

Mackerel Committee Report April 10, 2024 Mr. Dakus Geeslin – Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab C, No. 1**) and approved the minutes from the October 2023 meeting (**Tab C, No. 2**) as written.

Coastal Migratory Pelagic Landings (Tab C, No. 4)

Mr. Frank Helies (NMFS Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) reviewed the recent coastal migratory pelagic (CMP) landings for the Gulf migratory groups of cobia, king mackerel, and Spanish mackerel. A Committee member inquired about the geographic distribution of cobia landings. Dr. Mike Larkin (SERO) reported that 70% come from Florida's west coast, with 10% from Alabama, 10% from Mississippi, 10% from Louisiana, and 1% from Texas.

CMP Special Engagement Session Summary, (Tab C, No. 5)

Council staff presented the results of the CMP Special Engagement Session that was held with the CMP Advisory Panel (AP). This session was held as a part of the Council's broader CMP Communications Strategy that aims to gather stakeholder feedback on king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia that will shape future Council management considerations for these species. Staff summarized the themes that emerged from the Session, including changes in abundance, location, fishing behavior, and ecological factors influencing each CMP species. The Committee suggested that staff hold Special Engagement Sessions with each AP that has relevant CMP experience. The Committee also suggested that data be gathered on respondents' length of experience in the fishery because it may influence their perception of the stocks. A Committee member asked whether respondents to the CMP communications effort would be continuously engaged as their feedback is considered by scientists and managers. Council staff indicated that they planned to update participants on the effort as management actions are considered and scientific information on the stocks becomes available by sending the results of this effort to those that participated. Staff also plan to encourage respondents to participate in the development of future management actions resulting from the effort.

The Committee then inquired about what science currently exists to ground truth what is being heard from fishermen and whether the science could be influenced by this engagement effort. Numerous studies are tracking CMP species but may not be examining changes in migratory behaviors. Stock assessments for all three CMP species have been completed in recent years and subsequent assessments are scheduled for the coming years.

CMP Advisory Panel Recommendations, (Tab C, No. 6)

Mr. Martin Fisher (CMP AP Chair) summarized the CMP AP meeting. A Committee member questioned Dr. John Walter from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) about the possibility of creating a shark working group. Dr. Walter responded that while it hasn't been established yet, it's an option the SEFSC will consider, potentially in collaboration with the Council. He also mentioned ongoing predation studies. Several Committee members

highlighted the availability of grant programs, like those under NOAA Sea Grant, which support such studies.

Draft Framework Amendment 14: Modifications to Gulf Migratory Group Spanish Mackerel Catch Limits and Accountability Measures (Tab C, No. 6)

Council staff reviewed the document that considers modifying the catch limits and accountability measures for Gulf Spanish mackerel based on the recent SEDAR 81 stock assessment and the Council’s SSC’s revised catch limit recommendations. SEDAR 81 transitioned the recreational catch and effort data to the Marine Recreational Information Program’s Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES), and determined the stock was healthy as of 2021. The SSC recommended an overfishing limit (OFL) of 12.074 million pounds whole weight (mp ww) and an acceptable biological catch (ABC) of 9.63 mp ww. An alternative using the Council’s Annual Catch Limit (ACL)/Annual Catch Target (ACT) Control Rule would result in an ACL of 8.667 mp ww, reduced from the ABC by 10% based on historical landings and fishery performance. Though recent landings have not exceeded the proposed catch limits, the possibility of an overage of the ACL in the future remains.

The Committee discussed Action 1, which would modify catch limits for Spanish mackerel. The Committee noted that Alternative 1 (no action) is not viable and that the action alternatives are a reduction from current allowable harvest limits. The Committee considered Alternative 2 that would set the ACL equal to the ABC at 9.63 mp. Alternative 3 would apply the ACL/ACT control rule and reduce the ACL by 10% relative to Alternative 2. A Committee member expressed support for Alternative 3 given some concerns about recent declines in Spanish mackerel that may not have been captured in the stock assessment. Another Committee member expressed reluctance to support Alternative 3, considering it overly cautious and preferred Alternative 2.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to make **Alternative 2 the preferred Alternative in Action 1.**

Alternative 2: Modify the OFL, ABC, and stock ACL as recommended by the Council’s SSC, for 2025/2026 – 2027/2028 and subsequent fishing years. Retain the stock ACL being set equal to the ABC.

