

King Mackerel Gillnet Issues

Background

Run-around gillnets are allowed for harvesting king mackerel in the Gulf of Mexico only in the Southern Florida West Coast Subzone (Southern Subzone), which includes waters off Collier County, Florida, year-round, and off Monroe County, Florida, November 1- March 30. Currently, there are 23 vessels with valid or renewable gillnet endorsements to the king mackerel permit; five of these vessels have no landings since 2001. Several issues related to this component of the coastal migratory pelagic (CMP) fishery may be considered for action by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Changes to the Trip Limit

Representatives from the CMP fishery have requested raising the trip limit for the gillnet component of the fishery. The current trip limit is 25,000 lb per vessel per day. Further conversations with several permit holders show that the desire to change the trip limit may not be universal among participants.

In most years, the fishing season has lasted for two weeks or less. Assuming each vessel would harvest its capacity, the season could be shorter with a higher trip limit. Any vessels that could not take advantage of a higher trip limit could be damaged economically because they would harvest the same amount of fish daily, but may ultimately have fewer days to fish. The scenario is confounded by the fact that vessels appear to be able to carry more than their reported hold capacity based on vessel-specific landings. Additionally, gillnet endorsements can be transferred to another vessel owned by the same entity or to an immediate family member. Therefore, if the trip limit is removed or increased, permit holders could transfer their endorsement to a larger vessel, increasing the total hold capacity of the whole fleet. Fishermen against removing the trip limit have stated they would make more room aboard their vessel if the trip limit is increased. Thus, the actual number of vessels affected either positively or negatively is difficult to determine at this time.

Those for removing the trip limit believe it will help protect the stock while improving the efficiency of the fleet. If a vessel catches more than the trip limit in a net, they have two options to keep from landing over the trip limit. First they can release the excess fish. Because of the nature of the gear, discard mortality is extremely high and most of those fish would not survive. Second, they can cut the net and leave the section with excess fish in the water. Another vessel can then retrieve the partial net if that vessel has not yet met its trip limit. This second choice is better for the resource as it eliminates waste, but obviously damages gear, which takes time and money to repair. Also, another vessel may not be in the area to retrieve the net.

The weight of the fish caught in a gillnet is more difficult to judge than other types of gear. The large amount of fish which can be caught at one time also makes judging the weight difficult. For these reasons, vessel operators sometimes do not realize they have fish in excess of the trip limit until they land. If a trip limit is retained, fishermen have suggested implementing an overage allowance of some percent of the total to encourage fishermen to report excess fish.

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Those against removing the trip limit cite safety at sea and product quality issues. Because of the short season, fishing opportunities are already limited. The pressure to take advantage of an increased trip limit may result in fishermen fishing in poor weather or for excessively long days in order to participate in the fishery before the ACL is met. Fish quality may also be compromised because fish can be crushed and damaged when too much weight is on them.

Another concern is that the annual catch limit (ACL) would be easier to exceed with no trip limit. In 2014, 13 vessels reported landings on a single day, accounting for 45% of the ACL, although not all vessels landed the trip limit. If all of those vessels could fish every day, the ACL could be met in less than three days, even at current catch levels. If all vessels caught the 25,000-lb trip limit, the ACL would be met in less than two days. With an increased trip limit, vessels could leave port on the first day and the ACL could be reached before all vessels returned.

Changes to Accountability Measures

The gillnet component of the fishery has an ACL separate from the hook-and-line component that is used as the Southern Subzone gillnet quota (CMP Amendment 18). If the quota is reached or projected to be reached, NMFS publishes a notice prohibiting further harvest by the gillnet component of the fishery until the following year. Industry representatives have worked closely with NMFS over the last several years to track the landings on a daily basis and voluntarily cease fishing when the quota is expected to be met. However, in the past 10 years, landings have exceeded the ACL five times (Table 1). Under the National Standard 1 (NS1) guidelines, if a stock catch exceeds the ACL more than once in a four-year period, the system of ACLs and accountability measures should be re-evaluated and modified, if necessary, to improve performance and effectiveness.

