

# Amendment 44 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region

## Yellowtail Snapper



## Decision Document

### Background

The status of the southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper stock was assessed through the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) process in 2019 (SEDAR 64), with data through 2017. Yellowtail snapper is considered a single stock in the South Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf). The assessment estimated that the stock was **not overfished nor undergoing overfishing** as of 2017.

The current acceptable biological catch (ABC) for yellowtail snapper is based on the previous yellowtail snapper stock assessment (SEDAR 27A 2012). That assessment used landings

information that has since been revised. Therefore, a new ABC that is based on the latest stock assessment and latest revised landings data must be adopted.

The ABC for a stock is recommended by a Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). Because the yellowtail snapper stock is distributed across two Councils’ jurisdictions (South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico), both SSCs had to agree on a recommendation for ABC. The South Atlantic Council reviewed the SSCs’ recommendations in December 2020. This amendment is being developed jointly with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council but the summary of actions presented in this document pertain to the South Atlantic region.

## Possible actions in SG Amendment 44/RF Amendment 55:

- Modify the jurisdictional allocation of the ABC between the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico regions
- Adjust the total annual catch limit (ACL) and annual optimum yield (OY) for the South Atlantic
- Revise sector allocations and sector ACLs
- Establish commercial management measures

## Tentative amendment timing

December 2020	Direction to initiate plan amendment
April 2021	Obtain feedback from the Snapper Grouper AP
June 2021	South Atlantic Council reviews AP feedback and provides direction to staff
August 2021	Gulf Council reviews and provides direction to staff
September 2021	South Atlantic Council approves for scoping
October 2021	SA SG AP and Gulf Council input
November 2021	Scoping hearings for South Atlantic
Winter 2021	Develop document and conduct analyses
Spring 2022	Councils approve for public hearings
Winter 2022	Councils approve document for formal review

## Acceptable biological catch

The current ABC for yellowtail snapper is based on results of the SEDAR 27A (2012) stock assessment and is 4.05 million pounds whole weight (excluding discards).

The ABC is split 75% to the South Atlantic and 25% to the Gulf of Mexico. This jurisdictional allocation is based on 50% of average landings from 1993-2008 + 50% of average landings from 2006-2008. At the time this allocation was adopted, available landings included those from the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey. This survey was used until 2008 to estimate recreational landings. In 2008, the survey methodology was improved, and the program became the current Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Below are the current ABCs for the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico:

**South Atlantic ABC = 3,037,500 pounds whole weight**  
**Gulf of Mexico ABC = 1,012,500 pounds whole weight**

The survey methodology used by MRIP was again revised to improve estimates of recreational effort. The telephone survey of coastal households (Costal Household Telephone Survey, CHTS) was replaced by a mail-based survey, the Fishing Effort Survey (FES) in (2018). This change influenced recreational landings estimates. **The latest yellowtail snapper stock assessment (SEDAR 64 2019) includes the revised recreational landings that are inclusive of the current survey (MRIP-FES) and is thus based on the best scientific information available.**

In October 2020, the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico SSCs issued an ABC recommendation based on SEDAR 64 (Table 1). The ABCs decrease over time as removals from the population cause the biomass to move closer to the level that produces maximum sustainable yield (MSY); these yields decrease because the spawning stock biomass is currently greater than that required to sustain MSY.

**Table 1.** Annual combined (South Atlantic and Gulf) recommended ABCs for yellowtail snapper. Values are in millions of pounds whole weight (mp ww) and MRIP-FES units.

Year	ABC (mp ww)
2021	4.655
2022	4.242
2023	3.991
2024	3.836
2025+	3.736

Note: ABC reflects the calendar year. Fishing year for yellowtail snapper for both commercial and recreational sectors is August 1 through July 31.

## Potential actions for the South Atlantic Council

The scoping document for Amendment 44 (*Attachment 8b*) contains a range of options for potential actions affecting the South Atlantic Council.

### Summary of input to date

#### SAFMC (September 2021):

- Add option for constant catch total ACL that is based upon the year with the lowest recommended ABC.
- Request feedback from the advisory panel(s) on:
  1. potential trip limit during spawning season (May 15 to July 31)
  2. trip limit step down after 75% of ACL is met?
  3. trip limit for part-time fishermen – 500 or 400 pounds?
  4. trip limit for multi-day fishermen – 3,500 lbs per week?
- Take the amendment out for scoping and obtain additional feedback from the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel, Gulf Reef Fish Advisory Panel, and Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council.

#### Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (October 2021):

- Clarify that *commercial* landings are allocated based on where they come from whereas *recreational* landings for Monroe County are attributed to the SA.
- **Motion: Recommend retaining current allocation between the SA and Gulf. Adopt constant catch as total ACL for the SA and retain sector allocations for the SA.**
- Don't need to discuss trip limits for this fishery until the commercial ACL is being met in-season for two years in a row.
- Part-time trip limits could make new entry into the fishery difficult.
- Since commercial landings are not reaching the ACL, consideration of multi-day trips is not necessary at this time. Large trips are vessels making several day trips and those vessels should not have a different set of rules than for other vessels (quality of product is lower on longer trips too).

#### GMFMC Meeting (October 2021):

- Concern over using current jurisdictional allocation formula since landings are “old” and the formula does not account for changes in recent state of nature.
  - Include a couple options:
    - Most recent 10 years
    - 50% of average landings from 2000-2008 and 50% from most recent 10 years
- Council discussed also looking at a constant catch scenario derived from stock assessment projection (not based on lowest recommended ABC).
- More information on catch and effort in the SA to come up with options for apportionment. Need more alternatives.
  - Specifically, Gulf wants to see history of sector-specific landings against their ACLs, along with a FES-converted version of the same.
- Concern over swings in recreational landings under FES, especially in recent years.
- Obtain annual APAIS intercepts for last 10 years by region (Gulf less Monroe County; SA including Monroe County) to investigate outliers, etc.
- No strong interest in Gulf for trip limits unless SA wants to consider. Would need to look at how dually-permitted vessels would be affected.
- Concern over enforceability of trip limits between regions.
- Reef Fish AP is scheduled to meet on January 5, 2022 and will provide input.

### **SAFMC Scoping (November 2021):**

The scoping period for possible actions pertaining to the South Atlantic was from October 21 to November 5, 2021. Scoping hearings were held via webinar on November 2 and 3, 2021.

No comments were received online during the scoping comment period.

Three members of the public attended the scoping hearings and one offered the following for the Councils’ consideration:

- Concern about significant reduction to yellowtail snapper catch levels.
- Consider managing as a single stock and not splitting the ABC between the Councils. It is genetically a single stock and managing jointly may reduce administrative burden.
- There is anecdotal evidence of population shifts, possibly related to climate change (have seen the same for mangrove snapper).
- There has also been a significant increase in depredation by sharks.
- These elements combined may be responsible for the perceived decline in the population based on the latest assessment.
- Fishermen are skeptical of landings used in assessment, particularly recreational estimates.

## **IPT Comments:**

The IPT discussed guidance and feedback obtained thus far during a call on November 8, 2021. The IPT had the following comments for the Councils' consideration:

- Fishers are reporting yellowtail are shifting distribution. Recreational landings in the Gulf are occurring further north, up to the Tampa Bay region.
- **The majority of the IPT was supportive of using the current yield stream (based on SSC's recommendations) to set ABC and include lowest ABC in the series as a constant catch option beginning in 2023 to keep the amendment moving forward.**
  - The terminal year of the assessment is 2017.
  - Mean age of fish harvested commercially is 4-5 yrs old, recreational is 3 yrs old. As such, projections for 2020 onwards are mostly unrealized.
  - If the Councils choose to request a constant catch projection to set the ABC based on the current assessment, it will be based on a fictitious population from that assessment.
  - The projected catch level for 2024-2025 is close to MSY.
  - There is a very narrow buffer between OFL and ABC.
  - Requesting constant catch projection would delay amendment development. Both SSCs would have to review and provide input before incorporating in the amendment.
- Regarding the option for the jurisdictional allocation, the Councils would need to provide rationale for keeping the current jurisdictional allocation (based on the same time series of data, albeit with revised landings).
- Further research into recreational landings is needed before the IPT can provide additional options for the jurisdictional allocation formula time series.

Subsequent to the IPT call, another option to obtain a constant catch-ABC was discussed among IPT leads: **The Councils could request an update to the assessment to include three more years of data (2018-2020) and a constant catch projection based on the update.**

- An update to the assessment would also require the SSCs to review but may only delay amendment development for an additional two months than if the Councils were to request a constant catch projection based on the current assessment.
- Analysts would have the chance to address possible issues with 2017 recreational data to improve the assessment.

## **Committee Action:**

- Guidance on options for setting ABC.
  - a. Retain current ABC recommendations?
  - b. Request constant catch projection based on current assessment (with data through 2017)?

- c. Request update to assessment to add data through 2020 with a constant catch projection in addition to annual catch levels?
- Guidance on range of alternatives for sector allocations action for the South Atlantic?
- Guidance on actions to address management measures and accountability measures?
  - Does the Council want to consider commercial trip limits?
  - Accountability measures would be examined after sector allocations are resolved and changed only if necessary.