

## **Summary of the Public Hearings on Amendment 46 – Gray Triggerfish Rebuilding**

**Spanish Fort, Alabama  
March 6, 2017**

### **Council/Staff:**

Johnny Green  
Carrie Simmons  
Karen Hoak

9 Members of the public attended  
8 Members of the public commented

### **Ben Fairey** – State guide boat operator

In Action 1, Mr. Fairey stated he supports the Council's preferred alternative for the rebuilding timeframe of 9 years (Alternative 4). In Action 3.1 he stated he is in favor of a fall fishing season and doesn't mind closing recreational harvest through the end of July (Alternative 3). In Action 3.3 he supports increasing the minimum size limit to 15 inches FL, the Council's preferred alternative (Alternative 2). As far as Action 4, which considers modifying the commercial trip limit, he is in favor of allowing them to catch the commercial quota.

### **Gary Bryant** – 6-pack charter for-hire Fort Morgan, Alabama

Mr. Bryant agrees there is concern over the stock assessment and gray triggerfish being in a rebuilding plan as long as the animal's life cycle. Overall he would like to see a better stock assessment because he feels something is not correct based on what he is seeing on the water. In Action 1, he supports the Council's current preferred alternative for a rebuilding timeframe of 9 years (Alternative 4). In Action 3.1, he supports the Council's preferred alternative to close the season January - February and June - July (Alternative 4). For Action 3.2, he supports the Council's preferred Alternative 2 (reduce to 1-gray triggerfish per angler per day bag limit).

### **Randy Boggs** – Reel Surprise Charters, Orange Beach, Alabama

Mr. Boggs stated he supported the Council's current preferred alternative in Action 1 for the rebuilding timeframe of 9 years (Alternative 4). In Action 3.1 he supports the Council's current preferred alternative of a closed season of January - February and June - July spawning season (Alternative 4). In Action 3.2 he did not support reducing the bag limit to 1 fish because he feels it will result in angler dissatisfaction. Mr. Boggs stated he thought anglers would prefer to keep 2 gray triggerfish within the 20-reef fish aggregate as long as the landings stay within the recreational ACL. Thus, in Action 3.2 he supported no action (Alternative 1). In Action 3.3, he supports the Council's current preferred alternative of increasing the minimum size limit to 15 inches FL (Alternative 2).

**Susan Boggs** – Orange Beach, Alabama

In Action 1, Ms. Boggs supports the 10-year rebuilding timeframe (Alternative 5). In Action 2, she supports increasing the catch levels to the 9-year rebuilding period at 409,333 lbs ww (Alternative 3, Option b). In Action 3.1 she supports the June 1 through August 31 closed season (Alternative 2). In Action 3.2 she supports no change to the bag limit (Alternative 1). In Action 3.3, Ms. Boggs supports the Council's preferred alternative to increase the minimum size limit to 15 inches FL (Alternative 2).

**Bill Staff** – Fishing Vessel Sea Spray

In Action 1, Mr. Staff supports the Council's preferred alternative of a 9-year rebuilding time period (Alternative 4). In Action 3.1, he supports the current fixed closed season June 1 – July 31 (Alternative 1). In Action 3.2, Mr. Staff stated that he would prefer to have a 1 fish bag limit over none, so he was in support of the Council's preferred alternative to reduce the bag limit to 1 gray triggerfish (Alternative 2). In Action 3.3, he supports increasing the minimum size limit to 15 inches FL (Alternative 2).

**Dale Perkins** – Deckhand, mullet fisherman, captain's license, two M.S. degrees, and recreational fishing family. Lives in Pensacola, Florida

Mr. Perkins feels that managers are constantly trying to reduce recreational fishing opportunities and he believes this is unfair. He believes the stock assessment information is not matching the real world. Mr. Perkins stated that gray triggerfish are aggressive and they are competing with other fish on the reef and there are impacts to the ecosystem that must be taken into account when the recreational season for gray triggerfish is closed all year. On almost every reef where he drops a line, the bait is eaten up from all the gray triggerfish. In Action 3.1, he supports the current closed season June 1 through July 31 during spawning (Alternative 1). In Action 3.2 he supports the current 2 fish bag limit (Alternative 1). In Action 3.3, he supports the Council's preferred alternative to increase the minimum size limit (Alternative 2).

**Peter Mitten** – Anchors Away Boat Repairs, Pensacola, Florida

Mr. Mitten stated he agreed with what Mr. Perkins had already stated, and that gray triggerfish are recovering, as he is seeing more fish and larger fish on the water.

