

Public Hearing Summary
**Reef Fish Amendment 56: Modifications to Catch Limits, Sector Allocation, and
Recreational Fishing Seasons for Gulf of Mexico Gag**

Virtual Hearing

May 8, 2023

Council/Staff

Bob Gill
Emily Muehlstein
Ryan Rindone
John Froeschke
Carrie Simmons
Bernie Roy

26 members of the public attended.

8 members of the public spoke.

Bill D’Antuono: Charter and Commercial - Naples, Florida

Recently, it’s one thing after the next and the Council keeps cutting what he can fish for. This is one of the best years for gags he’s seen in a long time. On the charter side, it’ll be very disappointing on June 1st that anglers have to release a trophy fish that will likely die anyways. He prefers Action 4; he supports June 1 opening even if the season is short because that’s when a lot of people will be targeting the bigger gags. On the commercial side, the lease price has gone up 400% – 700%, if you can even find it. He spent \$3000 for 600 pounds and people keep asking him for it. He wants to know what measures are stopping the allocation price from skyrocketing. Cutting harvest by 85% and giving extra to the recreational sector doesn’t make sense when the commercial sector is accountable.

Eric Brazier: Commercial - Reef Fish Share Holders Alliance

The fact that the Council is even considering reallocation at this point, regardless of which sector it is exchanged to, when a stock is in terrible shape makes no sense. It’s not good for the resource to reallocate from the commercial sector to recreational sector. Even if you take social and economic considerations off the table, reallocation doesn’t make sense. He expressed support for Action 2, Alternative 2c. There are lots of fishermen seeing lots of gags and the data being used to create this rebuilding plan is already five years old. If the stock is doing better like we’re hearing, then the Council should select to rebuild using the longer timeline. Action 2 addresses three major changes in one bite: catch limit data, allocations, and the timeline to rebuild. This is a lot to take in at once and he believes it should have been split into three separate actions. This would at least allow for a proper allocation review. 99% of gag discards are in the recreational sector (28 million fish), compared to the small number of discards from the commercial sector (200 thousand fish), however, nothing in the document accounts for this. We need to request interim analyses because the fishermen are seeing more in the past few years and the commercial sector has already caught half of its quota so far this year. Lowering

catch limits could cause huge problems, If the stock is doing that much better and harvest exceeds catch limits, this could result in a fishery wide shut down.

Gary Jarvis: Charter and Seafood Restaurant Owner – Destin, Florida

He thinks the Council shouldn't reallocate from an accountable fishery to an unaccountable fishery. It doesn't make sense when you're trying to rebuild a fishery. Regardless of the data program used, we need to use common sense. Grouper, greater amberjack, and triggerfish reallocations to the recreational sector make no sense. Fish shouldn't be taken away from the most accountable sector in America when the fisheries are stressed. Re-writing history is not the problem when we have collapsing fisheries. If gag are coming back faster than we think they are, it still doesn't justify reallocation at this point.

Rachal Histler: Commercial - Texas

If the fishery is rebounding faster than the assessments are showing, then we're setting ourselves up for failure.

Forest Pressnell: Recreational - Carrabelle, Florida

He has been fishing in Carrabelle, Florida since 1999 and sees more grouper than ever. He can fill the boat in depths from 28-100 feet with grouper and red snapper of all sizes. The gag population is so insane, you can't catch lane snapper or triggerfish. He believes that this cut aims to close the Florida economy. He has never seen more grouper and easily catches his limit in one hour. He has never caught a spawning grouper in under 100 feet of water. If the Council is going to shut it down, leave gag open for 70 days during the red snapper season. That's the only fair solution with gas prices as high as they are.

Robert Houghton:

In northwest Florida the grouper stock is great. The last four years, it has been off the charts good and he's been fishing for 30 years. Fishing in November and December you catch them in 30 minutes. There are more male fish that are being accounted for. The science isn't right because people don't give accurate information in the surveys. The fishery is much stronger than the science is making it out to be. He doesn't know about other parts of the state, but the stock is strong in the big bend. Northwest Florida shouldn't be included with the rest of the state because an October through December season is best for him. It doesn't make sense for the whole state to share the same season. The Council is forcing people to stop fishing for grouper even though they're there.

