018: complete gray snapper (benchmark track started in 2017), the MRIP Calibrations, king mackerel (joint research track with Mexico), gray triggerfish, cobia, and red grouper. For 2019: scamp, vermillion snapper, yellowedge grouper, tilefish, and Spanish mackerel.

Spiny Lobster

After reviewing public comment, the Council took final action on Regulatory Amendment 4, which considers spiny lobster status determination criteria, annual catch limits and targets, and recreational trap prohibition. The Council chose to set maximum sustainable yield, maximum fishing mortality threshold, annual catch limits and targets using a longer time series of landings than had previously been used. The Council also chose to support the South Atlantic Council's preferred alternative to prohibit the use of traps for recreational harvest of spiny lobster in the South Atlantic federal waters. The Amendment will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation after the South Atlantic Council takes final action.

The Council also initiated work on a document that addresses the consistency on bully-netting regulations with the State of Florida and to reestablish protocol procedures with the state of Florida.

Coral

Staff presented an Options Paper for Coral Amendment 9, which considers designating protections for deep-water coral areas in the Gulf of Mexico. In addition to making some minor changes to the document, the Council added a new alternative to Action 1 that would exclude octocorals (soft corals) in the Exclusive Economic Zone off of Florida from being incorporated into the fishery management unit. The Council directed staff to include alternatives that would exempt certain fishing gear prohibitions in proposed areas where that gear has historically been used based on evidence from Vessel Monitoring System and Electronic Logbook datasets and are likely to have minimal impacts on coral.

Minimum Stock Size Threshold for Reef Fish Stocks

After reviewing a summary of comments received during public hearings, the Council took final action on Reef Fish Amendment 44, which considers standardizing the minimum stock size threshold for certain reef fish species.

Minimum stock size threshold is used to determine whether or not a stock is considered to be overfished; if the biomass of the stock falls below the threshold then the stock is considered to be overfished. The Council selected the most lenient option which would set the minimum stock size threshold for gag, red grouper, red snapper, vermillion snapper, gray triggerfish, greater amberjack, and hogfish equal to 50% of the biomass at maximum sustainable yield. The minimum stock size threshold is not expected to affect management action as fishing is primarily constrained by the overfishing definition. As long as overfishing is prevented, the stock biomass should never drop to the MSST level. The Amendment will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation.

Vermillion Snapper Maximum Sustainable Yield and Annual Catch Limit

The Council took final action on Reef Fish Amendment 47 after reviewing comments received during public hearings. The Council selected a proxy for vermillion snapper maximum sustainable yield based on fishing at the fishing mortality rate associated with 30% spawning potential ratio. The annual catch limit for the years 2017-2021 was set at 3,110,000 pounds which is the constant catch average of the 5 years when fishing at 75% of the maximum sustainable yield proxy. This new annual catch limit is higher than catches have been since 2012, so in-season quota closures are unlikely unless catch rates increase. The Amendment will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation.

Modification to the Number of Unrigged Hooks on Bottom Longline Vessels

The Council took final action on an abbreviated framework action that considers modifying the number of unrigged hooks carried onboard bottom longline vessels. The Council decided to allow bottom longline vessels to carry an unlimited number of hooks, of which no more than 750 can be rigged or fished at any time. The framework action will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation.

Modifications to Federal For-Hire and Private Angler Red Snapper Annual Catch Targets

The Council reviewed a draft framework action that considers changing the buffers between the red snapper annual catch limits and annual catch targets for federal for-hire and private angler components of the recreational sector. Since

2014, when the annual catch target was put in place, the private angler component has exceeded its annual catch target twice and its annual catch limit once. The for-hire component has not exceeded its annual catch target or annual catch limit. The Council is considering adjustments to achieve more accurate and fair implementation of annual catch targets to ensure the greatest level of harvest without exceeding the component annual catch limits.

Greater Amberjack Annual Catch Limits and Management Measures

The Council addressed a Draft Framework Action that considers modifying the greater amberjack rebuilding plan. A recent stock assessment determined that the greater amberjack stock continues to be overfished and to experience overfishing, and is not making adequate progress towards rebuilding. The Council is considering adjusting the greater amberjack rebuilding time period; annual catch limits and targets; and recreational season and size limit. After reviewing a decision tool that compares different recreational season options using daily catch rates from 2014-2016 to predict future landings, the Council chose not to adjust the recreational minimum size limit and added a new alternative that would consider creating a recreational closed season from January 1 – July 31st.

Ad Hoc Red Snapper Private Angler Advisory Panel

The Council heard a report of the first Red Snapper Private Angler Advisory Panel meeting. The Council discussed how to best fulfill the data needs requested by the panel and decided to hold another meeting of the panel sometime in the fall.

Red Snapper Allocation

The Council was briefed on a recent lawsuit that overturned Amendment 28, which shifted red snapper allocation in favor of the recreational sector to 48.5% commercial and 51.5% recreational. The ruling reasoned that allocation could not be shifted based on the years used in the rationale because the commercial sector's effort was constrained by the Individual Fishing Quota program while the recreational sector's effort was unconstrained and, as recreational effort had increased in recent years, the proportion of their harvest had continued to grow. Because of this, the allocation shifts could only to shift in favor of the recreational sector. As a result of the court order, the red snapper allocation has been restored to its original 51% commercial and 49% recreational.

Commercial Reef Fish Individual Quota Program Modifications

The Council heard a presentation on the federal Fishery Finance Program before reviewing a draft options paper for Amendment 36B which considers program participation, distribution of shares from non-activated accounts, restrictions on share and allocation transfers, and allocation caps. The Council decided to add an alternative considering an adaptive management redistribution method based on cyclical redistribution that depends on future fishing participation. The Council also directed staff to write a letter to NMFS requesting a determination if the use of an auction to distribute commercial red snapper quota above 4.65 million pounds would require a referendum.

Federal Charter For-Hire Management

The Council reviewed a draft of Amendment 41 and selected preferred alternatives that would establish a mandatory permit fishing quota program for red snapper, greater amberjack, and gray triggerfish. The Council also chose a preferred alternative that would redistribute a portion of shares in cycles of progressively lengthening years through the first three cycles of the program. The Council expects to hear draft referendum requirements for this amendment at the August meeting.

Turtle Release Gear

After hearing that two new gear types have been approved by the Science Center for use in handling and releasing incidentally caught sea turtles when fishing for reef fish, the Council voted to initiate an amendment that considers a protocol for the incorporation of new turtle release gear onboard for-hire and commercial vessels without having to develop a full plan amendment.

The next Council meeting will be held on August 7-11, 2017 in San Antonio, Texas.