**Darren Bryant** – 18 years Destin Commercial fishermen, captain's license

In the 1980s, gray triggerfish were difficult to catch and the banjo size gray triggerfish were not being captured. However, now he believes the stock is increasing and he feels that the government is not listening to the public. He stated the stock assessment is three years behind, and in other fields, such as technology, that would not be acceptable. He feels there is an abundance of red snapper and gray triggerfish. In Action 3.2, Mr. Bryant supports the current 2 gray triggerfish bag limit (Alternative 1). In Action 3.3, he support the Council's preferred alternative to increase the minimum size limit to 15 inches FL (Alternative 2).

Mr. Bryant felt that the cobia stock was declining and that management needed to be considered for that species.

**Corpus Christi, Texas  
March 6, 2017**

**Council/Staff**

Greg Stunz  
Emily Muehlstein  
Jessica Matos

0 members of the public attended.

**Destin, Florida  
March 7, 2017**

**Council/Staff:**

Pam Dana  
Carrie Simmons  
Karen Hoak

23 Members of the public attended  
19 Members of the public commented

**Adam “Bud” Miller –**

In Action 3.3, Mr. Miller supported the current 14 inch FL minimum size limit (Alternative 1) because he did not feel the 15 inch FL minimum size limit would slow harvest due to the high numbers of gray triggerfish. In Action 3.2 he supports the 2 gray triggerfish bag limit (Alternative 1).

Mr. Miller has developed a kiosk that he is currently in the process of patenting. This kiosk would be placed in 17 locations throughout Okaloosa County to capture the species and weights of recreational landings.

**Toye Hill -**

Mr. Hill commented that by increasing the size limit, they will catch their poundage limit much faster. He thought a trip limit would work better for management than a size limit. Don't count pounds, count numbers of fish.

**Gary Jarvis – Charter vessel owner and commercial fishermen**

Mr. Jarvis was concerned about the entire recreational sector being shut down in 2017. He did not feel that was fair based on the information in the stock assessment being old (stopping in 2013). When fishing, he has seen that, since 2010, the gray triggerfish stock has recovered in size, abundance, and range. Right now he stated the problem is the state fishing seasons are different than the federal fishing seasons and that the states' commissions were not being held accountable for noncompliance. Mr. Jarvis stated that any fishery such as recreational gray triggerfish that has been closed for 2 consecutive years, a mandatory emergency benchmark stock assessment should be required in a year that the fishery is closed. In Action 3.1, he was in favor of fall fishing season. In Action 3.2, he supported the Council's preferred alternative to reduce the bag limit to 1 gray triggerfish (Alternative 2). In Action 3.3, he supported the

Council's preferred alternative to increase the minimum size limit to 15 inches FL (Alternative 2).

**Casey Weldon –**

Mr. Weldon was in favor of a small fishing season in the spring and fall. In Action 3.2, he supported the Council's preferred alternative to reduce the bag limit to 1 fish (Alternative 2). He was seeing lots of triggerfish offshore.

**Charles Trotter – Private recreational angler**

Mr. Trotter stated that there are so many gray triggerfish, it is difficult to catch other reef fish species such as vermilion snapper. He felt that allowing gray triggerfish to be so abundant was putting undue pressure and has consequences on other reef fish species. He stated that he is catching 50-70 gray triggerfish per trip and 80% of them are over the current 14 inch FL minimum size limit. In Action 3.3, Mr. Trotter stated he felt that increasing the minimum size limit would just be shifting pressure to the larger gray triggerfish and thus impact other species of fish on reef, such as mango snapper, because larger more aggressive gray triggerfish would be left unharvested on the reef. Thus, he was in favor of no action (Alternative 1).

**Mike Eller - Charter vessel owner and commercial fishermen**

Mr. Eller felt that the stock assessment was old and inaccurate for gray triggerfish and that the Council should turn its attention to conducting a benchmark assessment. In Action 3.1, he supports the Council current preferred alternative January through February closed season and the June 1 through July 31 closed season (Alternative 4). He stated he would also support a fall season but he was afraid since the Gulf states are opening up harvest for many reef fish species early in the year that might result in no fall fishing season in federal waters. Further, he felt National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) should do something about the continual overfishing of species in state waters resulting in quota overages. In Action 3.2, he supported the Council's preferred alternative to reduce the bag limit to 1 fish (Alternative 2). In Action 4, Mr. Eller supported the Council's preferred alternative to increase the trip limit to 16 fish (Alternative 4).