Andrew and Cherry Norris: Charter Captain

The fishery in the central Gulf coast of Florida is off the charts good and has been for 35 or 40 years. He has been making a living of it and can catch his limit in 8 and 15 feet of water every day of the year. The assessments are unbelievably wrong. He can catch all the fish he wants. He doesn't hardly ever get checked at the dock. Based on the number of fish he catches and throws back in the shallow water; he can't imagine how many are in deep water. As a family that depends on the fishery, there are lots of captains whose livelihoods will be hurt. Closing gag takes food off their table and impacts the restaurant industry. They would support cuts to

harvest if there was an issue with the stock, but there isn't. September and October is hurricane season and a storm might kick up the water and they'll end up losing precious fishing time. They prefer an earlier season opening. They also support increasing the size limit over changing the season.

Stephen Stang: Recreational – Wakulla, Florida

Franklin, Wakulla, Jefferson and Taylor counties are already managed differently and should have a different season. The special season drives tourism to the area. Cutting out December fishing hurts their region because it's an epic month for gag fishing and the water clears, allowing for better spearfishing opportunities.

Ft. Myers, FL

May 15, 2023

Council/Staff

Phil Dyskow

John Froeschke

Lisa Hollensead

5 members of the public attended.

4 members of the public spoke.

Barry Nicholls: Recreational and Charter - Estero Bay, FL

No argument about the math, but the data are bad. He wants to hear about better research to inform facts as these decisions are affecting people's livelihoods. Commercial divers see fish and why aren't those numbers extrapolated to the reefs rather than mailing out comment cards to private recreational fishermen? They are seeing fish; know they are they are there; got to be a better way.

Timothy Dillingham: Commercial and fish company owner – Naples, FL

Why do the assessments take so long and are based on data that are years old? Fishermen are giving scientists landings logs; why can't an assessment be done every year? An interim assessment (IA) for gag grouper may be the way to go. Drastic cuts of landings at 85% is a lot. Perhaps reduce landings by 25%, then do an IA to check if another cut of 25% is needed and do that instead. The drastic cut is too much.

For the IFQ program, it is good for shareholders to be able to fish year-round, but quota keep getting cut and it is hard. It's too hard to buy-in and have no confidence in IFQ. Price for quota has gone up from \$1 to \$7 per pound, if you can even find it. Too many private outsiders can come in and buy up all the quota, and there is too much private money that aren't fishermen. The program should be a participation only fishery or you have to be a dealer. Get a boat and do the fishing. Shareholders that aren't fishing or dealing should have a year or two (set some kind of precedent) and then sell off shares to fishermen or dealers. Would be the only saving grace for commercial fishermen. Need to be considered just like agriculture. Since so much fish

are international, if commercial fishermen are gone, you won't be able to supply local communities. This is for the American people, and its cheating people when they eat some important since that's all there is. The IFQ system needs an overhaul. New entrants can't get involved.

There is no commercial fishermen representation on the Council. Mostly sells catch to restaurants and country clubs in the community. The commercial industry represents other users like chefs, restaurants, and tourists. This reduction is worse than red grouper. The recreational sector should have some kind of an app to report when they are going fishing and what IFQ species they caught and would be better than 3% coverage. No one believes the numbers with methods through mailing and dockside only capturing 3% of the recreational sector and it doesn't make sense to base decisions off that. It's a waste of money to do dockside surveys on small boats that aren't going offshore. If a fishermen can't tell the difference between a gag and a black grouper, they shouldn't be on the water.

Willing to record and share videos of fish during dives.

Jesse Baughman: Commercial – Florida
Seconded everything Tim said.

Bill D'Antuono: Commercial and Charter – Naples, FL
Gag grouper is better than he can remember. For charter side, would like to see the season open June 1 and it would reduce discards. Gag grouper are floating by the time they are coming up to the surface and he doesn't think you'd be able to get them down. Would normally fish for them at 155-190 ft depth out to 85-90 miles offshore. When gag grouper closes, it's putting pressure on another fish. Hogfish will take a huge hit and they don't live when you catch them. Cobia is cut, lane is closed for part of the year, and with black group misidentified, there is only so much meat on the bone to go out for. The data was last looked at in 2019; need to go back to the drawing board and look at the data again. Would be good to have red snapper coincide with gag opening. September 1 and booking charters that far into hurricane season would be tough. Fishermen are on the chopping block and things have shifted away from commercial. Went to talk about cobia, spoke 4 times, and didn't listen to what was said. There is no Council representation for commercial sector. People will be learning how to fish for black grouper. Gag grouper quota is \$7 per lb to lease, if you can find it. Hopefully an IA would help out and it would be good to see the recreational sector more accountable.

