

Gulf Fishery News

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*Protecting our marine
resources*

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COVID-19 Impacts on Gulf of Mexico Fisheries: Perspectives from Fishermen

It's probably safe to say that 2020 will be in the history books. Across the country, people were starting to feel the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as early as March with most states enacting some measure of social-distancing protocols shortly thereafter. Along the Gulf of Mexico, this had far-reaching effects for all those involved in fishery-related activities, although the impacts were felt differently among industries, fishing sectors, and individuals. Below are three perspectives from three individuals, each one with insight into how the pandemic impacted the recreational, commercial, and charter fishing industries.

Jay Gardner - Recreational Fisherman

Jay has lived in Corpus Christi, Texas for the last 15 years working as an environmental consultant. He enjoys spending free time fishing and writing a weekly news column called "On the Rocks" about fishing activities and other local events in his area. He has a diverse background in fisheries and environmental-related subjects. As an avid angler, Jay enjoys fishing in the waters near Corpus including the Laguna Madre. He has noticed a difference in recreational fishing in that area since the pandemic began. Many people along the Texas coast, as elsewhere across the country, have been laid-off or furloughed because of the COVID-19 crisis. Individuals with extra time and the means to go fishing have done so, both from boats and shore.



Photo: Sea Grant

Jay also noted increased shark fishing on the beach. As a volunteer with CCA Texas, the Harte Research Institute and Sharkathon, Jay enjoys projects and research focused on marine conservation including tag and release of sharks. During the pandemic, there was an increase in shark fishers targeting and catching more sharks that were coming up to shallow water to pup. Recently, two hammerhead females over 13 feet and two over 10 feet were brought to shore for tag and release. Despite best efforts, some of the tagged sharks that were released were later found dead on one small stretch of the beach.

Overall, the pandemic has put substantial strain on economic infrastructure. States that rely heavily on tourism dollars to fund multiple projects are feeling the pressure. More people may be fishing and spending time on the beach, but they aren't traveling from out-of-state to do so, and due to limitations on occupancy, some local businesses that were able to re-open are still struggling. On a positive note, Jay noticed recently that some of his friends who own a bait shop have seen an increase in business due to the increase in recreational fishing.

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COVID-19 Impacts on Gulf of Mexico Fisheries: Perspectives from Fishermen cont.

The pandemic has allowed for more quality time spent with friends and family, all from a safe distance. Regarding the downstream effects of this pandemic, Jay thinks now that states are starting to reopen, his thoughts are probably similar to many others: much of what happens with fisheries depends on the economy and whether businesses can reopen, people can go back to work and tourists decide to travel again.



Photo: Karen Hoak

Jason Delacruz - Commercial Fisherman

Jason has owned and operated Wild Seafood Company in Madeira Beach, Florida, since 2011. He has been heavily involved in the commercial fishing industry as an owner of spear, rod-and-reel and long-line vessels. Jason is a member of the Shareholders' Alliance and remains active in the seafood community through various activities and community engagements. When discussing the impacts of the pandemic on his business and the commercial industry as a whole, Jason said a significant amount of money was lost because product (fish) being brought off the boats could not be sold.

When the pandemic hit, Jason had multiple boats out fishing that had to be called back into dock. He was able to mitigate some of this loss by modifying his business to work with clients on a more structured schedule to let some of the vessels take shorter trips within a certain timeframe. By increasing communication with the vessels while they were offshore, Jason was aware of which fish were being caught, how much they were catching, and what his clients were willing to buy. Pop-up markets also allowed some commercial fish

houses to meet consumer demand with available product. Within a span of months, Jason noticed the dockside value of fish dropped suddenly. Fortunately, those values are increasing again.

Jason also discussed competition with some large grocery stores. Some stores buy imported seafood, instead of local seafood, because it can be cheaper. This got worse during the pandemic because selling to grocery stores wasn't profitable for the local fish houses. However, there are some stores that continued to remain true to their corporate culture, despite difficulties stemming from the pandemic, by promoting initiatives such as sustainability, avoiding illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) seafood, and purchasing domestic fish.

