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Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council manages fisheries in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico for reef fish, coastal pelagic species, spiny lobster, stone crab, corals, red drum, and shrimp. The commercial shrimp fishery, in particular, is one of the nation's largest and most valuable fisheries with thousands of people employed in the fishery. In addition to managing traditional fisheries, the Council recently developed and submitted a fishery management plan to regulate offshore aquaculture in the region. The Gulf region includes federal waters off the coasts of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and western Florida.

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Opportunities & Challenges



Balancing Social and Economic Goals

Commercial and recreational fisheries are very important in the Gulf region. In 2006, for example, commercial fishermen landed 1.3 billion pounds of fish, from which \$674 million was paid to fishermen. In the same year, 6.2 million recreational anglers made 23.9 million fishing trips. Fish and fisheries are important to the economic and social health and well-being of many communities in the region. The Council is challenged with balancing these competing uses of marine resources with varying social and economic goals, while at the same time providing for sustainable fisheries. To address these challenges, the Council thoroughly assesses potential costs and benefits of proposed management changes to fishermen and fishing communities before making a final decision.

Protecting Sensitive Habitat

The Gulf Council has used marine protected areas as an important tool for the conservation and management of the region's resources, protecting thousands of square miles of vulnerable habitat types, as well as nursery areas from fishing activities. Certain gear types also have been prohibited over large areas to reduce fishing mortality on juvenile fish and shrimp. Other areas containing sensitive benthic habitat have been identified as habitat areas of particular concern, where fishing is severely restricted. Some areas containing corals and coral reefs were considered so sensitive that the Council decided to protect them from all possible fishing impacts and prohibited all fishing in these marine reserves.



Considerations in Developing ACLs and AMs for Each Fishery

1. Management Strategies

Set goals
Design management approaches
Set target catch levels
Evaluate performance
Incorporate new information



2. Data Collection

Need appropriate, reliable, timely data



3. Data Analysis

Need adequate resources and timely analysis



4. In-season Management

Need authority to close a fishery when necessary (timely closures)



Setting Annual Catch Limits

The new provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act require Councils to set annual catch limits for fish stocks (populations) managed under fishery management plans. Additionally, Councils are required to prevent overfishing and rebuild stocks to levels that will support maximum sustainable yield. Annual catch limits must be established by 2010 for all fisheries where overfishing is occurring, and all other fisheries by 2011.

The Gulf Council is challenged with establishing annual catch limits and accountability measures to ensure that overfishing does not occur. Scientists may be unable to assess the population size of particular species or determine an acceptable biological catch amount on an annual basis because of a lack of data for many stocks, and the limited number of stock assessments that can be completed in a timely fashion.

To complicate management efforts, basic fishery information is not available for some fish species in the Gulf region. These species are caught mainly as bycatch, and biological data necessary to conduct stock assessments is lacking. Without this information, it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish meaningful catch limits for some species.

Even when adequate data about a stock are available, the Gulf Council requires frequent stock assessments and assessment updates to ensure that catch limits are established at appropriate levels. Understanding stock status is critical to setting an annual catch limit that avoids overfishing. However, given existing funding levels for the Gulf Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service, additional personnel are not available to prepare and update stock assessments annually. Having adequate and timely stock assessments will remain a challenge for fisheries managers who are required to keep catches within specified limits and prevent overfishing.

Despite these challenges, the Gulf Council has already established annual catch limits and accountability measures for managed stocks that are susceptible to overfishing. Catch limits have been established for greater amberjack, gray triggerfish, and red snapper. The Council has also adopted catch limits for gag grouper that are expected to be implemented in 2009. The Council is currently developing an amendment to implement catch limits and accountability measures for the remainder of the stocks it manages.





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Establishing Limited Access Privilege Programs

The Magnuson-Stevens Act encourages the development of limited access privilege programs for fisheries and provides specific requirements for the implementation of such programs. Three types of limited access privilege programs authorized in the Magnuson-Stevens Act include individual fishing quotas, community quotas, and quotas held by regional fishery associations. Limited access privilege programs pose a challenge to fishery managers, both in terms of program design and in garnering stakeholder acceptance. Overcoming these challenges provides an excellent opportunity for Councils to address problems resulting from overcapacity and the race to fish.

By assigning a portion of the catch limit to individuals, communities, or associations, limited access privilege programs can provide many positive benefits to fishermen, managers, and consumers. Limited access privilege programs allow fishermen more flexibility in terms of how and when they can fish during the year, increasing efficiency and safety at sea. For fishery managers, limited access privilege programs not only provide a flexible management approach, but also help to improve resource conservation because combined catches of all quota holders are generally at or below the commercial total allowable catch. Enforcement and monitoring is enhanced with the increased accountability of individual fishermen. Overall, limited access privilege programs result in more efficient, more profitable, and more sustainable fisheries.

In 2007, the Gulf Council implemented a limited access program for the commercial red snapper fishery to address problems resulting from overcapacity and the derby nature of the fishery. Under this program, an individual or entity is given the privilege to harvest a percentage of the commercial quota. The program has been very successful to date; fishing capacity has been reduced, the race to catch fish has ended, and fishermen are operating more efficiently. The Gulf Council recently adopted a similar program for the commercial grouper and tilefish fishery, and implementation of the program is expected in 2010.



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