

Summary Report

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Meeting

April 18-20, 2022

The South Atlantic Council's Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC on April 18-20, 2022.

The AP approved minutes from the October 2021 meeting and the agenda for the April 2022 meeting.

Jessica McCawley, Chair of the Snapper Grouper Committee for the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council), provided opening remarks along with a framework for what the Council was looking for from the AP at the meeting.

1. Update on recent regulation changes and status of amendments

Council staff updated the AP on the status of recent and developing Council actions including Snapper Grouper Amendment 50 (Red Porgy Rebuilding and Allocations) and Snapper Grouper Amendment 48 (Wreckfish ITQ Program Modernization).

2. Fishery Performance Report update for Black Sea Bass

With input from the AP, Fishery Performance Reports (FPRs) have been developed for several snapper grouper species, including black sea bass in 2017. The intent of the FPRs is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPRs will be provided to the SSC, the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP), and the Council to assist in their discussions. An operational assessment (SEDAR 76) for the black sea bass stock in the South Atlantic is scheduled for completion by mid-2023.

Council staff provided an overview of landings trends as well as other background information and the AP focused their input based on a series of discussion questions, including information requests from the SEDAR 76 analytical team, from which the FPR for black sea bass was updated. A copy of the full report will be posted along with other FPRs, including the previously completed FPR for black sea bass, at: <https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/FPRAll/>.

3. Amendment 46 – Recreational Permitting/Reporting

At the March 2022 meeting, the Council discussed the Amendment 46 and decided to continue work on the amendment by:

- Considering development of a private recreational permit for the snapper grouper fishery with options that would create a vessel or individual permit.
- Implement reporting requirements that may cover all species or a select group of species.
- Establish an ad hoc advisory panel to aid in the technical aspects of permit development.

The Council is scheduled to establish membership of the ad hoc advisory panel at the June 2022 meeting and will next discuss Amendment 46 at the September 2022 meeting. The AP was updated on the progress of Amendment 46 and provided the following comments:

- For reporting, consider prioritizing a smaller group of species and then potentially expand later.
- A private recreational permit is greatly needed. This amendment should be highly prioritized and move as fast as possible.
- To have permit come through without reporting could introduce moral hazard.
- Permit may aid in outreach/education efforts. Potentially distribute materials with issue of a permit.
- The commercial sector identified when they had too many participants; Is there a max number of recreational permits that should be allowed?
- Need to get data that can be used in stock assessments and need tangible result from requiring a permit.
- There are examples already in place such as the federal HMS permit.
- Having educated fishermen makes better compliance and management and a short test could be administered ahead of time. Not sure if testing to issue a permit is realistic.

4. Regulatory Amendment 35 – Snapper Grouper Release Mortality and Red Snapper

In March 2022, the Council initiated a regulatory amendment to reduce release mortality in the snapper grouper fishery and implement catch levels for red snapper based on the SEDAR 73 stock assessment. SEDAR 73 indicating that the South Atlantic red snapper stock is overfished and experiencing overfishing, but is making adequate progress according to its current rebuilding plan. The assessment indicated that the majority of red snapper fishing mortality occurs as release mortality rather than through landings. While increased use of best practices, including descending devices, has increased survival rates for released fish, the high number of red snapper caught out of season has resulted in a high number of fish estimated to die as a result of being caught and released. Therefore, the Council is investigating potential management measures to reduce out-of-season encounters for red snapper, as well as other snapper grouper species.

The AP discussed the amendment and worked through a series of questions aimed at gathering background information on how the snapper grouper fishery generally operates regionally and input on how the Council could move forward. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

1. Discussion question: *What time of year do you typically fish shallower water? What time of year do you typically fish deeper water?*
 - a. *Generally speaking, what depth do you consider “deeper water” for your fishing practices? Please state region and sector/component so this can be noted with response.*
 - Lower Florida Keys: Deeper water is greater than 140 feet for bottom fishing.
 - South Florida: Typically fish shallower water in colder weather. Deeper water is typically considered beyond 180 feet.

