

**Public Comment Summary
Reef Fish Amendment 43: Hogfish
Naples, Florida
May 9, 2016**

Council/Staff

Steven Atran
Emily Muehlstein
Martha Guyas

5 members of the public attended.

Jerry Atkinson

There have never been large hogfish in the Naples area. Jumping from 12 to 16 inches is too drastic. We do need to try to keep hogfish open all year round and if the Council wants to slow harvest a bag limit reduction will be better than an increase in the minimum size limit. If the size limit has to increase, 14 inches is good (Action 4, Alternative 2).

Bill D'Antuonio – Charter operator

The hogfish regulations don't need to be changed. A 16-inch minimum size limit is way too big. If the Council makes such a drastic change, discards will increase because a lot of people will shoot undersize fish if they look like males. If something has to change then he supports Action 4, Alternative 2, 1 14-inch minimum size limit. He passes up small fish all the time. The preferred alternative being proposed for the stock boundary (Action 1, Preferred Alternative 2) is in no man's land and he thinks it's a good idea to separate the two distinct stocks.

Bill Goulding – Charter operator

A 15-inch minimum size limit would still allow an extra year for spawning. Moving to 16 inches is a huge jump for a stock that's not in trouble. He would rather start at an increase to 14 or 15 inches (Action 4, Alternative 2 or 3) and if it needs to be bigger it can be ratcheted up gradually. The stock isn't in trouble so there isn't reason to make such a huge increase. Regarding Action 1, the Florida Keys are a good physical boundary. He doesn't know why the South Atlantic would stick their nose into our Gulf business so, he prefers that the Council select Action 1, Alternative 1, no action. If we must do something to slow harvest, reduce the bag limit to 3 fish because you don't need 5 hogfish.

Garry Paxson – Private recreational angler

There will be a lot of bycatch if the minimum size limit increases. There will be a major transition for people to change their perception of size and dial in a 16-inch fish. Put the size limit at 14 (Action 4, Alternative 2) and consider lowering the bag limit. Supports setting the stock boundary at the Cape Sable line (Action 1, Preferred Alternative 2).

Saint Petersburg, Florida
May 10, 2016

Council/Staff

Steven Atran
Emily Muehlstein
Martha Guyas

16 members of the public attended.

Scott Childress - Commercial spear fisherman

Fish he catches from nearshore trips make up a huge percent of his harvest. Over the last 5 years he has sold about 5000 pounds per year to a single dealer and made about \$100,000 on hogfish alone in that time period. 80% of those fish are under 16 inches, and most are in the 13-15 inch range. He has only taken two trips in the last two weeks. On the first trip he harvested 149 hogfish and 25 were over 16 inches, that is only 16.7%. On the second trip, he harvested 163 hogfish with 28 over 16 inches, that is only 17.1%. A major size increase would reduce his harvest dramatically. If the Council is trying to manage based on science, there is no problem with the hogfish size limit. Why do we need to change the size limit when we're not overfished or undergoing overfishing? He can support an increase to a 14-inch minimum size limit (Action 4, Alternative 2), but when you get into the 15-16 inches, the size distinction underwater is pretty hard to make out. He is worried about bycatch from people that don't spearfish full time like he does. If the limit is increased to 16 inches only males will be removed from the population. Only one of the hogfish harvested in his past two trips was a female. He worked with Angela Collins (A Goliath and hogfish researcher with SeGrant), who suggested a one-inch increase. She didn't believe that the fish would grow to 18-inches because there are far too many fish there for the them to reach a large size. The stock is better than it's ever been, and historically people haven't harvested big fish. The recreational fishermen have had so many regulations and they don't need anything else taken away from them. It would be a hardship to require recreational guys to catch bigger fish. There is no problem so we don't need to make these drastic changes. In a healthy stock you see fish of all sizes. You don't want to see just big fish or just small fish. He is seeing an unbelievable amount of baby hogfish, and has for years. He supports Action 1, Preferred Alternative 2, draw the boundary at Cape Sable. He supports Action 5, Alternative 1, take no action on the power head exemption. The annual catch limits are too low across the board and supports the highest possible limits. He asks that the Council and scientists please revisit the numbers.

John Shill - Restaurant owner

Every time the size limit is increased or a fishery is closed it makes it hard to supply his restaurant with local fish and he is forced to consider Chinese and Indonesian imports instead. Use some common sense and let the fishermen fish so that

restaurants don't have to import fish from other places. A 12-inch hogfish makes a nice sandwich, he would reluctantly support an increase in the minimum size limit to 14 inches (Action 4, Alternative 2), but it shouldn't be a huge shift to 16 inches. It's discouraging that it's so easy to import and so hard to get local fish because of the regulations.

