



South Atlantic Fishery Bulletin

Bringing Fishing News to You

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Sustainable Fisheries (727) 824-5305

Atlantic Cobia (Georgia through New York) Recreational Fishing Season is Closed in Federal Waters

WHAT/WHEN:

Recreational harvest of Atlantic migratory group cobia (from Georgia through New York) closed at 12:01 a.m. on January 24, 2017, in federal waters. Recreational harvest of cobia will remain closed until January 1, 2018.

WHY THIS CLOSURE IS HAPPENING:

- In 2016, the recreational and total annual catch limits of Atlantic migratory group cobia were exceeded. Therefore, the 2017 recreational season must account for this overage.
- When landings of Atlantic migratory group cobia exceed annual catch limits, accountability measures are in place to ensure overfishing (rate of removal is too high) does not occur. If total landings (commercial and recreational) for the Atlantic migratory group cobia exceed the total annual catch, NOAA Fisheries is required to reduce the length of the recreational fishing season in the following fishing year.
- With the understanding that recreational harvest of cobia will remain open in some state waters during the federal closure, NOAA Fisheries has determined that the annual catch limit in 2017 will likely be exceeded as the majority of cobia landings come from state waters.
- NOAA Fisheries will reevaluate the federal closure if state regulations change in 2017.

DURING THE CLOSURE:

- During the closure, recreational harvest of cobia is prohibited in federal waters from Georgia through New York. Cobia off the east coast of Florida are part of the Gulf of Mexico migratory group.

- This closure only applies to the recreational sector. The possession limit of two cobia per day remains in effect for Atlantic cobia that are sold in state or federal waters.

This bulletin provides only a summary of the existing regulations. Full regulations can be found in the *Federal Register* or at <http://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/retrieveECFR?gp=&SID=76c2b80788a139f1549b85d3764437b0&mc=true&n=pt50.12.622&r=PART&ty=HTML#sp50.12.622.q>

Frequently Asked Questions In-Season Recreational Cobia Closure for Fishing Year 2017 January 2017

When will recreational Atlantic migratory group cobia (Georgia through New York) be closed?

- The recreational harvest of Atlantic migratory group cobia closed in federal waters from Georgia to New York at **12:01 a.m. on January 24, 2017.**
- Recreational harvest of cobia will remain closed through December 31, 2017. During the closure, recreational harvest of cobia in federal waters is prohibited off the states of Georgia through New York.

Who will be affected?

- This closure applies to those fishing for cobia recreationally in federal waters from Georgia to New York, from a private vessel, charter vessel, or headboat.

Why did NOAA Fisheries close the 2017 Atlantic cobia recreational fishing season?

- The recreational and total catch limits for 2016 were exceeded.
- Accountability measures are required by federal regulations to protect the cobia resource and prevent overfishing (rate of removal is too high), and help keep landings within the catch limits, or make adjustments if the catch limits are exceeded.
- If the total (recreational and commercial combined) catch limit is exceeded, NOAA Fisheries is required to shorten the recreational fishing season in the following year to ensure recreational landings do not exceed the recreational catch limit.
- Cobia management measures require that a three-year average of recreational landings are compared to the recreational catch limits to determine if the catch limit has been exceeded. If a catch limit has changed, the first year of landings used will be the year the catch limit was most recently changed.
- For example, the catch limits were most recently changed in 2015, therefore landings in 2015 and 2016 were used to determine whether the 2016 total catch limit was exceeded.

- The average annual total landings in 2015 and 2016 were 1,511,079 pounds and the total catch limit in 2016 is 670,000 pounds (Table 1).

Table 1. Recreational and commercial catch limit, annual catch target, and landings, in pounds, for Atlantic migratory group cobia.

Year	Catch Limits			Annual Catch Target	Landings	
	Recreational	Commercial	Total	Recreational	Recreational	Commercial
2015	630,000	60,000	690,000	520,000	1,554,394	82,848
2016	620,000	50,000	670,000	500,000	1,336,012	48,904
Average of 2015 and 2016 total landings					1,511,079	

Why are the landings higher in recent years?

- An increase in landings could be attributed to an increase in fishing effort as well as an increase in the weight of the fish being caught.
- The number of recreational trips that targeted cobia from New York to Georgia increased by 25% from 2014 to 2015, and then increased by another 18% from 2015 to 2016.
- The average weights of cobia in the Atlantic migratory group area were higher in 2015 and 2016 than in previous years.

Why is a closure occurring if most landings are from state waters?

- Cobia caught off state and federal waters counts against the federal catch limit.
- NOAA Fisheries will continue to monitor state landings and may file additional notifications if necessary to readjust the reduced federal fishing season to ensure harvest achieves the annual catch target, but does not exceed the catch limit.

Why does this closure not apply to fishermen off the east coast of Florida?

- Cobia off the east coast of Florida are part of the Gulf of Mexico migratory group.
- The boundary between the Gulf of Mexico migratory group and the Atlantic migratory group is the Georgia/Florida border (Figure 1).
- Genetic information from the most recent population assessment for cobia indicates that the Gulf of Mexico cobia stock extends through the Florida east coast.