Cedar Key, Florida

May 15, 2023

Council/Staff

Bob Gill

Emily Muehlstein

Charlotte Schiaffo

27 members of the public attended.
11 members of the public spoke.

Bob Bullard: Commercial – Steinhatchee, FL

There are several factors at play causing issues with gag. He used to catch thousands of pounds of fish in 60 feet, but since the big red tide the bait has disappeared. Fish follow bait and where you find bait you find fish. The fishery in Apalachicola and Panama City is beautiful, so is the fishery in Mexico. Unfortunately, there is no bait here, so the fish aren't here and the cost of bait is astronomical. Wayne Warner told him that the more snapper you have, the less grouper you have because snapper love grouper eggs. There are lots of problems with our fisheries beyond what we're thinking, including the problem that there are lots of people fishing. The cut to the commercial quota took \$80,000 of his income, so he'll have to fish harder on a different species.

Vincent Biue: Commercial – Steinhatchee, FL

The only thing he disagrees with is that the commercial sector lost 80% of their gags and they continuously stay under their quota while the recreational sector overfishes every year. Not only will both sectors be cut, but the commercial sector will lose an extra 4% if the allocation shifts. The commercial sector shouldn't be penalized for the recreational sector going over their limit.

Paul Reeves: Commercial – Steinhatchee, FL

He wants to see this fishery rebuild as much as anyone because it's nothing compared to what it was 15 years ago. Gag has already been under a rebuilding plan for 10 years; what happened to that? The quota was cut and then increased for the last 10 years and now we're talking about doing it again. He supports Preferred Alternative 2, Option 2b. He doesn't agree with giving the commercial sector a double hit with reallocation; there is no point to add that on top of an 80% decrease.

Jim Zubrick: Commercial – Steinhatchee, FL

He applauds the state of Florida for voting not to shift allocation to the recreational sector. The sheer number of people participating in the recreational sector causes incredible discards. He supports Alternative 2, Option 2b which retains the current allocation and initiates an 18-year rebuilding plan.

Robert Lanier: Commercial – Steinhatchee, FL

He doesn't think harvest should be cut and he believes the allocation should remain the same.

Ellis Doshier: Commercial – Steinhatchee, FL

He's been a captain since 1993 and his usual pattern is to fish in 120 feet all summer. Then, in October, he fishes 180-220 feet until April. Last November he had to lease extra gag because he was catching them so easily. In the winter, he predominately catches red snapper, then red grouper, then gag, scamp, and mangos. This year before the 1st of March, he got tired throwing gag back because he only has 900 pounds of quota for the whole year. He keeps 100 pounds per trip and his fish average 16-17 pounds apiece. He catches more like 4-6% males (n=200). He

wonders if the sampling methods are not proper or if the data old enough that the sex ratio has changed since then? He encourages the Council to revisit the male ratio. He found two spawning aggregations he didn't know existed this year. What you observe creates your perspective, which is your reality, and he doesn't see a lack of fish. He doesn't know anything about what happens inside of 80 feet. The gag fishery is not as good as it was in the early 2000's or since the big red tide in 2014. He supports Alternative 2, Option 2b.

Anna Woods: Commercial - Keaton Beach, FL

Her family has been fishing full time since 2018. Reallocation is a problem. The commercial sector has already taken a huge cut and another 4% dips even deeper into their pockets. The commercial sector is accountable, we know what they catch and what they discard. The Council shouldn't reallocate to a sector that doesn't report.

Mark Rustemier: Recreational fisherman and diver – Cedar Key, FL

In this assessment there are six or seven new variables that could create misinterpretation or error. In Action 1, using $F_{40\%SPR}$, rather than F_{max} as an MSY proxy, is very conservative and severe. He thinks there should be less conservative options, like $F_{30\%SPR}$. Action 2, represents an 85% recreational cut and 87% commercial cut. He is not sure how the commercial sector can make it with that magnitude of a cut. Action 3 increases the recreational buffer and reduces the buffer for the commercial sector. The ACL used to be the trigger to close the recreational season and using the ACT to set seasons is taking more fish away from the recreational sector in addition to the 85% reduction. So, even with allocation changes, the recreational sector essentially loses the gains with the increased buffer. While it looks like there is a bigger piece of the pie with the allocation change, but the ACT buffer takes that away.