Even with the easing of restrictions, commercial fishing businesses are operating in modified ways. Jason has sold 100,000 pounds less fish this year compared to previous years. Unfortunately, crew sizes had to be reduced to decrease costs. Additionally, vessel operation costs remain the same regardless of the fluctuation in buyer demand. Jason is concerned about the coming months. School schedules are altered, and families have made lifestyle changes. He wonders if they will opt to eat out more or less, or if they'll purchase seafood to cook at home. In any case, the future is unknown and many in his industry are concerned about how to move forward.

Greg Hebert - Federally Permitted For-Hire Captain

Greg has been captain and owner of Amberjack Charters since 2001. He fishes out of Biloxi, Mississippi, for red snapper, red drum, sharks and other species. Greg is very passionate about the charter fishing industry; it's evident in the way he speaks about his love for fishing and taking others out to enjoy the salt air and sunshine. He said he's learned a lot in the last few months since the pandemic closed schools and businesses. He has always been focused on clientele and that became extremely important during the crisis.

Greg decided to reopen for business on May 1st and was accepting walk-ups, partial groups and clients willing to push back their reservations from previous months. Greg pushed back clients booked for March and April to May and June. He reiterated how thankful he is for his clients because their flexibility and patience have sustained his business through this crisis. Like other businesses, he had to be flexible, communicate more often with customers, and adjust schedules based on reservations and availability. He explained that instead of asking to book trips on a certain day, clients would offer flexibility by giving him two or three days they were able and willing to fish so that he

COVID-19 Impacts on Gulf of Mexico Fisheries: Perspectives from Fishermen cont.

could build trips to satisfy as many clients as possible. Greg accommodated more “walk-up” and “visual” trips than he ever has in previous seasons. Many of these trips occurred simply because he tried to be around the boat as much as possible to greet people and tell them he was available for charter trips.

When asked how he thought other charter boat businesses fared during the pandemic, he said every business is different but he doubts any business is doing great right now. Greg estimated his current business is at 50% of its normal operation and he hopes all charter boats will soon see an improvement in booking trips.

Greg compared the pandemic to previous disasters that have been major setbacks for the charter industry such as the oil spill and hurricanes. COVID-19 is different because it is pervasive and not an event that only impacted a small area or group of people. Because of its seasonality, the charter industry has always had periods of struggle and prosperity. Although uncertainty of the future can be intimidating, Greg is optimistic. He ended the conversation by saying that he’s noticed everybody is ready to get back to work, do what they’re best at, and enjoy some time outdoors. He says there’s no better way to spend time outdoors than being on the water, with friends and family, enjoying the sun, catching plenty of fish.



Photo: Emily Muehlstein

Federal "CARES" Act Funding Update Provided

At the June 2020 Council Meeting, The Department of Commerce provided an update on the Federal Fisheries Assistance Package, which is part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. Funding for Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas will be administered through the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission and funding for Florida will be administered through the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. Commercial, recreational, and for-hire fishery businesses are eligible for assistance if they experienced at least a 35% loss in revenue. Each state is responsible for determining the amount of revenue loss for businesses and for determining spending plans.



Photo: Kathy Hoak

NOAA Fisheries presented the Council with landings data showing a slight decrease in the commercial landings and the price of red snapper, gag, and red grouper since the pandemic started. The decrease in commercial harvest and price were not significantly different from trends from previous years. Recreational data collection programs were interrupted by the pandemic in mid-March, April, and May in most of the Gulf states; thus, landings estimates were not yet available. Pending any additional information, at its August 24-28 meeting, the Council may or may not provide recommendations to modify management to mitigate impacts from COVID-19.



Did You Know?

Federal fishing regulations aren't always easy to figure out. We hope to shed some light on some common misconceptions about **what is and is not allowed** when fishing for federally regulated species. Don't forget, state regulations may differ from federal regulations when you're fishing within state waters for federally regulated species. Please check state saltwater regulations before you go fishing if you are unsure. Download the FishRules App for both state and federal fishing regulations.



Aggregate bag limits

Most anglers are familiar with the definition of a bag limit: the number of a certain species of fish that you, as an individual, are allowed to harvest and possess. Bag limits usually apply to a daily angler limit but may also apply per vessel. Additionally, some species, such as grouper, may not be retained by the captain or crew of a vessel operating as a charter vessel or headboat.