**Harold Staples – Federal for-hire permit holder**

Mr. Staples observed that gray triggerfish had some sort of small shellfish in their stomachs before Hurricane Opal, which disappeared after that hurricane. Those shellfish, as well as triggerfish are coming back and are in much better shape now. For example, with the current commercial 12 fish trip limit, folks were landing 96 lbs which is an 8 lb gray triggerfish. That is a large gray triggerfish and he felt that the stock could handle a 1,000 lb commercial trip limit. Mr. Staples stated that the recreational sector doesn't need them during the months of January and February, therefore he was in support of closing the fishery then (Action 3.1, Alternative 4). He stated that he would prefer to have gray triggerfish open in the fall.

**Doug Owen – Private recreational angler**

Mr. Owen stated if there was an overabundance of any species, then there would be a subsequent impact on other species. He said there were bushels of gray triggerfish boiling on the surface in the Gulf right now. One person observed a gray triggerfish attack a remora, and another caught a triggerfish trolling for King mackerel during a tournament. Gray triggerfish are aggressive and voracious reef fish. Mr. Owen stated because there were so many red snapper and gray triggerfish that the balance of species was off because they had to move because they were unable to reach any grouper.

**Kyle Lowe** – Charter for-hire

Mr. Lowe stated they are catching gray triggerfish from 18-20 fathoms like crazy and that the type of hook used when collecting data makes a big difference in what is caught. In Action 3.1, he supported the Council's preferred alternative to close the fishery in January and February and June and July (Alternative 4). In Action 3.3, he was fine with increasing the size limit except he was concerned that increasing the minimum size limit of gray triggerfish would fill the quota faster because the fish were so large. Therefore he was in favor of maintaining the current 14 inch minimum size limit (Alternative 1).

**Peter Mitten** - Anchors Away Boat Repairs, Pensacola, Florida

Mr. Mitten fishes with Mr. Perkins and agrees with his and others' testimony that gray triggerfish were recovered and are a nuisance on the reef. In Action 3.2, Mr. Mitten supported the current 2 gray triggerfish bag limit (Alternative 1). In Action 3.3, he supported the current 14 inch FL minimum size limit (Alternative 1).

**Darren Bryant** – Private recreational fishermen out of Pensacola, Florida

Mr. Bryant stated the gray triggerfish stock is healthy and there are no grouper because of the high abundance of gray triggerfish and red snapper. He feels overregulated by the federal government. Mr. Bryant believes it is unjustified to use a stock assessment to manage fishermen that utilizes three year old data. He feels that recreational fishermen have been pushed aside in the management system and that the data was skewed. Mr. Bryant suggested that stock assessment be conducted regionally as many stocks are not evenly distributed throughout the Gulf. He felt that the commercial, charter, and private anglers are all divided and pitted against one another. In Action 3.1, he supports the fixed closed season of June 1 through July 31 (Alternative 1). In Action 3.2, he supports the 2 gray triggerfish bag limit (Alternative 1). In Action 3.3, Mr. Bryant stated he supported the Council's preferred alternative to increase the minimum size limit to 15 inches FL (Alternative 2). Mr. Bryant stated he felt cobia is in trouble and managers should turn their attention towards that species.

**Dale Perkins** – Headboat operator and private recreational fishermen in Pensacola, Florida

Mr. Perkins noted that the stock assessment was done when the size limit was 12 inches, the bag limit was 10 fish, and there were no closed seasons. He quoted page 4 of the amendment and noted the Magnuson-Stevens Act requires rebuilding plans be put in place as quickly as possible but still take into account the needs of the fishing community. He asked that the Council take this to heart because he believes there is a gray triggerfish infestation, not a problem with the stock. Mr. Perkins noted he felt the federal regulations were too difficult to follow, especially with the state fishing seasons. He said recreational anglers don't come to these meetings because they are disenchanting with the process and feel all the federal managers do is decrease the catch levels on recreational anglers. If they catch too few fish or the fish are too small, managers reduce the recreational TAC. If they catch too many fish, they are too big or they are catching them too fast, managers reduce the recreational TAC. No matter what the data says, the outcome is predetermined. In Action 3.1, he supports the current June 1 through July 31 fixed closed season (Alternative 1). In Action 3.2, he supports the current 2 gray triggerfish bag limit (Alternative 1). In Action 3.3, he would have been in favor of increasing the minimum size limit for recreational anglers, but since there was no 2017 fishing season, he would only support the 14 inch FL minimum size limit (Alternative 1). Further he would encourage the Council to open the recreational fishing season in 2017.

