



Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

Managing Fishery Resources in the U.S. Federal Waters of the Gulf of Mexico

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April 21, 2016

Karen Abrams,
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East West Highway
SSMC3-OSF-SF3
Silver Spring, MD 20910

006539 APR 20 16

Dear Ms. Abrams,

During its April 4-7, 2016, meeting in Austin, Texas, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council) received a NMFS-SERO presentation on the draft proposed rule for Standardized Bycatch Reporting Methodology (SBRM). The Council appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the following items:

SBRM Review Timeline

Overall, the Council supports the timeline in the proposed rule that allows 5 years for the adoption of SBRM that are consistent with the rule and appreciates the flexibility for reviewing and documenting SBRM in the various fishery management plans (FMPs). However, after the initial reviews are completed, the proposed rule states that SBRMs should be reviewed at least every 5 years thereafter. The Council and its staff will attempt to continue these reviews on 5-year cycles, but this will likely require additional Council and staff time, on top of an already growing list of regulatory program reviews, such as Essential Fish Habitat and limited access programs. In the Gulf, these additional reviews include the charter for-hire permit moratorium and commercial individual fishing quota (IFQ) programs.

Required factors for establishing or reviewing a SRBM:

The Council supports the proposed data quality and characteristics of bycatch, including the additional factors outlined in the rule: amount of bycatch occurring in the fishery, if known, importance of bycatch for estimating total mortality of fish stocks, the importance of bycatch to related ecosystems, economic impacts to the fishery, and data collection methods for collecting and reporting bycatch in the various FMPs. The Council understands and supports the concept of this proposed rule that requires each SBRM be designed in consideration of available funding, and the Council will consider funding and feasibility when reviewing implemented SBRMs.

Adaptable Implementation of SBRM:

The Council supports the items outlined in the adaptable implementation of SBRM, such as changes in frequency of data collection and reporting through FMPs. The Council is always looking at ways to increase and improve methodologies for data collection practices including information about bycatch. It should be noted the Council is currently working on an amendment that aims to require electronic reporting for all for-hire vessels in the Gulf of Mexico. This could greatly improve the quality of bycatch estimates, even if the data is self-reported.

Review of SBRM:

The first step outlined in the proposed rule is for the Council to conduct a review of its existing SBRM, and the Council is in agreement with the timeline of this initial review. The proposed rule states, "FMPs may describe procedures or activities that comprise an SBRM but do not explain them in a manner consistent with this rule. In such cases, an FMP amendment may be warranted." Although the Council does not have a discrete SBRM, bycatch reporting methodologies have been established and described in various plan amendments or in SEDAR documents. The proposed rule allows the flexibility of incorporating by reference, but some FMPs may require development of a generic amendment to explain why the methodology is appropriate for the fishery. Thus, additional staff time and resources would be required in the initial review. Recognizing the additional workload on the initial review and documentation of SBRM, the Council feels this is a reasonable approach and timeline to fulfill these requirements. However, after completing the initial review of SBRMs, there is an additional burden of conducting reviews at least once every 5 years thereafter, requiring further Council and staff time on top of an already growing list of regulatory program reviews. Therefore, the Council proposes to extend the subsequent SBRM review time period to 10 years after the initial review of SBRMs or on an as needed basis.

We appreciate this opportunity to comment on the SBRMs proposed rule and look forward to your modifications to the final rule based the Regional Management Councils' input.

Sincerely,


Kevin Anson
Council Chair

c. Gulf Council
Council staff