

Cobia Management

- Prior to 2012, cobia was jointly managed by the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils as a single stock throughout both jurisdictions. There were no Annual Catch Limits (quotas) or commercial/recreational sector allocations. Amendment 18 to the Coastal Migratory Pelagics FMP modified this (approved in Sept. 2011, regulations effective Jan. 2012)
 - Cobia was separated into two stocks at the Gulf and South Atlantic Council's jurisdictional boundary (west of the FL Keys). The Atlantic stock range was the east coast of FL through NY.
 - Annual Catch Limits were established for both Gulf and Atlantic stocks as required by the 2006 reauthorization of the federal Magnuson Stevens Act. The total Annual Catch Limit (commercial + recreational) was set at 1,571,399 pounds whole weight.
 - Commercial and recreational sector allocations were established for the Atlantic stock Annual Catch Limit (92% recreational = 1,445,687 pounds whole weight; 8% commercial = 125,712 pounds whole weight).
- The 2013 stock assessment modified the Atlantic/Gulf stock boundary from the jurisdictional boundary between the councils to the GA/FL state line based on genetic analysis (the transition zone was between Cape Canaveral, FL and GA; for ease of management the GA/FL boundary was selected).
- Modifications to the stock boundary and Annual Catch Limits from the 2013 assessment became effective in March 2015 through Coastal Migratory Pelagics Amendment 20B.
 - The total Annual Catch Limit (commercial + recreational) for 2015 was set at 690,000 pounds whole weight.
- The recreational Annual Catch Limit for 2015 was 630,000 pounds; preliminary estimates of harvest through the end of 2015 are 1.54 million pounds.
 - VA caught the majority of that harvest (~862,000 lbs) followed by NC (~676,000 lbs)
 - This is primarily a Wave 3 (May/June) fishery; VA does have significant harvest in Wave 4 (July/Aug) and caught the majority of fish in Wave 4 in 2015.

Accountability Measures

- Accountability measures are regulations meant to ensure that Annual Catch Limits are not exceeded, and are required under the federal Magnuson Stevens Act.
- The recreational accountability measures for cobia do not include an in-season closure if the Annual Catch Limit is met or projected to be met.
- The recreational accountability measures also specify use of a three-year running average to determine if the recreational has been exceeded except that:
 - The initial year "re-sets" when the Annual Catch Limit is updated. Because the Annual Catch Limit for cobia was changed in 2015, *only* 2015 recreational landings are compared to the 2015 Annual Catch Limit.
 - For 2016, the average of 2015-2016 will be compared to 2016 Annual Catch Limit; for 2017, the average of 2015-2017 will be used and a moving 3-year average after that until the next stock assessment updates the Annual Catch Limit.
- If the total (commercial + recreational) Annual Catch Limit has been exceeded, the accountability measures require the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to reduce the length of the recreational season in the following year by an amount that will constrain harvest to the ACL for that year.
 - NMFS can also readjust this season length if available harvest data during the year indicates the recreational has not been met.
 - If the total Annual Catch Limit is exceeded AND the stock is overfished, the Annual Catch Limit for the appropriate sector will be reduced in the following year; the 2013 stock assessment indicated Atlantic cobia is not overfished and overfishing was not occurring, so there will be no reduction in the recreational Annual Catch Limit for 2016 (620,000 pounds).

