

**South Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel  
Vermilion Snapper Fishery Performance Report  
November 2017**

At their November 2017 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for vermilion snapper and developed this fishery performance report (FPR). The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR for vermilion snapper will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to complement material being used in the assessment (SEDAR 55) and to inform future management.

**Advisory Panel Members:**

David Moss (Chairman; Recreational/FL)	Kerry Marhefka (Commercial/Dealer/SC)
Jimmy Hull (Vice-Chairman; Commercial/Dealer/Retail/FL)	Wayne Mershon (Commercial/Dealer/SC)*
Robert Johnson (Charter/FL)	Jim Moring (Recreational/SC)
Rusty Hudson (Commercial/FL)	Jim Atack (Recreational/NC)
Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)	Red Munden (Conservation/NC)
Manny Herrera (Commercial/FL)*	Robert Lorenz (Recreational/NC)
James Freeman (Commercial/FL)*	Dick Brame (NGO/Recreational/NC)
Greg Mercurio (Charter/FL)*	Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)
Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)	Andy Piland (Charter/NC)
David Snyder (Consumer Rep/GA)	Scott Buff (Commercial/NC)
Deidra Jeffcoat (Charter/GA)	Jack Cox (Commercial/Dealer/NC)
Gary Manigault Sr. (Charter/SC)	Todd Kellison (At-large/NOAA)
	*not in attendance

***Fishery Overview***

Information on the vermilion snapper fishery in the South Atlantic region is presented in a Fishery Information Document intended to provide an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history of the species, stock status, management overview, and trends in landings and fishery economics for both the commercial and recreational (for-hire and private) sectors. The information was provided as background to elicit the discussion presented in this Fishery Performance Report.

***Stock Observations***

AP members generally agreed that vermilion snapper are abundant throughout the region and the stock is healthy.

An AP member from north Florida claims that he is seeing as many, if not more, vermilion snapper as he saw when he started fishing off St. Augustine in the 1980s. He claims the fishery is doing very well in his area. Charter boats in the area catch legal fish in 80 feet of water. Vermilion snapper are readily available and they are a staple of the charter fleet. Nowadays fishermen simply assume they will get their limit of vermilions and then go look for other fish to catch.

Asked whether a particular time of the year is better to catch vermilion, an AP member from Florida indicated that the vermilion bite generally slows down in the winter time, when the water cools. During that time, for-hire and recreational fishermen have to go out further offshore, about 30 miles off the north Florida coast, to catch vermilion snapper. The AP member clarified that off St. Augustine, Florida, there is no natural reef habitat inside of 30 miles. The first natural bottom in that area is 34 miles out. Commercial fishermen in this area have to go out 50 or 55 miles near the shelf edge where the bigger fish are and they have a better opportunity to catch other species (i.e., gray triggerfish).

Off Ponce Inlet, Florida, commercial fishermen catch vermilion snapper in 140 feet of water, and travel 45 to 50 miles to fish to the northeast of the inlet to get to where big triggerfish and big vermilion snapper are located.

In south Florida and the Florida Keys, fishermen report better access to vermilion snapper during the summer months but they attribute this directly to weather. It is simply easier to get to the depths where vermilion snapper are found in that area (about 180 feet) during the summer months.

Off South Carolina, commercial fishermen report seeing vermilion snapper year-round, in all sizes, and in the same areas the species has been historically accessible, but in much greater abundance. For-hire captains observe that vermilion snapper are found closer to shore than in the past and seem to be spreading out over areas where they were not found before.

In North Carolina, an AP member who fishes commercially stated vermilion snapper are being harvested during the worst time of the year in his area due to water temperature. By the time the water is warm enough for good fishing in April and May, the first commercial season is coming to a close. The second season only allows fishing until about September, leaving no vermilion to be harvested during the fall months when the weather is still good. Commercial effort for vermilion off North Carolina reflects the fishery's seasonality. Still, fishermen are catching their limits. Another commercial fisherman from North Carolina noted that this year (2017) the vermilion fishery is very robust; one of the healthiest fisheries in the region. However, he noted that this year there has been more current than fishermen have seen in years past. Strong currents seem to be a more common occurrence nowadays, making fishing more difficult. When fishermen are able to get out to 40 fathoms, they are catching big vermilions, two to four pounds, and some above that. The AP member stated that water temperature and currents are important factors that should be considered in stock assessments. An AP member from Florida agreed that current and temperature can play a major role in effort trends. He illustrated that when mutton snapper spawn off Florida, the current is very strong so only the most experienced fishermen have access those fish.

On average, commercial fishermen off North Carolina are seeing a lot more one-to-two and two-to-four pound vermilions. This has a lot to do with how far offshore fishermen are going. The smaller fish are found inshore. Off Morehead City, commercial fishermen go out at least 30 miles, to about 120 to 140 feet of water, and try to stay off of the small fish where a lot of the headboats and recreational anglers go for their day trips. Larger vermilions, two-to-four pounds, are in 35 to 45 fathoms, and there are plenty of them out there. There has actually been an

increase in size in recent years but the current has held fishermen back inshore a bit. Off Hatteras, abundance and size of vermilion snapper have both increased.

Off the Georgia coast, a charter captain reported going out about 30 miles, on average, to catch vermilion snapper. This year, however, she is seeing them a little bit closer, maybe 25 miles, in about 45 to 80 feet of water. Generally, vermilion snapper are found in 90 feet of water; a little further out for the bigger ones.