Table 1. Days and landings (pounds) of king mackerel by gillnet in the Southern Subzone.

Fishing Year	# of Days Open	Total Landings	Quota	Percent of Quota	Over/Under %
04/05	11	477,628	520,312	91.80	-8.20
05/06	51	680,869	520,312	130.86	30.86
06/07	10	510,691	520,312	98.15	-1.85
07/08	15	491,758	520,312	94.51	-5.49
08/09	10	613,860	520,312	117.98	17.98
09/10	5	878,821	520,312	168.90	68.90
10/11	15	613,039	520,312	117.82	17.82
11/12	4	555,691	520,312	106.80	6.80
12/13	No closure	454,521	607,614	74.80	-25.20
13/14	8	505,807	551,448	91.72	-8.28

Note: The fishing season begins the day after the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. For the 2014/2015 fishing season the quota will be 551,448 lb. Source: SEFSC ALS database.

According to NS1 guidance, accountability measures can be in-season actions that prevent overages during the current fishing season, or post-season actions that mitigate the overage. The current in-season closure may not be sufficient to constrain catch within the ACL for this component of the fishery. A post-season accountability measure, such as a payback, may be necessary. In this case, in the year following an overage, the Southern Subzone gillnet quota

would be reduced by the amount of the overage by the gillnet component. The Council could also choose to only apply the post-season payback if the ACL is exceeded by a certain percentage. Any payback would result in beneficial impacts on the biological environment, the magnitude of which would depend on the amount of payback. Although the Gulf migratory group of king mackerel is not overfished or undergoing overfishing, constraining harvest within the established ACL may help maintain a healthy stock in the future.

Another accountability measure is the use of an annual catch target (ACT) for the quota. The in-season quota closure could be based on the ACT. The buffer between the ACL and the ACT should be set at a percentage that takes into account expected quota overages, so that post-season accountability measures (such as a payback) are not triggered by an ACL overage. The average overage for the past 10 years is 9% over the gillnet ACL, with large variability (Table 1).

The use of an ACT could also allow for rollover of an underage of the quota to the following year. The quota cannot be set higher than the acceptable biological catch (ABC) and currently the ACL is equal to the ABC. Therefore, an underage in one year cannot currently be carried over to the next year because that next year's quota would be the ACL plus the underage and exceed the ABC. If an ACT is set below the ACL, then an underage in one year could be carried over to the next year if the ACT plus the underage does not exceed the ABC.

Fishermen in favor of a trip limit increase have proposed new in-season and post-season accountability measures. The proposed in-season accountability measure would reduce the overall quota by the amount of any single trip overage, with the total poundage of that trip also counting in full against the revised fleet-wide seasonal quota. For example, if the fleet-wide quota is 100,000 lbs with a 10,000 lb trip limit, and a fisherman lands 12,000 lbs in a single trip, then the year's quota would be revised downward to 98,000 lbs, and the 12,000 lbs landed would count against the revised quota (leaving 86,000 lbs remaining). The proposed post-season accountability measure would deduct any fleet-wide overage from the following year's quota. The current reporting method makes the proposed post-season accountability measure feasible; however, due to the pace at which fish are landed versus the pace at which in-season adjustments can be made, the proposed in-season accountability measure is likely not feasible.

Changes to Permit Requirements

King mackerel vessels with gillnet endorsements cannot harvest king mackerel with gear other than a run-around gillnet. Therefore, outside of the open gillnet fishing season, those vessels must fish for other species. The Council set this restriction because they wanted vessels fishing with different gear to have separate quotas, and did not think it would be fair to allow one sector to fish off both quotas for an area when the other sector could not. Industry representatives have suggested removing this restriction to allow those vessels to use their king mackerel permits throughout the year to fish for king mackerel with hook and line.

Industry representatives also suggested removing latent gillnet endorsements. However, the Councils considered this in CMP Amendment 20A and decided they did not want to revoke any permits.