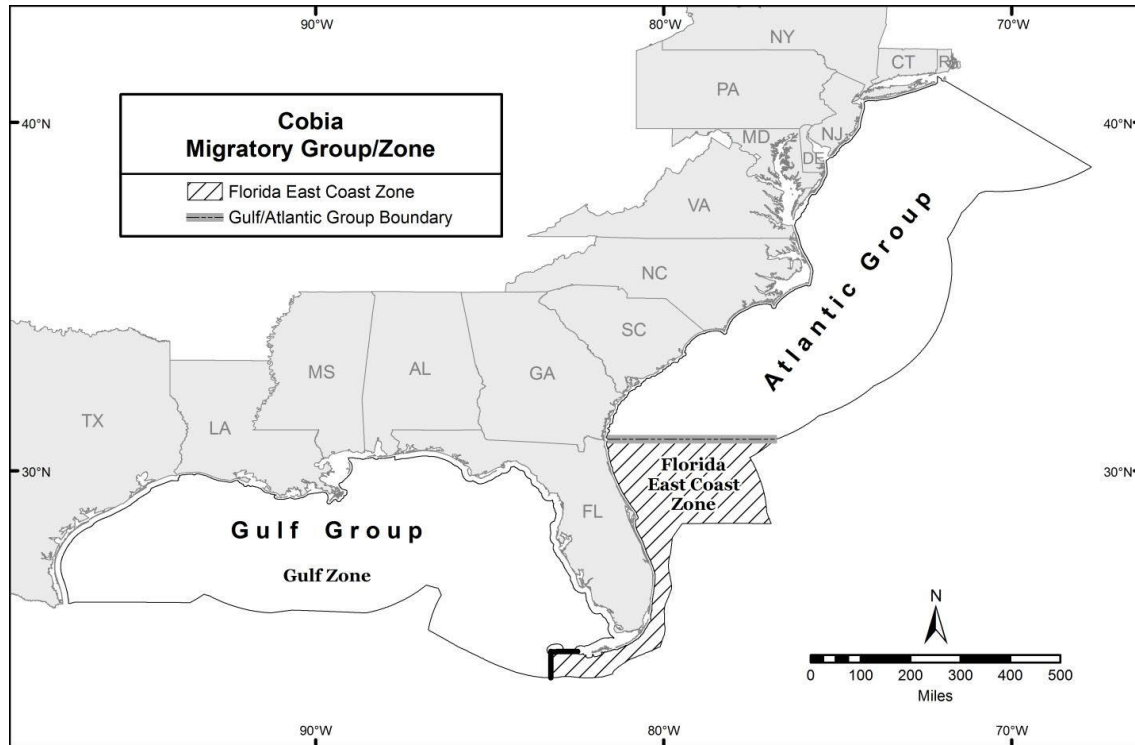


Figure 1: Cobia Migratory Group Boundaries

Will the closure for cobia apply to commercial fishermen?

- No. There are separate annual catch limits for the recreational and commercial sectors of Atlantic group cobia. This closure is only for the recreational sector.
- The commercial sector could be closed if commercial landings meet or exceed the commercial catch limit in 2017.

What is the status of the population?

- Based on the Southeast Data, Assessment and Review stock assessment completed in January 2013 (<http://sedarweb.org/associated-projects-species/cobia>), the Atlantic migratory group of cobia is not overfished (population size too low) or undergoing overfishing (rate of removals too high).
- Population levels declined since 2002.

Can I fish for cobia in state waters?

- The recreational closure only prohibits harvest from federal waters off Georgia to New York. Federal waters begin three nautical miles offshore of Georgia to New York and extend out to 200 nautical miles.
- For information on closure of cobia in state waters, contact your local state office on marine fishery issues.

Are new regulations being considered to extend the federal fishing season in 2017?

- The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council approved Coastal Migratory Pelagics Framework Amendment 4 at their September 2016 meeting.
- NOAA Fisheries will announce the effective date of any new regulations by filing a notice in the Federal Register and issuing a *Fishery Bulletin* similar to this one.
- If implemented, Coastal Migratory Pelagics Framework Amendment 4 would modify the recreational bag limit of Atlantic group cobia to one fish per person per day, establish a recreational vessel limit of six fish per vessel per day, and modify the minimum size limit to 36 inches fork length.
- For more information, visit:
http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/sustainable_fisheries/gulf_sa/cmp/2016/framework_am4/index.html.
- In addition, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission is currently developing an Interstate Management Plan for cobia. Therefore, regulations in state waters may change in the future.

How can I get more information about the in-season closure?

- If you have further questions, feel free to contact NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office by phone at (727) 824-5305.

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- Immediate fishery openings and closures
- Any significant changes to fishing regulations that happen quickly

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 - Text GULFRECFISH to 888777
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 - Text SATLRECFISH to 888777
- **South Atlantic Commercial Fisheries Related Alerts**
 - Text SATLCOMMFISH to 888777
- **Caribbean Fisheries Related Alerts**
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