

# Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council<sup>1</sup>

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## Management Update – March 2005

### **Ecosystem Management**

The Gulf Council's approach to an ecosystem approach to management is to work collaboratively with its Ecosystem SSC and with the public to evolve from the current species-based approach by building upon its Essential Fish Habitat amendment and those elements of its current fishery management plans that encompass ecosystem aspects of fishery management.

The Gulf Council recently formed an Ecosystem SSC, composed of government, university and private scientists who are knowledgeable about fisheries ecology. The Council is working with NOAA Fisheries and the other east coast Councils to develop a socioeconomic survey instrument and to develop ecosystem-based decision support tools. Later in 2005, the Council is planning to hold a series of facilitated workshops to involve the public in the development of an ecosystem approach to management, and to solicit public input as to what such an approach should include.

The Council's five-year budget provides for development of one Fisheries Ecosystem Plan (FEP) for the ecosystem made up by the West Florida shelf. This area is characterized by a very broad shelf (250 km) with extensive hard bottom area populated by emergent flora and fauna. The grouper fishery complex makes up the dominant part of the finfish biomass. This fishery complex had been managed as an ecosystem in the past. The development of the FEP is expected take three years. Under the same budget, the Council proposes to initiate work on a FEP for the Florida Coral Reef Tract that is also anticipated to take three years to complete.

### **New IFQs & Rights-Based Limited Access Programs**

The Gulf Council began developing limited access programs for its commercial fisheries beginning in the early 1990's. These initially took a temporary form of a moratorium on issuance of additional permits and by allowing the permits to be transferable between persons. These temporary systems were applied to all the commercial vessels harvesting reef fish and king mackerel. The State of Florida, and Gulf and South Atlantic Councils established a permanent trap limitation program for spiny lobster (1992) and subsequently (2002) for stone crabs.

In 2005 the Council established permanent license limitation programs for commercial vessels in the reef fish fishery and, jointly with the SAFMC, for commercial vessels in the king mackerel fishery. The Gulf Council (in 2002) had established a moratorium on the issuance of any additional permits for charter vessels and headboats in the Gulf EEZ fisheries for reef fish and coastal migratory pelagic fisheries. This capped the number of vessels at approximately 1,600. In 2005, the Council is working on a permanent limited access program which allows additional vessel owners the opportunity to demonstrate their vessel meets the eligibility criteria. The Council will take final action on this amendment in July 2005. The Council has also developed a shrimp amendment/EIS that establishes a moratorium on the issuance of

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additional shrimp permits, and allows transfer of permits between persons. This program essentially will cap the number of vessels at approximately 2,800, which is about 500 less than previously estimated by NMFS to be operating in the Gulf EEZ fishery.

The Gulf Council will complete an IFQ program for the commercial red snapper fishery in 2005. Approximately 600 fishermen would meet the qualifications for initial eligibility. The program will likely alleviate most problems associated with the current derby fishery which results because the entire annual quota is currently taken in about 77 days. Hopefully this will result in a higher ex-vessel value paid to the fishermen. The Council has instructed staff to develop an IFQ for the grouper fishery during 2006.

The Gulf reef fish industry has gained Congressional funding for a buy-back program to remove vessels from the bottom longline fishery for grouper. The industry anticipates this program will be implemented by Congressional action, rather than by NOAA and the Council. Buying these vessels should benefit all commercial grouper fishermen and result in the fishery remaining open all year each year.

## **Improved Scientific Review**

The Gulf Council has always used its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) for its final peer-review of all scientific information and analyses used by the Council. The SSC was structured for this purpose by having a 14-member standing committee with the following expertise: population dynamics (3), biology (3), economics (3), anthropology (3), marine law (1), and state fishery regulation (1). This standing committee meets with a special SSC for each fishery consisting of 3 to 5 members, particularly knowledgeable of that fishery.

Beginning in 2002, the NMFS Southeast Fishery Science Center (SEFSC) and the Southeast Councils (GMFMC, SAFMC, CFMC) adopted an improved process for developing peer-reviewed stock assessments, called SEDAR (for Southeast Data, Assessment and Review). The SEDAR process not only results in a peer-reviewed stock assessment, but it also provides greater opportunity for the user-groups and public to participate in the stock assessment process.

The SEDAR process involves holding the following public workshops: Data where the scientists, fishers and public participate in submitting and evaluating the data that will be used for the stock assessment; Assessment where the scientists, fishers and public are involved with completing and evaluating the stock assessment for a stock; and Review where independent scientists, fishers and public participate in evaluating the stock assessment and certifying that it is based on the best available scientific data.