Fishing Year	OFL	ABC	ACL
2025/2026 – 2027/2028 +	12.074	9.630	9.630

Catch limit values are in mp lw. Note: OFL and ABC as recommended by the Gulf Council’s SSC in lbs whole weight (ww). The recreational portion of the OFL, ABC, and ACL are based on MRIP-FES data. For management purposes, landed weight and whole weight are treated synonymously.

Motion carried 11 to 1.

The Committee then reviewed Action 2, which considers modification of the Spanish mackerel Accountability Measures (AM). The intent of this action is to consider an alternative that may provide more flexibility in the management and application of AMs, noting that in-season AMs can be difficult to apply given the timing of, and uncertainty in, the landings data. The Committee discussed the desire to avoid seasonal closures while meeting its conservation responsibilities. The Committee further discussed that seasonal closures may disproportionately affect some regions of the Gulf, given the migratory nature of Spanish mackerel and that a closure would affect both sectors. A Committee member indicated that Alternative 2 would be more manageable than an in-season AM, and beneficial for the fishery by allowing more time to adjust to any planned seasonal closures.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to make **Alternative 2 the preferred Alternative in Action 2.**

Alternative 2: Modify the AM for Gulf Spanish mackerel. If the stock ACL is exceeded in a fishing year, then in the following fishing year, the Regional Administrator will close the fishing season for Gulf Spanish mackerel for the commercial and recreational fishing sectors if the stock ACL is projected to be reached.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Next, the Committee discussed a potential action to reduce the recreational bag limits of Spanish mackerel. The aim of this action would be to reduce the harvest rate and corresponding likelihood of exceeding the catch limit. The Committee also discussed that few anglers likely retain the current 15-fish bag limit. A Committee member recommended a 10-fish bag limit and staff noted that it could be considered as part of a range of reasonable alternatives.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to add an **Action to Framework Amendment 14 looking at bag limits.**

Motion carried with no opposition.

Gulf Migratory Group King Mackerel Management Discussion (Tab C, No. 7)

Dr. Larkin presented historical landings of Gulf migratory group king mackerel (Gulf king mackerel). Council staff summarized the current management status and provided some discussion points for consideration, including changes to catch limits, recreational bag limits, and fishing seasons to improve the management of king mackerel. A Committee member thought reducing the recreational bag limit from 3- to 2-fish per person would likely meet little opposition from the fishing community. Another member concurred, suggesting that such a reduction could also create a perception among fishermen that steps are being taken to replenish the stock. Council staff added that since few anglers catch more than one kingfish per person per trip, a decrease in the bag limit would probably be acceptable but may not have much effect on reducing harvest or the associated fishing mortality.

A Committee member pointed out that lowering the ACL might not be an effective approach if environmental factors are the main cause for the perceived decline in the stock. Others agreed, suggesting that bag limits and seasonal closures could be more effective measures. Further, a Committee member observed that king mackerel tend to fluctuate cyclically and may simply be experiencing such a cyclic downturn. The Committee member also highlighted experience from studies showing a significant presence of juvenile king mackerel in shrimp culls, suggesting this as a potential source of mortality for the stock.

A Committee member then suggested a tiered management system, where certain landing thresholds would trigger adjustments in the catch limit. They noted that while such measures might not have an immediate impact, they aim to ensure the system is flexible enough to adapt to future changes. Another Committee member suggested that the current estimates for discard mortality might be lower than the actual rates. Dr. Walter expressed doubt that this is the primary cause of the stock's decline. He also mentioned the potential presence of hyperstability in the stock, indicating potential zones where fishing mortality exceeds healthy levels for stock sustainability.

The Committee discussed potential spawning closures for king mackerel. The Committee noted that king mackerel spawn in the summer, and the impact of closures would likely affect Texas and Louisiana more than Florida, raising concerns about the fairness of the proposed measures.

Remaining Items from CMP AP Meeting (Tab C, No. 6c)

Mr. Fisher covered all the CMP AP agenda items earlier.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.