### ***Commercial Observations***

Vermilion snapper were referred to as the “meat and potatoes” of the commercial snapper grouper fishery. Off South Carolina, price and demand for vermilion snapper have both gone up in the past five years. In particular, demand has increased for smaller fish, three-quarter to one-pound fish. Dealers report a lot of success moving such fish to local restaurants which use them in whole-fish preparations. To have a market niche for smaller vermilion is a fairly recent occurrence. Commercial fishermen and dealers from North Carolina also report that the price for vermilion snapper has continued to increase, except during times when there is a large influx of fish from the Gulf, which causes the price to dip down slightly. Additionally, commercial dealers noted that when the fishery shuts down and then reopens, there can be delay in moving product or restarting consumer demand since buyers do not always know the seasons that vermilion snapper are available. Efforts that reduce or remove the harvest closures would remedy this issue. Off Ponce Inlet, Florida, commercial fishermen report stable pricing for the larger fish and demand continuing to increase, not just for vermilion but for every fresh local fish.

An AP member from north Florida observed that annual catch limits have resulted in the commercial fishery becoming more targeted. Once the season opens on January 1, vermilion trips are where the money is; whereas, back in the 1980s, fishermen went fishing for whatever they could catch.

### ***Recreational Observations***

For Florida charter vessels, demand for vermilion snapper increased subsequent to the red snapper closure. After that, vermilion snapper became something that people were much more willing to catch and keep; before, everybody wanted red snapper. It is very rare for anglers on charter vessels to not catch their limit of vermilion snapper. Charter captains from throughout the region agreed that vermilion is not a species that is normally targeted but it is considered a reliable catch year-round. However, off Georgia where charters have relied on black sea bass historically but the fish have been unavailable in recent years, vermilion snapper are being targeted more than before.

Asked why recreational landings of vermilion snapper declined from 2007 to 2011 and what caused that decline, AP members attributed the decline to overall lack of effort after the housing market crash and subsequent recession. Fishing was one of the first things that came off the list of things to do. According to an AP member from North Carolina, another factor that may have been at play in the observed decline in recreational landings was the prohibition on recreational sale of snapper grouper species. After that regulation was implemented, this AP member estimated there was a 90% reduction in the number of recreational boats fishing offshore North

Carolina. Fuel cost was also mentioned as a factor that may have influenced recreational effort. Another AP member from North Carolina recounted a time when fuel prices at the dock went from around \$2.75 to close to \$5.00. At that time, a local charter captain trying to make ends meet approached several fishermen with an offer to take them fishing if they would pay for fuel. Normally, such offers would end up costing a group of fishermen \$400 to \$450. This particular trip, however, cost them \$900 in fuel. AP members commented that fuel prices have a disproportionate effect since in some areas as fishermen have to go much further offshore to find fish.

One fisherman from Florida recounted that in the 1960s, recreational fishermen would use bigger hooks (Eagle Claws) to bottom fish. In the 1970s, when big headboats carrying fifty to ninety people entered the picture, there was a shift to smaller hooks (5/0 Mustad) and catches of grunts and vermilion snapper picked up. More recently, there has been a requirement to use circle hooks and that has also had an effect on recreational catches of snapper grouper species.

### ***Observations on management measures***

AP members were in agreement that the current commercial and recreational minimum size limits (12 inches) are appropriate.

Asked whether the Council should consider changes to vermilion snapper management, one AP member from North Carolina expressed concern over effort shifting to vermilion snapper in response to the upcoming reductions in the golden tilefish annual catch limit.

Extending the commercial season was noted as a need, particularly towards the holiday season.

Since there is interest in extending the length of the second season closer to Christmas, perhaps consider opening the second season for vermilion a month later? During this time of year, there are other species fishermen can target and perhaps this would extend the season a bit and bring some relief to fishermen close to the end of the year and be beneficial to the stock by reducing fishing pressure during the prime spawning season.

### ***Environmental/ecological Observations***

Major storm events have occurred in the South Atlantic during the vermilion commercial season in the past couple of years. Managers should consider this and explore the effects of storms/hurricanes because they have a major impact on effort. Storms can also extend the season and it is important for managers to note this as well. The impacts of major storms are region-wide.

Most AP members agreed that vermilion snapper are highly fecund and spawn throughout the year. There may be a time of peak spawning in some areas, but fishermen see ripe fish every month of the year. Some AP members expressed that it is more important to extend protection to spawning fish for species that are long-lived and slow-growing, such as groupers.

Cold water intrusions strongly affect the vermilion snapper catch off Florida. The fish do not eat when the water is cold and during these events the bottom temperature can get down to the 50s.

Asked about observations on recruitment, a charter captain operating off Georgia reported large numbers of juvenile (four to six inches) vermilion snapper in 50 feet of water. Fishermen in southeastern North Carolina are seeing some small vermilion inside of 10 miles but they are still fairly incidental. However, fishermen now report seeing one or two small fish on every trip, and this was never the case before. Off north Florida, fishermen report seeing clouds of very small vermilions, three to five inches long, when trying to catch sardines on sabiki rigs.

There was no consensus among AP members on whether catches of vermilion snapper are higher on natural vs. artificial reefs. Fishermen report catching their limit on both.

### ***Research Recommendations***

- Cooperative hook-and-line sampling conducted at a federal level for all reef fish species to be used concurrently with the fishery-independent chevron trap survey information.
- Expand the fishery-independent sampling to cover additional months. Cooperative research with fishermen may be a way to accomplish this.

### ***Other Observations***

Managers may want to use vermilion snapper to conduct a study on fishing effort and success rate within the recreational sector. In some areas, vermilion are not that accessible to fishermen than in other areas but not necessarily for lack of effort. It would be informative to compare with a species such as gag, which appears to be on the decline yet some recreational fishermen they are readily available.

Restaurants have not done a good job of promoting vermilion snapper, especially educating consumers about the difference between vermilion and red snapper. A better job of promoting vermilion may help the red snapper stock bounce back sooner.