

**Mackerel Committee Report
January 25, 2021
Mr. Riechers – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab C, No. 1**) as amended to include a discussion about the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) king mackerel commercial Southern Gillnet Zone, and approved the minutes (**Tab C, No. 2**) of the October 2020 meeting as written.

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

Mr. Peter Hood of the NMFS Southeast Regional Office (SERO) reviewed the recent landings for the Gulf migratory groups of king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, and cobia, with a disclaimer noting the difficulty of capturing recreational data due to sampling limitations during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of data retrieval, preliminary landings for commercial Gulf king mackerel indicate that 48.4% of the ACL has been landed for the fishing year 2020-2021. Although some data remain outstanding, the ACLs for all Gulf CMP species were not exceeded during the 2019/2020 fishing year.

Draft Document: Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendment 32 (Tab C, No. 5)

Council staff presented Chapters 1 and 2 for Draft CMP Amendment 32, which includes actions to modify catch limits, possession limits, size limits, and language to the CMP Framework Procedure. The Gulf cobia stock is a single stock that includes both the Gulf Zone and the Florida East Coast Zone (FLEC) on the east coast of Florida. The results from the SEDAR 28 update stock assessment indicated that the Gulf cobia stock is undergoing overfishing, but is not overfished.

Action 1 would modify the Gulf cobia stock (i.e., combined Gulf and FLEC Zones) catch limits and transition to monitoring the annual catch limit (ACL) using the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES). The Committee did not modify the alternatives included in this action, but had questions regarding modifying catch limits as constant catch. The option to calculate constant catch by averaging the 2021 – 2023 catch limits was discussed but is not a viable option because it would exceed the acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendation from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) in the first year of the projections.

Action 2 would modify the apportionment between the Gulf and FLEC Zones to update each zone's ACL based on the selected Gulf cobia stock ACL Action 1. Currently, the Gulf cobia stock ACL is divided as: 64% Gulf Zone and 36% FLEC Zone. The Gulf Zone manages its ACL without sector allocations, while the FLEC Zone has sector allocations (i.e., 92% recreational, 8% commercial). The alternatives included in this action recalculated the possible apportionment between the Gulf and FLEC zones based on recent landings data and incorporate the transition to MRIP-FES. The Committee noted the small resulting change in percent apportionment reflected in the calculations. Alternatives 3 – 5 would modify the apportionment to the FLEC as: 37%, 38%, and 41% respectively.

Tab C

Action 3 would update or establish annual catch targets (ACT) for the Gulf and the FLEC Zones based on the apportionment selected in Action 2. CMP Amendment 18 established the Gulf Zone cobia ACT to equal 90% of the zone's ACL, which was based on the Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule. The FLEC Zone only has an ACT established for the recreational sector, which is calculated as the $ACL * [(1 - \text{Proportional Standard Error (PSE) of the FLEC Zone recreational landings}) \text{ or } 0.5, \text{ whichever is greater}]$. The FLEC Zone recreational ACT currently equals 83% of the FLEC Zone ACL, reflecting a proportional standard error estimate of 17% using MRIP's former Coastal Household Telephone Survey; this PSE estimate is expected to be higher using MRIP-FES data (see Action 1), reflecting less estimated precision in the latter data currency. Alternative 2 would update the calculation of the Gulf Zone ACT and FLEC Zone recreational ACT to be calculated using the Gulf Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule. Alternative 3 provides an option to establish an ACT for the FLEC Zone commercial sector.

Action 4 would modify the Gulf cobia possession limit and/or establish vessel/trip limits. The alternatives included in this action seek to reduce fishing mortality on Gulf cobia and constrain harvest to the ACL. Landings data from 2017 – 2019 report that the majority of both commercial and recreational trips for both zones harvested less than one cobia per person. Thus, the preliminary predicted reductions in harvest resulting from this action are low. The Committee discussed having similar bag limits and vessel limits to those enforced by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which would be expected to streamline enforcement and reduce the burden of compliance on fishermen. Given the incidental nature of the fishery, the Committee suggested removing the commercial sector from consideration in this action, but did not modify the alternatives.