Did you know that not all bag limits apply to one individual fish species? Aggregate bag limits include several species of fish instead of just one. In federal waters of the Gulf, a number of fish are managed by aggregate bag limits; we're aware that these aggregate bag limits tend to cause some confusion. Detailed information about aggregate bag limits can be found on the Gulf Council's website. Here's the link:

<https://gulfcouncil.org/fishing-regulations/aggregate-bag-limits/>. Note, species in aggregate may also have species-specific bag limits.

In some cases, species are managed with aggregate bag limits. Meaning, there is a single bag limit that includes multiple different fish species. Some of the species in the aggregate may also have their own specific bag limit within the aggregate limit.

Note: * indicates that a species has its own bag limit in addition to being part of the aggregate

Snapper Aggregate Bag Limit

10 Fish Per Person Combined Total

gray snapper
[mutton snapper](#) *
yellowtail snapper
cubera snapper
queen snapper
blackfin snapper
wenchman snapper
silk snapper



Reef Fish Aggregate Bag Limit

20 Fish Per Person Combined Total

[vermillion snapper](#) *
lane snapper
[gray triggerfish](#) *
almaco jack
golden tilefish
goldface tilefish
blueline tilefish



The recreational regulations page is also helpful by providing information regarding seasons, bag limits and biological information for all federal managed species in the Gulf of Mexico.

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Did You Know? cont.

On this page, aggregate bag limits are color coded at the far-right side of the species table. Species in aggregate are color coded with the same color (see screenshots): <https://gulfcouncil.org/fishing-regulations/federal/>

	Open year-round			10 snapper combined total
	Open year-round			10 snapper combined total
	Open year-round*	10" TL	10 per person	20 reef fish combined total
	Open year-round	8" TL		20 reef fish combined total
Groupers				
	Closed January – May			4 grouper combined total
	Open June – December*	24" TL	2 per person	
	Open year-round*			4 grouper combined total
	Closed February – March when fishing beyond 20 fathom break	20" TL	2 per person	

Below are a few scenarios to consider as examples of species with aggregate bag limits. Remember fishing seasons and individual or vessel bag limits within the aggregate may also apply.

Fishing for Snapper - 10 Fish Snapper Aggregate Bag Limit

Gray, mutton, yellowtail, cubera, queen, blackfin, wenchman, and silk snapper are all within the 10-fish per person snapper aggregate bag limit. For all of these species, except mutton snapper, this is the only bag limit they are managed under. Each individual is allowed a combined total of 10 fish, meaning you could choose any combination of these snapper species up to 10 fish. For mutton snapper, there is a species-specific bag limit of five fish per angler. You can, therefore, have up to five mutton snapper within the 10-snapper aggregate. So if you have five mutton snapper, you can also have any combination of five of the other snapper within the aggregate.

Red snapper does not fall within the snapper aggregate bag limit in federal waters. However, it does have its own individual bag limit of two fish per person per day. In this case, you can keep your limit of two red snapper in addition to the 10 snappers included in the snapper aggregate.

Vermilion and lane snapper are part of the 20-reef fish aggregate bag limit. So, if you're fishing for snapper, you could keep a total of: two red snapper (assuming the season is open), 10 of the snappers in the snapper aggregate, and a total of 20 vermillion and lane snapper.



Did You Know? cont.

Fishing for Reef Fish - 20 Reef Fish Aggregate Bag Limit

Vermilion snapper, lane snapper, tilefish, gray triggerfish, and almaco jack are all managed under the reef fish aggregate bag limit. Vermilion snapper and gray triggerfish both have additional individual bag limits. Within the reef fish aggregate, no more than one of your fish may be a gray triggerfish and 10 may be vermilion snapper. If you catch your limit of 10 vermilion and one gray triggerfish, that would leave the ability to harvest nine more fish to complete the 20 fish per person combined total. Also, since the other reef fish species, like hogfish and greater amberjack, are not part of the reef fish aggregate, you could retain your bag limit of those species in addition to the 20 reef fish in the aggregate.