Dana Smith - Commercial fisherman and retail fish market owner

Hogfish is the most popular fish at his fish market. It would take 80% of his fish out of the market if the size limit is increased to 16-inches. Most of the fish he sells are between 13 and 15 inches. People love hogfish, and they're not easy to get. It would be a huge income loss for him if the Council increases the size limit so drastically. He has never seen a 4-inch increase to any fish species in his life.

Dennis O'Hern - Fishing Rights Alliance

When red tide hits, it's natural, and it's factored into the assessment. When red tides happen fishermen can't kill fish and that is reflected in landings. The dip in landings after a red tide isn't necessarily indicating the stock has collapsed; it's because the fishermen are not fishing. The take will fall when there is red tide and it will discourage fishermen from harvesting.

Action 1 - It's confusing to the average fishermen when the agency uses an arbitrary line. He supports Action 1, Preferred Alternative 2; divide the stock at the Cape Sable line.

Action 2- He recommends no action at this time. The discards on the table seem high for private recreational anglers. The estimates on spearfishing vs. hook and line fishing are not reasonable. There is no way one in five hogfish is landed by hook and line. He wouldn't even guess that 1 in 20 are harvested hook and line. The reality is that 1-3% of hogfish are harvested hook and line. The information that is being funneled up to MRIP isn't correct. That is a major concern that should be addressed. Additionally, mortality rates of hook and line fish are high because they have anally extended barotrauma and can't recover. He would like the SSC to take another look at how conservative the ABC levels are.

Action 3 - He supports the alternatives that give the highest level of catch either Alternative 2 or Preferred Alternative 3 for Action 3.

Action 4 - The minimum size limit should not be drastically increased because hogfish mortality is high hook and line and increasing the size would increase discards. There isn't really a problem with the stock so the minimum size limit shouldn't go above 14 inches.

Action 5 - Take no action. He knows it's housekeeping but it should just be left alone. He would like to look at managing the hogfish stock by numbers of fish. When we manage by numbers we don't get penalized for taking an average heavier fish. He would also like to note that commercial and recreational fishermen at the hearing are working together and in agreement for these hogfish issues.

Raymond Bourque - Private recreational fisherman.

If you make the size limit 16 inches and there are 4 people on the boat with 3 tanks a piece and they each do their 3 drops he suspects they will only get one over 16 inches on average in a day. It's hard to find five fish over 16 inches on a recreational day so cost per pound becomes preposterous and he's not going to be able to participate in the fishery, which is going to be a huge economic loss.

Keith Ludwig – Private recreational fisherman

He fishes all the way from the Dry Tortugas to north of Tampa.

Action 1 – He supports Preferred Alternative 2; draw the line at Cape Sable.

Action 2 and 3 – In his real job he works with scientific modelers and the saying goes “they are often wrong but never in doubt.” He doesn't know if it matters what alternative the Council picks because the options don't have a major foundation in science.

Action 4 – He supports a 14-inch minimum size limit (Alternative 2). A 16 inch limit will lead to lots of bycatch by both divers and hook and line fishermen. There is a biological justification for not raising the size limit and in a paper written by Angela Collins: fish in shallow water (less than 30 meters) tend to change sex at 13.77 inches. So, at 14 inches, it would be easy for rookie spear fishermen to tell what's legal.

He supports Action 5, Preferred Alternative 2 because using power heads on hogfish shouldn't be an issue.

Mark Westbrook – Commercial spear fisherman

All of his dives are in a depth from 20-60 feet. He did a trip on Sunday and shot 100 hogfish; 26 of them were over 16 inches. He has been diving for 20 years and the hogfish stock has never been so healthy, so he's not sure why were messing with the regulations if there isn't a problem with the stock. It would be very difficult to require recreational people to shoot 16-inch hogfish. The biggest thing he has noticed is that for hook and line you have to use 400 shrimp to catch 6 hogfish and then half of them are undersized and have major barotrauma. He observed that hogfish show a unique form of barotrauma that he called skin bends. All the other restrictions on the other fish have caused effort shifting in the hook and line fishery. For him commercially, such a drastic size increase would kill his business.

Chris Grauer – Private recreational angler

He supports moving the hogfish minimum size limit to 14 inches (Action 4, Alternative 2). Commercial and Recreational fishermen wouldn't prefer to eat such small fish. He doesn't want to shoot 12-inch fish, he doesn't want to shoot anything under 14 inches. For Action 1 he supports Preferred Alternative 2, the line should be at Cape Sable.