In 2003, the three Southeast Councils and NMFS began jointly drafting the FMP amendments and NEPA documents under the NMFS “streamlining process”. Under this process interdisciplinary project teams (IPTs) were formed of persons from each of the NMFS divisions, NOAA general counsel and Council staff (Typically 12 to 16 persons). The intent of the streamlining process was to produce more legally defensible amendments and EIS documents. This goal was achieved partly by more intensive review of and dependence on better scientific information.

## **Stock Rebuilding Progress**

By 2004 the Gulf Council completed rebuilding programs for all the Gulf stocks that were classified as overfished. In the 1988-1993 period the Council implemented rules prohibiting harvest or possession from the Gulf EEZ of red drum, goliath grouper, and Nassau grouper. These prohibitions remain in place. Harvest of red drum occurs only in the state jurisdictions and each of the states implemented rules that allow at least 30 percent of each year class (cohort) to escape from the state estuarine waters to the offshore spawning stock.

The harvest prohibition is resulting in good progress in restoring the goliath grouper stock which is being evaluated by NMFS biennially. Nassau grouper are a Pan-Caribbean stock that rarely occurs in the Gulf and only in the Florida coral reef tract. The GMFMC, SAFMC, CFMC, and state of Florida all prohibit harvest and possession, and many Caribbean island nations are implementing rules to restore Nassau grouper.

In 2004 the Council implemented amendments for rebuilding Gulf stocks of red grouper, red snapper, and vermilion snapper by applying fishery restrictions to recreational and commercial fisheries for those stocks. Rebuilding is anticipated to be completed within 10 years for red grouper and vermilion snapper; and within 30 years for red snapper, which is a long-lived stock with some fish living more than 50 years.

The Council implemented a rebuilding program for greater amberjack in 2002 by reducing the recreational bag limit from 3 fish to 1 fish and closing the commercial fishery for 3 months. In January 2005 NMFS notified the Council that overfishing was occurring for that stock. The Council and NMFS implemented additional restrictions by emergency interim rule. The Council is developing a regulatory amendment to make that rule permanent.

## **New MPA's and Coral Protection**

The Gulf Council has routinely used marine protected areas (MPAs) to manage its fisheries by regulating use of fishing gear. Each of the Gulf states also has extensive areas (MPAs) where certain gear is prohibited either temporarily or permanently.

The Gulf Council has two MPAs that include portions of the nearshore waters across the Gulf from the Florida Keys to the Mexican border. The "Stressed Area" where fish traps, rock-hopper trawls, and powerheads are prohibited lies inshore of the "Longline and Buoy Gear Prohibition Area," which encompasses more than 70,000 square nautical miles. Gulf MPAs also include shrimp nursery areas off Texas and Florida, 2 extensive zones regulating shrimp and stone crab gear, 2 habitat areas of particular concern (HAPCs), and 4 marine reserves where fishing or bottom fishing is prohibited. These additional MPAs total more than 14,000 square nautical miles of ocean.

The Council through its Generic Amendment (3) for Essential Fish Habitat (EFH), approved in January 2005, is implementing new HAPCs with several coral reef areas protected from gear interfacing with the bottom. Off Florida, the Council is creating an approximately 100 nm<sup>2</sup> area of coral reef within the HAPC on Pulley's Ridge (see figure). This is the northernmost and deepest pristine area with hermatypic coral characteristic of the Caribbean Sea. Its proximity to the Loop Current results in the water being clear enough to allow sunlight to penetrate to those deeper depths (240 feet) and support the algae components of the reef complex. It is certainly a unique area. The HAPC will encompass about 2,300 square nautical miles with bottom impacting gear being prohibited on approximately 104 square nautical miles therein.

Off the Texas/Louisiana shelf the amendment established HAPCs for 13 reefs and banks, and identified McGrail Bank and the East and West Flower Garden Banks as having living coral reefs, and Stetson Bank as having significant coral resources, making all of these areas worthy of protection from anchoring and bottom-tending fishing gears (see figures). These areas contain unique coral and hard bottom resources including deep-water pinnacles along the shelf edge that extend well above the bottom. They are the northern-most extent of coral reefs in the Gulf of Mexico. The other nine reefs and banks depicted in the figure do not have coral reefs.

(The figures referenced in this document are available in the conference briefing books.)