Dan Martin: Recreational – Cedar Key, FL

The release kits from Return 'Em Right work great. They haven't dived down and seen how they do, but the fish don't come back up. He supports the use of descending devices and believes it helps the resource. He would like the recreational season to start in October. This would provide some weekend overlap with red snapper season which would be more efficient for him. Everyone is concerned about the viability of the stock and he supports consideration of area/depth closures and slot limits. A moratorium on harvest of larger fish should be considered. Even though the Council has not done it before, that's no reason not to consider it now. He also supports the idea of increasing the minimum size limit incrementally, by an inch per year, if that would increase gag egg production exponentially. The 80% cut is catastrophic, so let's do something soon to ensure the viability of the stock.

Ron Kamzelski:

There is nothing in these alternatives that shows how these measures will increase the male population specifically. He would like to see targeted management measures to fix that.

Shawn Stephenson: Commercial - Cedar Key, FL

Compared to the rest of the Gulf there is a pretty impressive fishery in the area. He doesn't know if there is any better place in the state than Cedar Key to fish for gag. If the commercial

and recreational sector have to share the resource it should be split 50/50, because that's what is fair. At the same time, he is concerned about the lack of male gags and believes something will have to be done about that. The Lumps, and other areas where spawning grounds have been identified, have been unfishable and maybe there should be more areas that give sanctuary to the older spawning fish to increase male populations. He's also concerned about the increased recreational red snapper season. Increasing the season to 70 days will put a lot more pressure on the gags because the recreational fishermen will fish, and they will have more discards. The gag season and the red snapper season should be set at the same time.

Matt Sky: Recreational - Cedar Key, FL

If the lack of males is the biggest issue threatening the stock then we should consider changing the size limit and or creating more area closures.

Clay Shidler: Charter – Crystal River, FL

He owns 11 charter vessels and permits. Last year, he killed over 5,300 gags and turned in every carcass over 43. Of those, only four were males (not in transition). His fleet doesn't fish out deep. He would rather see a longer season and one fish per person bag limit. If a guy can go out to fish on a slick calm day, he would rather have the opportunity even if it's just one fish. He supports Alternative 2. The season should start September 1st. He also believes that blacks and gags shouldn't be managed together because we assume the fishermen are incompetent. He knows that's coming in the next framework and blacks needs to be taken out.

Destin, Florida

May 15, 2023

Council/Staff

CJ Sweetman

Ryan Rindone

Carly Somerset

4 members of the public attended.

4 members of the public spoke.

David Krebs III: Commercial and recreational - Destin, FL

He grew up in the commercial industry, but spent time recreational fishing while he was in the Air Force. He is familiar with the changes that have occurred in both sectors from the early 1990's. Many transplants have migrated to the Panhandle to buy boats, giving them direct access to the fishery that wasn't available over a decade ago. The gag grouper season is essentially "open" year-round because regardless of whether the fishing season is open, anglers are still catching gag and then have to discard them. When fishing in deeper waters, a discarded gag is a dead discard. He thinks the gag season should align with other reef fish seasons. He would prefer a June 1st recreational season open, to more or less coincide with the start of red snapper season; fish within the same group can be targeted at one time so they aren't discarded. He thinks the Florida weekend-only red snapper season is a great idea; this is when

the maximum fishing effort occurs anyway. With that in mind, think about making a gag fishing season weekends only so that it could be extended for a longer time period.

In Action 3, Sub-Action 3.2, he supports Preferred Alternative 3. The commercial buffer doesn't need to be more than 5% since that sector is more accountable. He also thinks reallocating any of the quota away from the commercial sector is wildly inappropriate. The recreational sector should have a 20% buffer as this is closer to what they are probably already overfishing.