Jason DeLaCruz

There is no way that there are so many hook and line hogfish harvested but, he does run out of shrimp nearly every day because people regularly come for 36 dozen shrimp at a time so they can target hogfish. He has always advocated for a 15-inch

minimum size limit because once you're there, the male ratio is where you want it to be. He is okay with starting with an increase to a 14-inch minimum size limit (Action 4, Alternative 2), and then moving up to 15-inches if need be. We have a healthy fishery here, and the size of the fish in the Gulf is not truncated because we have a beautiful shelf and the fishermen in the area are spread out.

For Action 1, he supports Preferred Alternative 2; draw the line at Cape sable. Hogfish is very popular at his fish house, the retail market for it is insane.

Brent Kempton

It's ridiculous to say that there is an issue with the hogfish fishery. It's amazing to see the variety of sizes of fish in the stock. There are so many. It's unnecessary to increase the size limit when there isn't a problem. However, 13 and 14-inch fish do have a better for yield of fillets because there isn't much to eat on a 12-inch fish.

Richie Zachary – Commercial spear fisherman

He supports Action 4, Alternative 2; the 14-inch minimum size limit. He will lose a big chunk of his income going from 12-inches to 14, but an increase to 16- inches would kill him. The hogfish average size has not changed since he was a little kid and he's been in the water for 34 years. He was involved with Angela Collins' research and the average inshore fish is 1 pound while fish in the Middle Grounds are twice that. The Middle Grounds doesn't have red tide and there is almost a 40-degree water temperature change inshore that the Middle Grounds don't have. The fish out deep don't have the same pressures and there isn't the same pollution out there. There are big hogs inshore, but you don't see them everyday. Inshore fish max-out at 5 pounds.

Webinar May 11, 2016

Council/Staff

Emily Muehlstein

Bernie Roy

1 member of the public attended.

Jim Zubrick – Commercial fisherman and fish house owner

During the years 1995 - 2010 his business harvested at least 10% of the hogfish quota for those years. If he was limited to harvesting 16-inch fish he would have deprived the American consumer of approximately 50% of my catch, and at the same time would have increased the discard mortality due to the difficulty in judging the larger fish size. One has to be a diver to understand the difficulty in

judging size, as the smaller fish are very hard to identify and thus live to feed consumers another day.

At the FWC meeting in April a presentation was given on the logic for the increase, a logic that was based primarily on being consistent with the South Atlantic proposed regulation of 16-inches. What a terrible excuse to use when the American consumer will be the one to suffer along with hard working commercial fisher.

The other part of the logic for the increase was that the SPR (Spawning Potential Ratio) would increase and help preserve a sustainable biomass. This excuse, as good as it sounds, is not necessary to maintain and increase the stock. The Hogfish stock is not overfished or undergoing over fishing. An increase to 14 inches (Action 4, Alternative 2) more than satisfies what is necessary to maintain the health of the fishery without damaging recreation and commercial interests. The Reef Fish Advisory Panel heard that hogfish was a topic and he and some other commercial fishermen recommended a 14-inch size limit; some people preferred 15 inches. The South Atlantic is talking about 16 inches as a preferred. He feels that 14 inches is safe because there isn't a problem in the Gulf region. 14 inches makes a lot of people happy and will lead to less discards.

Finally, the Council should consider separate allocations of hogfish for commercial and recreational sectors.

Reef Fish Amendment 43
Summary of Written Comments
June 17, 2016

Comments received since the January 2016 Council meeting

- Support for Action 4, Preferred Alternative 4: set the hogfish minimum size limit at 16 inches. There is not enough meat on a 12-14 inch fish.
- About half of commercially harvested hogfish are smaller than 16 inches; so increasing the size limit to 16 inches would deprive the American consumer.
- Increasing the size limit will increase discard mortality as divers struggle to judge the increased size limit.
- Making rules that are consistent with the South Atlantic is not a good rationale for increasing the size limit.
- Since the hogfish stock is not overfished, a size limit increase is unnecessary.
- Support for Action 4, Alternative 2: set the hogfish minimum size limit at 14 inches.

Other Comments:

- Allocate the hogfish annual catch limit into separate commercial and recreational allocations.
- The Council should reconsider the charter/headboat permit moratorium because permits are expensive and were originally given to people who were lucky enough to be in business at the time. Many licenses are owned by out-of-state persons and brokers. Additionally, the original moratorium was temporary and considered an exemption for guide boats. Current permit holders are experiencing increases in business and new entrants should be allowed to compete on an even playing field.