

**Mackerel Committee Report
June 26, 2024
Mr. Dakus Geeslin, Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab C, No. 1**) and approved the minutes (**Tab C, No. 2**) of the April 2024 meeting.

Framework 14: Modifications to Spanish Mackerel Catch Limits and Accountability Measures (Tab C, Nos. 4a and b)

Council staff reviewed the document that considers modifying the catch limits and accountability measures for Spanish mackerel based on the recent SEDAR 81 (2023) stock assessment and the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee’s (SSC) recommendations. This stock assessment transitioned the recreational catch and effort data to the Marine Recreational Information Program’s Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) and determined the stock was not overfished or undergoing overfishing. This version of the document included an additional **Action 3** to consider reducing the bag limit for Gulf Spanish Mackerel.

A Committee member noted that, from a biological perspective, there is no need to reduce daily bag limits stating the Spanish mackerel annual catch limit has only been exceeded 3 times in 20 years. Other Committee members agreed, noting the recent decline in Spanish mackerel may be a downturn in a cyclical process, which anecdotal evidence from this year suggests may be trending upwards again.

The committee proposed a motion to consider and reject **Action 3**.

The Committee recommends and I so move: **To move Action 3 to Considered but Rejected.**

Action 3: Modify Gulf Spanish Mackerel Bag Limits

Motion carried with no opposition.

A Committee member questioned the timing of this framework action, noting that Spanish mackerel are a tier 3¹ (medium exposure) species for MRIP-FES and suggested that by going final with the document at the August 2024 meeting the Council would miss valuable feedback on Spanish mackerel from the CMP (Coastal Migratory Species) virtual workshops and potentially the MRIP-FES pilot study.

A Committee member asked Council staff about the timeline for Spanish mackerel virtual meetings and stakeholder engagement, wondering if it would be best to postpone going final with the document until these engagements have been completed and considered. To this point, Council staff replied that these engagements are planned for the fall and will be complete with a summary by January 2025. Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff recommended the Council move forward with taking final action on the document, as there is a requirement under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to reduce catch limits based on the current scientific information from the stock assessment and SSC; thus, waiting for the MRIP-FES pilot study to be completed would not be plausible. A Committee member responded that, while waiting for the

¹ https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/F-7a-Exposure-Analysis10162023_rrr.pdf

MRIP-FES pilot study is likely not tenable, waiting for the stakeholder engagement could be beneficial. A Committee member noted that stakeholder engagements are unlikely to influence **Actions 1 and 2** of the framework amendment, and thus asked what feedback the Committee expects to receive. The Committee member noted that the sentiment regarding Spanish mackerel is dynamic and possibly changing, and for that reason public comment on the current state of Spanish mackerel would be valuable.

A Committee member raised concerns over the use of the terminology “landed weight” in the draft framework amendment and wished to consider its removal from future Spanish mackerel documents, noting it is not used with any species outside of mackerel and there is a need for consistent terminology. Council staff recalled that the rationale for using landed weight was that some mackerel are landed whole, others are landed gutted, and there is no conversion. Council staff said this was discussed by the Interdisciplinary Planning Team and SERO was disinclined to change this due to existing regulatory language and potential inconsistency with the South Atlantic Council. The Committee asked the South Atlantic Council liaison if they have considered these issues, to which he replied they have not. The Committee chair pointed out that these issues are not relevant to the management issues currently being considered and suggested moving on. A Committee member agreed and noted that the virtual meetings could be a good time to explore this issue.

King Mackerel Management Measures Draft Options (Tab C, No. 5)

Council staff reviewed draft options to consider modifications to king mackerel management measures in response to public concern about the stock abundance and an observed recent decline in landings. The cause of these declines appears to be caused due to environmental influences rather than fishing mortality. As a result, the Committee expressed concern that reducing catch levels may result in seasonal closures reflecting an improvement in stock health rather than exhibiting an unsustainable fishing level.

The Committee discussed the fishing dynamics of the commercial sector. Southeast Fisheries Science Center staff commented that king mackerel appear to demonstrate stability in catches despite population declines as king mackerel seasonally aggregate in core areas in the southern Gulf. A Committee member responded that, while the southern gillnet zone has landed much of its allotted quota in recent years, it has taken substantially longer to do so.

A Committee member suggested that the conventional management measures presented may not be the most appropriate approaches to address the concerns for this stock. Instead, he proposed exploring provisions within the post-season accountability measures to allow for dynamic processes in the fishery to be reflected in the management measures. Council staff also recommended considering changes to the number of permitted vessels prosecuting the fishery, as well as the catch-per-unit-effort by gear and fishing zone over time, to assess any future management decisions. The Committee requested staff explore some of these other options and provide a presentation to the Committee at the August 2024 meeting.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.