Fishing for Grouper - Grouper Aggregate Bag Limit

Gag, red, black, yellowfin, scamp, yellowmouth, yellowedge, snowy, speckled hind, and warsaw grouper are managed under the grouper aggregate bag limit. Gag and red grouper also have individual bag limits and speckled hind and warsaw have a vessel limit. All anglers on the vessel would be able to fish for their individual aggregate bag limit of 4 grouper per person but, only one speckled hind and one warsaw would be allowed on the vessel.

Fishing for Jacks - Individual and 5-fish Aggregate Bag Limits

There is a 5-fish aggregate bag limit for banded rudderfish and lesser amberjack. You may harvest and possess any combination of those two species. Greater amberjack and almaco jack are managed with individual bag limits. Greater amberjack is not part of the 5-fish aggregate and almaco jack is part of the 20-reef fish aggregate, so you would be able to retain one greater amberjack, up to 20 almaco jacks, and a combination of 5 banded rudderfish or lesser amberjack.

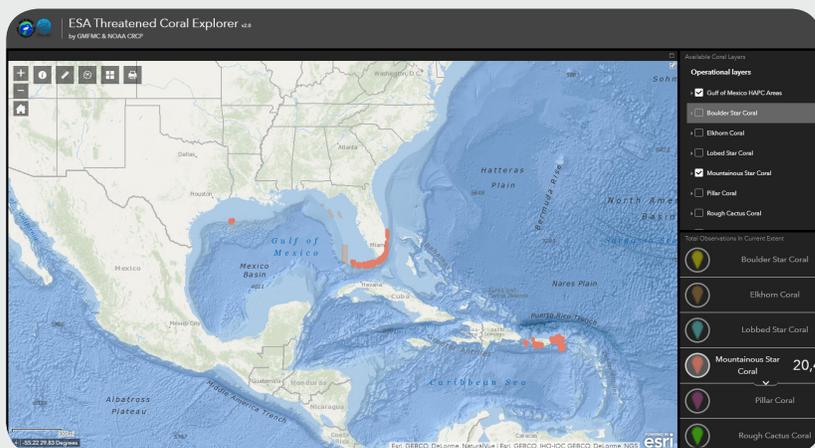
In summary, aggregate bag limits are a bit confusing, but they ultimately allow more freedom in what you catch. They allow you to mix and match your way to a full cooler. If you add up all the fish you can keep: 10 fish from the snapper aggregate, plus 20 fish from the reef fish aggregate, plus four fish from the grouper aggregate, plus five jacks, plus your individual bag limit of red snapper, hogfish, greater amberjack, cobia, Spanish mackerel, and king mackerel (assuming the seasons are open), you would be allowed to have over 40 fish per angler per day.

Web Application Showcases the Distribution of Endangered Corals in the Gulf of Mexico

The Gulf Council has launched a new tool, the *Coral Explorer Tool*, to showcase the distribution of endangered corals in the Gulf of Mexico. “This tool should make it easier for people to access data collected from NOAA field surveys and from other agencies on the distribution of these important coral species in the Gulf,” said Dr. Zeenatul Basher, the Council’s Coral and Habitat Biologist. The tool showcases corals that are designated as ‘threatened’ by the Endangered Species Act.



Photo: Staghorn Coral - NOAA



It includes information on each of the species and allows users to filter data by species and year. The tool also allows users to run spatial analysis, conduct simple measurements, and locate Habitat Areas of Particular concern where fishing and other activities may be limited to protect the corals. The *Coral Explorer Tool* is hosted on the Gulf Council’s Coral Portal at: <https://portal.gulfcouncil.org/ESACoralDB.html>

In the News

States Receive \$3 Million to Improve Recreational Fisheries Data Collection

States along the Atlantic, Gulf, and Pacific coasts have received an additional \$3 million for recreational fisheries data collection. The funding is part of a NOAA Fisheries plan to provide the state support described in the Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act of 2018. Also known as the Modern Fish Act, the legislation calls on NOAA Fisheries to improve recreational fisheries data collection through state-federal partnerships. The agency's Marine Recreational Information Program develops, improves, and implements a network of recreational fishing surveys to estimate total recreational catch, and maintains such partnerships through Regional Implementation Teams. These investment funds will support the highest priorities these teams have documented. They will also advance state specialized survey programs that allow recreational anglers to submit information through electronic technologies.