- Northeast Florida: Typically fish in inshore and shallow in the Winter (more mackerel fishing in this time and area). Fish deeper in warmer weather/summer months. Deep water is typically beyond 150 feet.
 - Georgia: In the winter typically fish shallower (less than 100 ft) and fish deeper in the summer.
 - South Carolina: Fish shallower in winter and deeper in the summer months; may move to the nearshore reefs in September. Deep water is considered greater than 150 feet.
 - Charter/HB South Carolina: Shallow water is within 30 nautical miles. From Mid-March through November typically fish depths of 45-75 feet, which is 5-35 nautical miles from shore. Tend to stay within 120 ft most of the time due to current.
 - Southern North Carolina: Fish shallow water in May and deeper water (greater than 150 feet) in winter.
 - Central North Carolina: Shallow water is 100-200 feet often targeting black sea bass and triggerfish. Move deeper to at least 60 fathoms for snowy grouper and blueline tilefish.
 - Northern North Carolina: Fish shallower water in April and November; deeper from May through September.
2. Discussion question: *Consider species that are targeted in areas of your region where red snapper are frequently caught and released while out of season. Consider local and sector effects in responses to the following questions:*
- a. *What are these target species?*
 - Florida Keys– Greater amberjack, mutton snapper (180-220 ft). Also, vermilion snapper, margate, and deep water grouper fishing west of Key West up to 500 ft.
 - South Florida - Amberjack in 180-220 feet. When catching mutton snapper, grouper, triggerfish typically not interacting with red snapper if within 70-220 feet. Sharks are a pervasive issue.
 - Northeast Florida (Daytona area, commercial) – Vermilion and mangrove snapper. In 60-120 feet, target vermilion and triggerfish off bottom until red snapper find you. Red snapper pervasive directly on the bottom.
 - Changed technique to vertically avoid.
 - Georgia – Triggerfish, black sea bass, and gag.
 - South Carolina - Black sea bass, gray triggerfish, vermilion snapper, greater amberjack, grunts, scamp, gag, red grouper, and porgies in 60-200 feet.
 - Target grouper June-Dec; larger circle hook reduces red snapper interactions.
 - Southeast North Carolina – From January through April target trigger fish and black sea bass with few interactions with red snapper (in 70-110 feet).
 - Central North Carolina – Previous areas fished for black sea bass and triggerfish can't be fished due to abundance of red snapper and sharks. Red snapper abundance today is similar to 80s.
 - Northeast North Carolina – Black sea bass, gray triggerfish, vermilion snapper, greater amberjack, and grunts in 60 feet - 200 feet.

- b. *What are the most critical times of year to retain access to these species? Are there times of year when fishing for these species could be closed or reduced if it meant a greater ACL and a longer season for red snapper?*
- Need assurance that any measures would be backed by a change to the red snapper ABC recommendation.
 - Several AP member stated they do not want to lose access to other species and expressed disagreement with reductions to some species to increase harvest of others.
 - The AP thinks that the stock is rebuilt. Management should not be considering further reductions for red snapper.
 - Florida – Red snapper encounters more in deeper water.
 - Fish deeper water in summer, also when grouper is open.
 - Lower Keys (Charter) - Dependent on bottom fishing. Red snapper are not an important species in this area, so don't want to lose any access for other species.
 - South Florida - amberjack & mutton March-July is critical; black grouper May 1 is critical.
 - April closure for greater amberjack; so in May, greater amberjack and grouper are especially critical.
 - More red snapper encounters in deeper water.
 - Fish deeper water in summer, also when grouper is open.
 - Northeast Florida - Interact with red snapper when targeting vermilion snapper, triggerfish, and greater amberjack.
 - Need full access to these species rather than increased access to red snapper.
 - May-February are critical (commercial).
 - Georgia – For black sea bass, December-February.
 - Keep vermilion snapper, April through June and September through October.
 - Southeast South Carolina (Bluffton) – For black sea bass, December-February.
 - For vermilion snapper, April through June and September through October.
 - Could consider reduction at other times for these species in this area.
 - South Carolina (for-hire) – Don't need to reduce others for red snapper.
 - Southeast North Carolina – Fewer red snapper interactions in winter in 70-120 ft; don't want to lose access to other species for red snapper.
 - Central North Carolina – Not able to reduce area/time of access to other species for greater retainment of red snapper. Interact with red snapper year-round.
 - Northeast North Carolina – Critical time is April-November. Access year-round is important and needed.
- c. *Considering decreased release survival at greater depths (increased barotrauma effects), if it meant a greater ACL and a longer season for red snapper, are there specific areas or depths of water that could be closed during non-critical times of year?*

- Many AP members felt that area or depth-based closures should not be considered.
- It was noted that access to shallow water is critical in the winter for South Florida.
- A bottom closure greater than 120ft could be considered for the recreational sector during the Shallow Water Grouper Closure (North Carolina).
- One member suggested closing red snapper to match the Shallow Water Grouper Closure and opening a 2 month season on either end of the SWG closure (South Carolina).

Other Comments:

- Consensus Statement:

For Amendment 35, the AP was asked to provide suggestions to further reduce red snapper interactions while fishing for other species.

The AP was asked to consider punitive actions that may include bottom fishing closures and altered or shut seasons for other species in order to avoid red snapper interactions.

The AP presented opinion and suggestions in the best of faith. However, the overriding opinion and feeling of the AP is that red snapper are recovered. This is based on the collective on-the-water experience of the AP members. The AP overwhelmingly feels they were asked for suggestions to solve a problem that no longer exists.

The red snapper is highly abundant. The biomass of the species is largely assumed by the AP as recovered and sufficient in abundance and range to begin a pathway to more liberal regulation of the species.

