

Mackerel Committee Report
June 18, 2018
Dr. Tom Frazer – Chair

CMP Amendment 31

Staff reviewed CMP Amendment 31 (**Tab C, No. 5**), which addresses the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) request to withdraw the Atlantic migratory group of cobia (Atlantic cobia) from the joint fishery management plan for coastal migratory pelagic resources (CMP FMP). The SAFMC and the GMFMC have selected Preferred Alternative 2 to remove Atlantic cobia (only) from the CMP FMP, and allow the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) to manage Atlantic cobia in state and, in the absence of federal management, federal waters. Since this FMP is jointly managed by the South Atlantic and Gulf Councils, the two Councils must concur on a preferred alternative for CMP Amendment 31 to go forward. At their June 2018 meeting, the SAFMC voted to transmit CMP Amendment 31 to the Secretary of Commerce for implementation.

The Gulf and Atlantic cobia stock identification data and review workshops have reviewed the available data for both migratory groups, and did not support moving the current stock boundary from the Florida/Georgia state line. The data did show a transition zone between (approximately) Brunswick, Georgia and Cape Canaveral, Florida, in which cobia from the Atlantic and Gulf stocks may interact. The joint cooperator technical review, which will include SSC members from both the GMFMC and SAFMC, will be held in early August of 2018.

The Committee asked what impacts may result from the Council deferring action on CMP Amendment 31 until the August Council meeting, after the completion of the joint cooperator technical review. Staff replied that delaying implementation of the proposed regulations would delay the date at which the ASMFC's regulations would become effective from the beginning of 2019 to sometime later in that year.

The Committee chose to defer a decision on CMP Amendment 31 until the full Council session, after receiving public comment.

CMP Framework Amendment 7

Staff presented the one-page Gulf cobia handout (**Tab C, No. 6a**), which the Council had requested be developed at the April 2018 Council meeting. The Committee liked the handout and the information it presented, but requested that a figure which details recent landings also be added.

In Action 1, NMFS staff recommended clarifying that the document only applies to the Gulf jurisdictional area, and that the SAFMC would need to take separate, but commensurate, action for the east coast of Florida if they so desired. The Committee asked whether the data could support identifying at what size or age a given proportion say, for example, 85%, of Gulf cobia are sexually mature. Staff indicated that the data did not currently support such an explicit determination; however, generally speaking, larger fish would be more likely to be mature. The SEFSC added that larger fish likely contribute disproportionately to reproductive output and subsequent recruitment.

Committee members discussed public comments received, noting that larger cobia (anecdotally, those larger than 45-inch fork length from tournaments) have been less common in the last few years. Discussion of a slot limit brought forth questions about release methods for larger fish, which are typically gaffed at the side of the boat. The Florida FWC noted that their management changes for cobia left the size limit alone, and instead reduced the possession limit to one fish per person with a vessel limit of two fish, whichever is less. Staff noted that the biological data available at this time provide little insight into the decline in landings. The Committee requested that any size limit analysis also look at the size frequency of discards going back as far in time as practical, to try and get a better idea of the size range and frequency distribution of the fish with which anglers are interacting.

Staff continued with a review of Action 2, which examines changes to the possession limits for Gulf cobia in the Council's jurisdictional area. Staff added that a vessel limit has been included in the proposed management changes, since the Florida FWC recently changed their possession limit for Gulf cobia caught in state waters.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, in Action 2, to select Alternative 2 and Alternative 3, Option 3a as preferred alternatives.

Alternative 2: Decrease the per person recreational and commercial possession limit for Gulf cobia to one fish per day.

Alternative 3: Create a recreational and commercial daily vessel limit for Gulf cobia. Anglers may not exceed the per person possession limit.

Option 3a: The recreational and commercial daily vessel limit for cobia is two fish.

Motion carried unanimously.

The Council has requested that the SEFSC update catch-per-unit effort indices for Gulf cobia. Staff anticipates that requested information will be available by the next SSC and Council meetings.

Madam Chair, this concludes by report.