David Krebs: Commercial – Destin, FL

He has been a commercial fisherman for 42 years and prior to that was a bait fisherman. He thanked staff for providing valuable insights for gag grouper discussion. He is concerned about the actions that reallocate quota based on a 2023 understanding of the sectors; the commercial and charter industry have not been able to grow for a while, but the recreational sector is growing exponentially. Better technology allows them more access to the fish and makes their participation very effective. Managers have to account for all the recreational discards; this means doing more than writing white papers on descending devices. It may be a useful tool, but how well can it be enforced? Any control rule that will increase discards must be closely examined. Regulating through discards is not appropriate. He would like to see a Friday through Sunday gag season to hopefully appease more fishermen and reduce discards. He requested FWC to look at the SRFS red snapper data after the weekend only season concludes. He would like the Council to reinstate spawning closures in the Gulf and start the closure based on observer data. He doesn't want the sector allocation to change and he supports the shortest rebuilding timeline.

Austin Abrams: Commercial - Panama City, FL

He's been associated with his family business for 30 years. He recalled that the last time gag was not overfished was 2014. Since then, the commercial industry has decreased; fishermen are selling out yet the recreational sector has grown immensely, which is likely contributing to gag being overfished. He would like a 6-month closure during spawning season and prefers Action 2, Alternative 2, Option 2a for all sectors. He also recommends holding the recreational sector more accountable through stricter data collection measures.

Bob Zales II: Southern Offshore Fishing Association and National Association of Charter Boat Operators - Panama City, FL

He supports Action 1, Preferred Alternative 2, even though he is unsure about the $F_{40\%SPR}$; it seems like the SSC is using that more often now for other species. He also supports a rebuilding timeline of 18 years (Action 2, Option 3b). In Action 3, he supports preferred Alternative 3, to set the recreational sector buffer at 20% below the ACL. He would like a 5% buffer on the commercial side (Preferred Alternative 3).

Regarding the recreational season, he would like the Council to consider a September 1 to November 10th season, but in the meantime use information from the interim rule to analyze the best option for 2024. It may also be helpful to look at the weekend effort from the Florida red snapper season. He wants the allocation to remain at 61% recreational, 39% commercial. If

the recreational sector gets another 4% it will just increase discards. He's very concerned about the number of recreational discards and increased fishing effort. This could turn into a situation similar to red grouper where the quota is reduced for everyone. He also reiterated continuing to discuss requiring a federal offshore fishing permit for all private recreational anglers. Mr. Zales also suggested a Gulf-wide closure from January to May or June for both sectors.

Saint Petersburg, Florida

May 17, 2023

Council/Staff

Tom Frazer

Carrie Simmons

Emily Muehlstein

36 members of the public attended.

13 members of the public spoke.

Eric Schmidt: Commercial and Charter – Saint Petersburg, FL

He's been talking to the SSC and the Council about gag for years. The stock was depleted in 2017 and 2018 along southwest Florida. However, in the last few years, he's been running charters and the number of juvenile fish is unbelievable. He has never seen anything quite like it. This entire science and management process needs to be streamlined. He is on four SEDAR panels and by the time you get through the stock assessment and implement management, you're managing with five- or six-year-old data. The grouper stocks are cyclical so you're managing to the dip when there is actually a pulse in the population. Based on the schedule, the next SEDAR won't change things again until 2027. He does not agree with a September 1st opening; it's the peak of hurricane season and September and October are the two slowest months for charter fishing on the coast. Gags need cold fronts and water temperature changes to move closer to shore. With a September 1st opening, the 63 proposed days will in reality work out to 35 or 40 days. He supports a November 1st start date to economically maximize this fishery. Remember, the June 1 red snapper opening was not based on biology of the stock, it was based on the start of tourism season in the north Gulf. Gag should be managed economically and socially as well.

Reese Reed: Recreational fisherman and diver – Crystal River, FL

The gag population has built lately. They're the secret service for the other fish because you can't get around them to get a shot at the other fish. There is a healthy fishery right now, and you have to pick through the small ones to get the keepers. He hopes the sampling is done properly in the same areas year over year to ensure an accurate comparison. In Crystal River, you catch as many gag as you want.

Jake Augburn: Recreational spearfisherman - Tampa Bay

Anglers and spearfishermen are willing to support change when it is good, and when it is necessary. Changes to gag management are not needed now because they are healthy.