**David Krebs** – Commercial fishermen

Mr. Krebs stated he was disenfranchised by the recreational anglers stating they weren't being treated fairly by the federal management system. He stated there are plenty of fishing opportunities in state waters due to the states not having compliant regulations with the federal seasons. Mr. Krebs stated this is what exacerbates the issue of one group being pitted against the other, and results in shorter federal fishing seasons. Historically, stock assessments were completed by monitoring catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) and this was the way stock status was quantified throughout its range. In Action 4, he supports the Council preferred alternative to increase the commercial trip limit to 16 fish (Alternative 4). He stated he was in favor of closing gray triggerfish to harvest during the June 1 through July 31 spawning season for both sectors, and he did not see any reason for a size limit on this species. By setting unrealistically high size limits it only extended a season of fishing and throwing everything back.

**Chris Couvillion** – Charter for-hire permit holder

Mr. Couvillion stated that he believed the gray triggerfish stock had recovered. On a 12- hour trip he caught 263 gray triggerfish and of those, 80 of them met the 14 inch FL minimum size limit. He stated that 30% of the fish would have been of legal size for harvest. Mr. Couvillion said there are so many gray triggerfish that when he was trolling for king mackerel he caught a gray triggerfish, thus he believes there is no problem with the stock. In Action 3.1, he supports the Council's preferred alternative to close the recreational harvest January through February and during spawning from June 1 through July 31 (Alternative 4). In Action 3.2, he supported the 1 gray triggerfish bag limit because he wanted anglers to have some filets to take home (Alternative 2). In Action 3.3, he was concerned with catching the quota too quickly if the minimum size limit is increased from 14 inches FL to 15, 16, 17 inches FL.

Mr. Couvillion felt that the Florida FWC dockside surveyors were picking the two for-hire vessels that came in with the biggest catch and this was leading to over estimating the landings. He felt a more random selection to vessels to survey would be preferable.

**Bryan Kelley** – Charter for-hire

Mr. Kelley said he stopped counting the number of gray triggerfish they caught after he discarded 60 fish on a trip and observers are doing the same. He put a vessel monitoring system (VMS) on his boat to collect better data and would like to see an electronic logbook for more accountability. In Action 3.2, Mr. Kelley supports the 2 gray triggerfish bag limit (Alternative 1). In Action 3.3, he supported the current 14 inch FL minimum size limit (Alternative 2) because he was also concerned about larger fish filling the quota faster. Mr. Kelley felt this occurred with greater amberjack and he didn't want it to happen with another fishery. He stated that triggerfish are no longer a shallow water fish. They are finding them in deep water; also they are big, they are hungry, and they are destructive.

**Jason Mikel** –

In Action 3.1, Mr. Mikel supports the Council's preferred alternative (Alternative 4). In Action 3.2 he supports the Council's preferred alternative to reduce the bag limit to 1 gray triggerfish (Alternative 2). In Action 3.3, he supports increasing the minimum size limit to 16 inches FL. Mr. Mikel also suggested that the Council look into charter for-hire tags for bycatch when a season is closed, thus if a fish is dead it could be landed with a tag.

**Pam Jarvis –**

Ms. Jarvis stated she wanted an accountable fishery, particularly the private recreational sector. She feels that private recreational anglers need to be responsible for their own fishery and develop a plan that stops overfishing.

**Jason Klosterman –**

Mr. Klosterman would like to see Florida implement a tag program to get to real numbers, even at the risk of creating a derby fishery in that first year. He would like to see mandatory electronic logbooks for charter vessels. He feels this will help NMFS better manage several fisheries. Right now he feels that this is mismanagement of data and he wants to work with the Gulf Council to improve this issue. He would also like to see a data collection program for recreational fishermen over the entire Gulf.

**Travis Chunn – Fishes Commercially, Recreationally, and Charter**

Mr. Chunn has assisted with ROV research and number of hooks. They tested 28 sites in 90-100 ft of water. He stated that from this work gray triggerfish and lionfish were documented to be larger and in higher numbers.

**Galveston, Texas  
March 7, 2017**

**Council/Staff**

Lance Robinson  
Emily Muehlstein  
Jessica Matos

4 members of the public attended.  
3 members of the public spoke.

**Greg Ball– Charter Captain**

He supports the Council's current preferred alternatives.

**Taylor Borel – Charter Captain**

He supports the Council's current preferred alternatives.