Funds have been allocated to states through existing agreements with regional fisheries information networks. These networks function as Regional Implementation Teams in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf of Mexico. In the Gulf region the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Information Network will administer \$900,000 to restore sampling levels for the Access Point Angler Intercept Survey in Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi, and LA Creel in Louisiana. It will administer an additional \$300,000 to support the specialized state surveys that allow anglers to electronically report information about their reef fish fishing trips.

The Marine Recreational Information Program and its Regional Implementation Teams will work together to determine how to distribute the funds among the state sampling programs. While recreational fisheries data collection has been impacted by COVID-19—with several states suspending or modifying their shoreside and at-sea sampling programs in accordance with local social distancing guidelines—we anticipate these funds will be applied once in-person data collection has fully resumed. See more information at <https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/feature-story/>

Source: NOAA Fisheries MRIP Newscast, June 4, 2020

Enter Our Summer Fishing Photo Contest!

The Gulf Council is hosting the 2020 "In the Good Ole' Summertime" fishing photography contest! You may enter the contest by submitting photos in one or each of the following categories:

- Reef Fish
- Coastal Migratory Pelagics
- Spiny Lobster
- Coral
- Fishing Boats (on water)
- Charter Groups
- Fishers (individuals in the act of fishing)
- Commercial fishing/fish houses
- Fishing Gear



Entries may include up to three photos per category. **Photos can be submitted until 5:00 PM, EDT on September 8, 2020** . Entries will be judged using a popular vote by Council staff. First, second, and third place winners will be announced in our Fall issue of *Gulf Fishery News* and awarded a prize pack of Gulf Council "schwag."

By submitting a photo, you are agreeing to allow the Council to use it in publications and other communications. Photo credit will be given.

Photos may be emailed to gulfcouncil@gulfcouncil.org, along with your name, address, and phone number. Please add "photo contest" to the subject line of the email.



Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

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John Froeschke Deputy Director

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Deidre Warner-Kramer Designee for David Hogan OES/OMC 202-647-2337	Dave Donaldson GSMFC 228-875-5912

Upcoming Meetings

MRIP State/Federal Calibration Workshop - Hosted by NOAA's Office of Science and Technology	
When: August 5, 2020, 9:30 am-5:00 pm, EDT	Where: Via webinar Register for the webinar
Standing, Reef Fish, Ecosystem, and Socioeconomic SSC	
When: August 11-12, 2020, August 11, 9:00 am - 4:00 pm, EDT - August 12, 9:00 am - 12:00 pm, EDT	Where: Via webinar Register for the webinar
Council Meeting	
When: August 24-28, 2020, 9:00 am - 4:00 pm, EDT	Where: Via webinar Register for the webinar
2020 GMFMC and SAFMC Joint Workgroup Meeting - for Section 102 of the Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act of 2018	
When: September 10, 2020, 9:00 am - 4:00 pm, EDT	Where: Via webinar Register for the webinar
Standing, Reef Fish, Mackerel, Socioeconomic, & Ecosystem SSC	
When: September 14-16, 2020, 9:00 am - 4:30 pm, EDT	Where: Via webinar Register for the webinar



The Gulf Council would like to hear from you! Please contact us regarding fishery questions, comments, or suggestions that you would like to see covered in Gulf Fishery News. Anyone interested in submitting information, such as articles, editorials, or photographs pertaining to fishing or fisheries management, is encouraged to do so. Submissions may be mailed to Emily Muehlstein, Public Information Officer, Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, 4107 W. Spruce Street, Suite 200, Tampa, FL 33607. Materials can also be sent via fax to 813-348-1711, or by e-mail to emily.muehlstein@gulfcouncil.org.

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council is one of eight regional fishery management councils established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. The Council is responsible for the development and modification of fishery management plans (FMPs) that are designed to manage fishery resources in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the Gulf of Mexico from state boundaries to the 200-mile limit.

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