Amberjack and kingfish need help, not gags. Starting to manage this stock on limited and old data is a bad idea. When you close a species, another takes a hit. This is the definition of mismanagement. So many fish are being slashed and people are losing faith in the Council process. Fishermen are on the chopping block and these management changes are not reflecting what we're seeing. He would like a reevaluation of the management process and the stock.

Josh Weaver: Recreational diver and fisherman – Spring Hill, FL

We're seeing more gags than we've seen in the past going out of Hernando County. The Nature Coast is gag territory. The Coast of Florida is so large, if certain areas of the state are struggling, we should be able to manage them separately. Break management into areas and manage in ways that are reflective on the local populations.

Scott Stark: Recreational

From 20 feet out to the Middle Grounds, this is the best gag year he's seen. Maybe we need to build an APP and ask the recreational sector to report so we can get better data. The Council should consider reducing the recreational bag limit to one fish so the season can be longer. These huge cuts don't just hurt the fishermen, they hurt the whole industry.

Dylan Hubbard: Charter – John's Pass, FL

We're changing the data currencies and moving the goalpost in this fishery, so we don't need to change allocations right now. It's not an appropriate time to do this, especially when you look at the fact that taking 4% extra away from the commercial sector will only give the recreational sector two more days to fish. It doesn't make sense when the fishery is in trouble. We're seeing gag everywhere and the fishery is rebounding at an exponential rate. This year one and two fish are everywhere and we have a big recruitment to the fishery right now. The gag stock is doing better each year and we all agree that managing off data from 2019 isn't working. This has happened before. We started a rebuilding plan for gag and soon thereafter we had another assessment that said everything is ok. He supports the longest rebuilding timeline since the assessment is not agreeing with what we're seeing on the water. The September 1st opening date is important to him. When the private fleet starts fishing June 1st or 16th, it's going to cause discards, but the gag season would only be open for two weeks at that time so you're not going to make any progress to limit discards. He doesn't think it's a good idea to open gag in November/December when catchability is super high. Everyone in this area loves catching gag and if you wait that long, a million people will be eager to go after those easily targetable fish. Any huge effort spike will be dented come September 1st because catchability is lower. We kept moving goal posts with amberjack and noting has worked. None of the management changes the Council tried made a difference, let's not do that with gag. Hopefully, interim analysis will show us we're doing better. Also, black grouper should not be included in future gag management. There is no confusion; old-time fisherman called gags blacks, it's not an identification issue, it's just vernacular.

Scott Morris: President Suncoast Seals - recreational spearfisherman

His club has been around since the 1950's and as divers they actually put eyes on the reef. They have harvest data and technology in their club and they can report their fish and share footage of the gags. He has been spearfishing since 1994 and he's seen more gags in the last two years than he ever has. His club wants to help, if there is a way to get more data.

Randy Lauser: Commercial longliner – Madeira Beach, FL

He has seen a lot of fisheries build and rebuild and he believes the Council needs to postpone action on this Amendment and give him back gag. He hasn't seen a single scientist collecting gonads. We have to harvest gag so we can study them. If they're not bringing them to the dock then there are no grouper to keep studying. It was harsh to take 80% away. Last year he caught 15,000 pounds and this year he was allocated 1,500. It's hard to take that hit based on old science. There needs to be more sampling before these cuts are made.

Troy Smith: Recreational - Hernando County, FL

He supports the June opening because it's during snapper season. If the goal is to not kill fish unnecessarily during snapper season, then the gag season should be open concurrently. Even if it's a shorter season you can still minimize discards. He can't imagine closing gag during snapper season when a ton of them are going to die. He doesn't believe that the season would only be allowed for two weeks in June; it should run during the entire red snapper season. Snapper season is a huge success and he supports the Council allowing the states to start managing it. Could the states manage gag? The state could manage it and then there could be zone management within the state.

Dan Hosimer: Recreational spearfisherman – Saint Petersburg, FL

He is a member of the St. Pete Underwater Club which has been around for 71 years. He wants to understand how to improve the science. The gag population has vastly improved over the years.