**Shane Cantrell – Charter Fishing Association and Commercial Captain**

Shane supports the current preferred alternatives except for the size limit increase. The recreational triggerfish size limit should remain at 14 inches fork length. We learned our lesson with amberjack; increasing the size limit means we harvest bigger fish and reach our quota quicker.

**Webinar  
March 15, 2017**

**Council/Staff**

Emily Muehlstein  
Carrie Simmons  
Karen Hoak

One member of the public attended.

**Mike Hagen** –Recreational fisherman out of Navarre, FL

Mr. Hagen catches and throws back many triggerfish that are typically 10 to 12 inches in size. The triggerfish are making it difficult to catch snapper. In Action 3.3 he expressed concern about increasing the minimum size limit because that would require throwing back more fish, which he believes are already too plentiful. However, he did mention that he prefers to bring home larger fish because they yield more meat. For action 3.2, he supported a one fish bag limit if it would increase the season length, and would also support weekend only seasons to further lengthen the season. It is hard to plan trips with such short seasons, and since he is unable to fish until weekends, it further reduces his opportunities to fish. He also expressed concern about the time lag between the data coming out of the stock assessments and the management response, since the data being used to drive this amendment is from 2013. He inquired about the possibility of using more data from the states in federal fisheries management and the possibility of studying populations on artificial reefs.

**Summary of Written Comments Received**

March 28, 2017

43 Members of the public submitted comment.

**Action 1 – Establish a Rebuilding Timeline**

- Support for preferred Alternative 4 – Establish a 9-year rebuilding timeline.

**Action 2 – Establish Annual Catch Limits and Annual Catch Targets**

- Support for Alternative 3, Option b. The annual catch limit should be increased to a level that aims to rebuild the stock in 9 years.
- Support for Preferred Alternative 1, no action.

**Action 3.1 – Modify the Recreational Fixed Closed Season**

- Support for preferred Alternative 4 – Create a closed season in January and February in addition to the current June – July closed season.

**Action 3.2 – Modify the Recreational Bag Limit**

- A bag limit reduction is acceptable if it lengthens the season.
- Support for preferred Alternative 2 – Reduce the bag limit to 1 fish per angler.

**Action 3.3 - Modify the Recreational Minimum Size Limit**

- Reduce the minimum size limit to 12 inches or consider a 12-15-inch slot limit.
- Support for Preferred Alternative 2 – increase the minimum size limit to 15 inches.

**Action 4 – Modify the Commercial Trip Limit**

- The commercial bag limit should not be increased if the stock is overfished.

- Support for preferred Alternative 4 – increase the commercial trip limit to 16 fish.

### **Other Triggerfish Related Comments**

- Triggerfish are not overfished, they're everywhere in vast numbers.
  - Fishermen are catching them while trolling.
  - Fishermen can't get past them to catch anything else.
  - A few years ago, the population dipped but now, they're very healthy.
  - Triggerfish off the Florida Panhandle are so prevalent they're a pest. They're on every artificial reef from 20-100 feet deep.
  - There are plenty of just legal sized triggerfish. A majority are between 16-20 inches.
  - There are so many triggerfish that they're hungry and eating plastic baits.
  - Triggerfish will come to the surface in swarms and attack every bait like a piranha.
  - People are catching more big triggerfish now than they ever have in their lives.
  - There are so many triggerfish eating everything that the bait industry must be thriving.
  - Fish are so abundant that 5 people can catch their limit in 2-hours.
- If the triggerfish stock is overfished, it should be shut down completely until it recovers for commercial and recreational harvest.
- The overabundance of red snapper is causing the triggerfish shortage.

### **Other Comments**

- NOAA should improve their data collection and stock assessment process. What's being seen on the water is not reflective of stock assessment results.
  - NOAA data is in conflict with state data, and it doesn't make sense that the commercial fishery data keeps the fishery open, while the recreational data indicates overharvest.
  - Data providers are incompetent and corrupt and they carry out the radical agenda of EDF.
  - Stock assessment scientists should listen to the fishermen.
- NMFS needs to improve their season projects and produce them in a more timely manner.
- Federal fisheries management has no credibility.
- The federal legal structure around fisheries management is ridiculous.
- There shouldn't be a size limit on Spanish mackerel because of they have high discard mortality.
- Discarding abundant red snapper outside of the season is wasteful.
- Reef fish regulations should be regional.
- Overregulations cause negative economic impacts for hard working Americans.
- Hatchery programs should replenish stocks.
- More seasons should be open at a time so trips can target multiple species.
- Recreational anglers should have the same right to fish as commercial fishermen do.