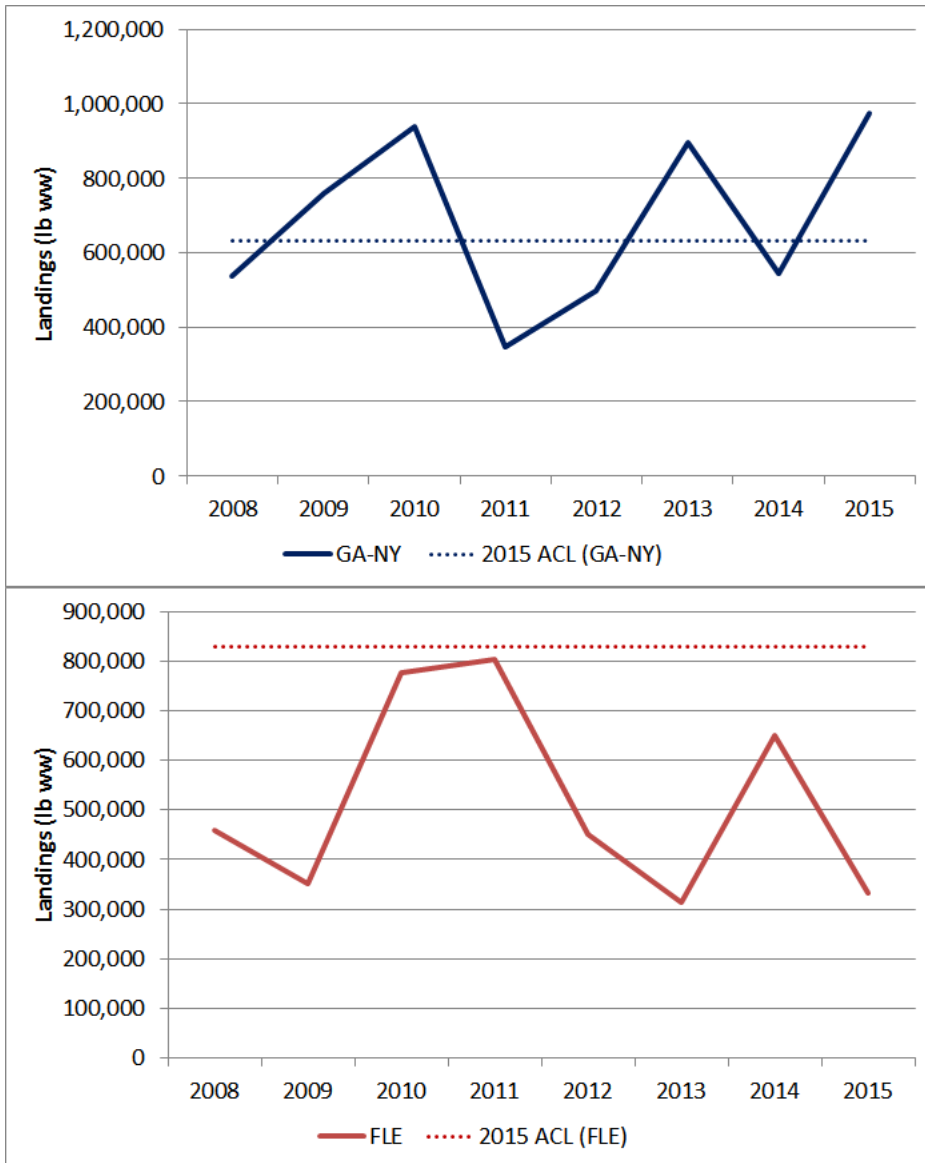
- NMFS is conducting an analysis to determine the length of the 2016 season based on 2014 and 2015 harvest rates, and should be publishing a Fishery Bulletin in the next couple of weeks.

Management measures

- The South Atlantic Council discussed the issue of 2015 recreational cobia harvest and impacts to the 2016 season at its December 2015 meeting in Atlantic Beach, and the certainty of a shortened season for cobia given the amount of the harvest overage in 2015.
- SC has legislation moving forward to drop to a 1-fish limit in state waters for a portion of their range (south of Edisto Island)
- FL and VA have had 1-fish/person limits in state waters for years. There are no regulations in MD state waters. NJ and NY have 2-fish limits and sporadic catch. GA is checking into the ability to reduce limits in state waters to 1 fish.
- The SAFMC will be seeing an options paper in March with alternatives to reduce the bag limit to 1 fish in federal waters, establish a vessel limit, etc. on the recreational side, but due to the length of the regulatory process, any action taken is unlikely to have a measurable impact on harvest in 2016.
- The Interjurisdictional FMP allows for the MFC to implement via proclamation regulatory changes that are approved by the councils/commission prior to the effective date.
 - The MFC may want to consider implementing a 1 fish/person recreational bag limit beginning March 1 to aid in maximizing season length.
 - All harvest in state waters is counted against the federal Annual Catch Limit.
 - Complementing the federal revisions to the length of the recreational season in state waters in 2016 will maximize the length of future harvest seasons.

Additional Information

- Had the stock boundary change occurred in previous years, the graphs below show that the GA-NY recreational harvest has fluctuated above and below the 2015 Annual Catch Limit; FL recreational harvest has been consistently below the FL 2015 Annual Catch Limit.
- The results of the 2013 stock assessment showed a consistent decline in spawning biomass (the poundage of fish able to contribute to the next generation) beginning in the late 1990's/early 2000's through the last year of data in the stock assessment.



Top panel: Recreational landings (in pounds whole weight) from GA-NY for the years 2008- Sept.2015 (solid line) vs. 2015 Annual Catch Limit (dotted line).

Bottom panel: Recreational landings from FL east coast (pounds whole weight) for the years 2008-Sept. 2015 (solid line) vs. 2015 Annual Catch Limit