Charlie Ranier: Commercial – Madeira Beach and Key West, FL

He was born and raised in the Keys and he grew up fishing his whole life. All he knows is catching, buying, and selling fish. Every single time he comes to a meeting it's because he is fighting for the fish. He wants his daughter to run the company one day and become third generation owner. When you need to do sampling, he has 30 boats that are almost all longliners and he will do anything to support better science. Since the fish were taken, all the boats have started talking about discards. The longliners catch gags and even though they've made a point to minimize discards, they are trying to support the fishery. You need to tell the Council what is happening because they don't believe us that the stock is healthy. This is scary; he is losing money. Get in touch; he is willing to help because he wants to survive in this business. He started buying quota and boats about six years ago because the thought that owning a fish house, boats, and quota would keep him in business. He's lost three to four million dollars in quota. He was told that the quota system would never allow for a bad year again and he was promised that he wouldn't have to stop fishing. There are lives and families at stake.

Steven Creesie: Recreational spearfisherman

If there is truly only a 2% male population, that would suggest a collapse. However, there is an abundance of fish. We don't know what the normal male sex ratio should be, it might be 2%. We need to find what the normal ratio is so we don't make a management mistake.

Brad Gorst: Charter and Commercial – Clearwater, FL

He has been fishing professionally for 35 years and caught his first grouper 50 years ago. He believes that the recreational season should be set from Thanksgiving through the end of the year. That would give him the best economic value. He would even take a 1-fish haircut to make that happen. The later the season, the shallower they are, so they're going to recover better. In June, if everyone uses descending devices like they should, the discards should be less. Next year, the season might be even shorter depending on what happens this year. He likes the one fish bag limit so you can bring back something, which is better than nothing. Seven years ago, the fishermen asked for the June gag opening (it was July). The biggest issue for the commercial fleet is the allocation. The Council shouldn't take the fish from an accountable fishery and give it to an unaccountable fishery. If the commercial sector can't catch 100% of its quota, then the quota is too high. Allocation shifting is not a solution. Whatever percent is reallocated won't increase the recreational season significantly. The for-hire data should be separated out and shown because the for-hire guys are professional anglers and handle high volume of fish. Move to a recreational reporting program; use fish tags and collect data that way. You can buy as many tags as you want, but you don't get a new tag until you turn in your old tag in.

Virtual Hearing

May 30, 2023

Council/Staff

CJ Sweetman

Emily Muehlstein

Carly Somerset

Carrie Simmons

Charlotte Schiaffo

21 members of the public attended.

2 members of the public spoke.

Dylan Hubbard: Charter – John's Pass, FL

While we are changing status determination criteria and data currencies we should avoid changing more variables. The science and management is lagging behind what's happening on the water. We are seeing more and more gag every day and the fishery is rebounding. The terminal year of gag stock assessment is killing us. We are hopeful that the science and management will catch up with interim analysis, showing the increase we're seeing. He supports the longest rebuilding timeline to ensure the fishery is fully utilized while we're going through this process. He supports a 22 year rebuild timeline or even longer, if possible. He cautions that the Council should avoid getting in a situation like with greater amberjack where

regulations keep changing (bag limits and size limits) with no improvement to the stock. He supports a September 1st opening date. This will avoid derby fishing in the summer where there is a big effort spike on June 1. People hammer gag in the summer in deep water and this would cause a quick closure and be hard for NMFS to manage, possibly leading to a revolving door of payback provisions. Additionally, discards won't go down if we open a June season because the season would be so short; summer discards would continue to be an issue. He also noted that black grouper was added to a future framework action and he wants that to be removed from consideration because anglers are not confuse; it's very easy to identify the difference between the two fish.

Catherine Bruger – Ocean Conservancy

The Council has made it evident that this amendment lacks sufficient management changes that will result in rebuilding success. It's unclear that, even with no fishing, the stock will be rebuilt meaningfully. She is concerned about the lack of options for setting the MSY proxy and would like to see a more precautionary option. At minimum, catch levels should be set using constant catch to add baseline precaution to the vulnerable stock. The document also lacks management actions that address the main drivers of mortality, which include recreational discards and environmental mortality from red tide. The Council should act to reduce reactional discards now. There was a motion to consider spatial temporal closures, bag limit, and slot limits and this should be done in this document. She encourages the Council to take action now, rather than make future plans to address those issues. Regarding the environmental factors she thanks the Council for adding the CVA analysis and hopes to see this included more frequently in future management. Unfortunately, the CVA shows that gag are highly sensitive and venerable to environmental disruptions. The Council should include an environmental buffer to directly address these events that will increase in both frequency and duration. Management measures seem to have a low chance of ending overfishing and rebuilding gag, even under the legal obligation to do so.