Action 5 would modify the Gulf cobia minimum size limit. The Committee was reminded that Framework Amendment 7 increased the minimum size limit from 33-inch fork length (FL) to 36-inch for cobia landed in the Gulf Zone. The FLEC Zone retained the 33-inch FL size limit. This action took effect on March 2020, the reduction in fishing mortality associated with the increased minimum size limit is not being captured by the update stock assessment nor the available data (i.e., 2017 – 2019) used for the analyses included in this action. Alternative 2 would increase the minimum size limit in the FLEC Zone to be equal to the Gulf Zone. Alternatives 2 – 4 are expected to reduce fishing mortality as anglers would be expected to release cobia that would otherwise be retained. Cobia that are released after capture are assumed to have a 5% discard mortality rate. Concern remains regarding the discards of undersized cobia, especially to those brought onboard by a gaff. Alternatives 3 and 4 indirectly drive fishing efforts to target larger cobia, which are more likely to be female as length increases. Directly targeting larger cobia could result in a negative effect on the spawning stock biomass (SSB) by removing disproportionately more females from the SSB. The Committee asked about the reasoning behind the FLEC Zone not increasing the minimum size limit at the same time the action was being taken for the Gulf Zone. Action in Framework Amendment 7 was taken as a precaution to reduce fishing mortality, while the stock assessment was underway although a similar action was not enacted in the FLEC Zone during this period.

Action 6 would modify the language outlining the responsibilities of the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils for the joint management of CMP species through the FMP's Framework Procedure. The Framework Procedure lists the regulatory changes that can be addressed via framework.

Alternative 2 would modify the language pertaining to the responsibilities of each Council. The CMP Framework Procedure lists the South Atlantic Council as responsible of establishing vessel trip limits, closed season or areas, and gear restrictions for the east coast of Florida including the Atlantic side of the Florida Keys (i.e., FLEC Zone). Discussion included in previous CMP amendments implied that the South Atlantic Council had the authority to make management changes that would affect its portion of the Gulf cobia stock (i.e., FLEC Zone). However, the current CMP Framework Procedure language is not consistent with this statement, especially as it relates to the management of Gulf cobia in the FLEC Zone. The changes to the language included in Alternative 2 would clarify that the South Atlantic Council does not make management changes that would affect the entire migratory group throughout its range, such as modifying catch limits, zone boundaries and apportionment. The Committee discussed taking a deeper look at the CMP Framework Procedure and will continue discussions during Full Council.

Gulf of Mexico King Mackerel Presentation (Tab C., No. 6)

Council staff summarized the recent changes in the management of Gulf king mackerel, the results from the SEDAR 38 Update stock assessment (2020), and public comments received during previous Council meetings related to sector allocations and minimum size limits. The Committee discussed moving forward with updating catch limits based on the SSC's recommendations. In addition, the Committee would like to move forward with looking into sector allocations for Gulf king mackerel, acknowledging that updating catch limits to incorporate MRIP-FES would result in a *de facto* increase to the commercial quota. Similarly, the Committee would like to examine size-specific discard mortality of released undersized fish. Although the transition to MRIP-FES results in a near doubling in the recreational landings, the Committee asked why this increase was not as high as what is being reported for other species that have also been transitioned to the MRIP-FES data currency. Council staff responded that calculations of recreational fishing effort is estimated to have increased as a result of using MRIP-FES, but this trend could be a result of king mackerel being managed closer to F/F_{MSY} , and also may be related to periodic fluctuations in recruitment.

Other Business: Gulf of Mexico King Mackerel Commercial Gillnet Discussion

Mr. Sanchez spoke on behalf of the Florida Keys Commercial Fisherman's Association (FKCFA), asking the Council to explore the opportunity to create an Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) for the Gulf king mackerel commercial Southern Gillnet Zone. This request comes as a result of economic challenges from the latest fishing season. The FKCFA expects this measure would address issues related to market price and timing related to overlap between fishing seasons for multiple species commercially targeted in the Florida Keys. The FKCFA plans to write a white paper regarding this topic and expects to share it with the Council. The Committee expressed interest in seeing the white paper.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.