



**Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council comments for the May 2011
Council Coordinating Committee meeting in Charleston, South Carolina**

Annual catch limits

The Gulf Council is (by May 2011) in the process of conducting public hearings on its Generic Annual Catch Limit/Accountability Measures Amendment, which will establish annual catch limits and targets for those stocks still in need of them - except for stocks jointly managed with the South Atlantic Council. For the joint stocks (i.e., spiny lobster, king mackerel), progress is proceeding slowly.

Development of the generic Annual Catch Limit and Accountability Measures document has illuminated several areas that affect our ability to set catch limits at optimum yield. This requirement in the Magnuson-Stevens Act presupposes that there are mechanisms in place to track annual catches. Problematic for many species is that available catch records are either insufficient or unreliable. This may be due to low management priority in the past, challenges in identification, and/or problems with estimation procedures. Additionally, catches may be influenced by many factors other than stock status, thus further complicating our ability to set catch limits at optimum yield for maximum benefit of stakeholders. Moving forward, enhanced data streams to track population status (e.g., Gulf-wide, fisheries-independent surveys) would aid in setting accurate harvest levels

Ending overfishing

The Gulf Council has taken steps to end overfishing on all stocks designated as undergoing overfishing (red snapper, greater amberjack, gray triggerfish and gag), but with mixed results.

1. For red snapper, overfishing has ended.
2. For greater amberjack, a recent stock assessment indicates that the current management measures have not been effective in ending overfishing. The Gulf Council is in the process of preparing a regulatory amendment to further reduce fishing mortality.
3. For gray triggerfish, a rebuilding plan to end overfishing and rebuild the stock was implemented in 2008. An update assessment to evaluate the status of the gray triggerfish stock will be conducted in 2012.

4. Gag was just recently declared to be undergoing overfishing. An interim rule to end overfishing in 2011 is in the process of being implemented, and Reef Fish Amendment 32, which will continue to end overfishing and rebuild the stock starting in 2012, is currently undergoing public hearing.

Similar to problems with annual catch limits, ending overfishing requires efficient mechanisms for tracking stock status. Given the number of additional stocks that will require monitoring, however, it will be unrealistic to rely solely on species-specific stock assessments to determine status with respect to overfishing. One potential solution is to consider species groupings (i.e., clusters) based on similar life history and fishery attributes in the management process.

Status of rebuilding plans

1. Red snapper is recovering and appears to be on schedule for rebuilding by 2032
2. Greater amberjack is not recovering as expected, and is in danger of not meeting its rebuilding target date of 2012. The projections produced by the latest update assessment were not accepted by the Scientific and Statistical Committee, thus the current status of the greater amberjack rebuilding plan is unknown.
3. The status of the gray triggerfish rebuilding plan will not be known until the 2012 update assessment has been conducted.
4. A rebuilding plan for gag is in the process of being developed. Although ten years is allowed for the rebuilding plan, the Gulf Council is following a rebuilding strategy that is projected to rebuild the stock in seven years to increase the probability of the plan's success.

Rebuilding plans are affected by our ability to diagnose stock status and reliably set management targets. This is problematic when management targets change over the course of the rebuilding plan (e.g., greater amberjack).

Catch shares

Catch shares, as a concept, needs more public outreach and education. Catch shares are misunderstood by many stakeholders. Moreover, the public perception currently is that catch shares are bad and that the NOAA Fisheries Service is advocating their adoption. Consequently, the Councils are viewed as having an agenda to establish catch shares. The utility of catch shares in contributing to sustainable harvests needs further investigation and some critics (e.g., Pauly et al. 2002) argue that catch shares do not prevent overcapitalization of the resource as intended.

Problems/concerns/other issues

After Annual Catch Limits and Accountability Measures are implemented, improvements will be needed in the monitoring programs currently employed. If the Gulf Council is expected to meet these guidelines and demands for establishing in-season and post-season accountability measures, significantly more effort is required from NOAA via the Fisheries Service. As a point

of reference, the New England Council has very different monitoring programs than the Gulf Council. While the New England Council has nearly 100% observer coverage for its commercial fleet, the Gulf Council has only about 1-2% observer coverage of its commercial fleet. MRIP continues to be developed and implemented to improve recreational catch and effort data, meanwhile, there has been support in the Gulf of Mexico to establish pilot programs (e.g., days as sea) for charter-for-hire and headboat operators. As potential solutions to improve catch estimates from recreational fisheries, additional pilot programs should be explored and evaluated. Ideally, such programs may eventually improve resource access by recreational fishers. In the near future, the lack of data timeliness will continue to be seen as the cause of our inability to appropriately respond with appropriate Accountability Measures to avoid overages.

Question: What is NOAA's plan to improve these data monitoring programs so that the regional Councils can monitor their annual catch limits and annual catch targets and implement accountability measures in a timely manner?

Additional challenges specific for the Gulf include understanding long-term effects of the Deepwater Horizon spill on fisheries and its potential impacts on human health. Often, the most severe effects are indirect and require many years or decades to be realized. Thus far, potential mortality (immediate or loss of larvae) have not been included in any management decisions. Recent additional support from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center through SEDAR will enhance the Gulf Council's ability to integrate data being gathered into the stock assessment process

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