Written Public Comment Summary

Comments Summarized through May 31, 2023

328 public hearing video views

50 comments received

Action 1: Modification of Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Gag Status Determination Criteria (SDC)

- The Council should explore additional options in Action 1 which set catch at baseline levels and do not proceed with catch increases. A constant catch should be used.
- Support for Alternative 2
 - This is based on the best available scientific information.

Action 2: Gag Catch Limits, Sector Allocation, and Rebuilding Timeline

- Support for Alternative 2

- It is the only viable and legal alternative.
- The Reef Fish AP unanimously supported this alternative.
- Reallocating from an accountable sector to the sector that is responsible for 98% of the discards will not help the recovery of the stock.
- Reallocation reduces the total amount of fish available for harvest.
- Reallocation is not fair and equitable because it forces the commercial sector to subsidize dead discards in the recreational sector.
- Reallocation fails to follow the Council's own Allocation Review Policy.
- Support for Alternative 3
 - The allocation shift makes sense because as Florida's population grows, the number of recreational anglers increases
 - This alternative uses the most recent, best scientific data to calculate allocations.
 - Since SRFS will be used to set catch limits and monitor the fishery, the allocations should be set using the same currency.
- Support for Option b.
- Support for Option c, a 22-year rebuilding timeline

Action 3.1: Recreational ACT

- Support for Alternative 3
 - Precaution should be taken because it will be difficult for NOAA to accurately predict the recreational season closure.

Action 4: Recreational Season and Accountability Measures

- Support for June 1 open date
 - Closing gag during the federal red snapper season is going to have a negative economic effect on charter businesses.
 - In the winter gag are in shallower water and it makes sense to discard them then, instead of in the summer when they'll die.
- Support Alternative 3, a September 1 season open date.
- Dissent for Alternative 3, a September 1 season open date.
 - It would open gag during peak hurricane season
 - It wouldn't solve the summer discard issue
- Support Alternative 4, an October 1 season open date.
 - The weather in September is too hot and requires long offshore runs to target gags. Opening later, when the fish are closer and shallower, will improve survival of discarded fish.
- Support for opening the season as late in the year as possible
 - Smaller boats will be able to target them as they move closer inshore
 - Discards will be reduced
- The gag stock is much healthier than the assessment reflects.
- Inshore gag fishing is the best it's ever been.
- There are more, large gag now than there have been historically.

- Hurricane Ian eliminated numerous boats, reduced access through ramp closures, and limited shrimping in the area protecting the fish and their food source.
- Gags are rebounding and managing with old data is a huge issue.
- The time lag between stock assessments and management actions result in fishing quotas that do not reflect what's happening on the water.
- Recreational landings information is not accurate.
 - A tag system should be considered to manage the recreational sector
 - Recreational reporting should be required
- The Council should obtain better discard data.
- The Council should initiate a process to monitor dead discards and track them against a predetermined annual mortality limit.
- A new assessment of gag should start now.
- Interim analysis should be performed for gag.
 - As soon as possible
 - Annually, for a minimum of 3-years
- Spearfishermen shoot all the keeper size fish, so hook and line fishermen should not be punished.
- Commercial harvest should be prohibited when a stock is overfished.
- There is no evidence to suggest that recreational fishermen have a greater impact than commercial fishing.
- Charter vessels should be limited to one trip a day.
- The Council should consider options which explore closed areas to protect males.
- A slot limit should be considered to protect spawning fish.
- The Council should cut the bag limit to increase the season.
- The rebuilding plan has a low probability of success.
- Proposed changes don't protect gag spawning.
- Consider increasing the gag size limit for both sectors. It's worked for gag in the past and for other species as well.
- There is a vast resource of potential fishermen/diver volunteers that will help gather gag data.

Other Comments

- Population growth in Florida is never addressed by fisheries management amendments.
- Allow harvest of large predatory sharks that are eating discards.
- When you preserve one species it causes effort shifting to other species.
- The Council needs to focus management on species that need rebuilding, like greater amberjack and king mackerel.
- Eliminate sector separation.