- Investigate how effort could change if more fish were allowed to be kept during an open season.
- Hatteras for-hire sector would like Council to consider a red snapper recreational season (both components) earlier in the year.
 - Potential additional benefits to black sea bass and grouper
 - May reduce the red snapper population, reducing encounters before summer fishery
 - Current season in peak of spawning
- If measures are enacted, consider regional differences in how the fisheries operate.
- Gear modifications could be considered to reduce overall discards in the recreational fishery:
 - Single hook rigs (seasonal) (Priority: 1)
 - Trigger fishing (2 hook chicken rigs)
 - Grouper fishing (1 hook)
 - Jigs (with size or no live bait requirements) (Priority: 2)
 - Apply regionally north of 28 degrees.
 - “Weak hook” requirements (possibly seasonal basis)
 - Minimum hook size and maximum leader length (6-8 in) attached to heavy weight.
 - What gets best “bang for buck” for gear restrictions?
 - Consider coupling hot spot with gear restriction rather than complete closure

MOTION 1: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL EXCLUDE THE COMMERCIAL SNAPPER GROUPER FEDERAL PERMITTED FISHERMEN FROM DISCARD MORTALITY REDUCTION MEASURES IMPLEMENTED THROUGH REGULATORY AMENDMENT 35.

MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 2: RECOMMEND THAT FEDERALLY PERMITTED CHARTER AND HEAD BOATS BE EXCLUDED FROM SEASONAL OR SPATIAL CLOSURES CONSIDERED IN REGULATORY AMENDMENT 35.

MOTION APPROVED

5. Amendment 49 – Greater Amberjack

In March 2022, the Council reviewed the draft amendment and approved it for public hearings. The Council changed its selected preferred alternatives for Action 2 (sector allocations) and Action 3 (recreational minimum size limit) and chose not to select a preferred alternative for Action 4 (commercial minimum size limit) prior to public hearings. The Council requested additional feedback from the AP on actions included in Amendment 49, particularly with consideration of cumulative effects of multiple management changes for greater amberjack as well as management changes being considered through other ongoing amendments for the snapper grouper fishery. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

Comments:

- In general, there were concerns over the health of the greater amberjack stock. It was noted that:
 - Greater amberjack may be in similar situation to gag or snowy in that they appear to be declining; may be better to be more conservative now (North Carolina).
 - Not seeing as many greater amberjack in recent years (North Carolina; Cape Canaveral and Stuart, Florida).
 - The fishery has not been catching ACL as it currently stands.
- It is important to keep greater amberjack open, including April, as a larger species that can be retained on a recreational trip (South Carolina- Charter).

MOTION 3: RECOMMEND THE FOLLOWING TO THE COUNCIL:

1. TOTAL ACL EQUALS THE 2026/2027+ ABC (2,669,000 LBS)
2. KEEP THE CURRENT ALLOCATION (ACTION 2 - ALTERNATIVE 1), 59.34% RECREATIONAL AND 40.66% COMMERCIAL
3. KEEP THE CURRENT RECREATIONAL SIZE LIMIT (ACTION 3 – ALTERNATIVE 1), 28 INCHES.
4. CHANGE THE COMMERCIAL MINIMUM SIZE LIMIT TO 34 INCHES.
5. KEEP THE APRIL SPAWNING CLOSURE AS IT CURRENTLY IS (ACTION 6 – ALTERNATIVE 1).
6. RETAIN THE CURRENT TRIP LIMIT FOR BOTH COMMERCIAL SEASONS (ACTION 5 – ALTERNATIVE 1).

MOTION APPROVED

Rationale for motion: Compromise and working together between sectors and regions for most equitable fishery possible, and retaining sustainability in the amberjack fishery. General consensus that the AP does not feel the stock is as healthy as suggested by the assessment.

6. Amendment 51 – Snowy Grouper

The Council directed staff to start work on a plan amendment in June of 2021 in response to the most recent snowy grouper assessment (SEDAR 36 Update 2020). This assessment indicated that the South Atlantic stock of snowy grouper is both overfished and experiencing overfishing. Amendment 51 will update the ABC, ACL and OY, allocations, and management measures for snowy grouper. Snowy grouper currently has a 34-year rebuilding plan in place ending in 2042 that will not be modified through Amendment 51. During the March 2022 meeting the Council reviewed scoping comments, which mainly discussed the reduction of the commercial trip limit, made modifications to actions and options, and requested specific feedback from the AP on the commercial trip limit and recreational season. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

Comments:

- Seasonality:
 - Typically year-round fishing, weather permitting. Historically April was an important month.
 - Golden tilefish hook and line (GT H/L) boats need snowy grouper open during the GT H/L season.
 - Longliners catch them as bycatch throughout the longline golden tilefish season.
 - Near the end of golden tilefish longline season, boats will target snowy and yellowedge grouper.
 - Some boats do a few snowy targeted trips after golden tilefish longline season closes.
- Regional Differences:
 - Weather can cause access differences across the region.
 - South FL – year-round fishing due to proximity to deep water.
 - There are concerns over snowy grouper discards while targeting golden and blueline tilefish (when snowy grouper are out of season or catches exceed 200 pounds in-season).
- Deepwater closure after private recreational season?
 - Can't just close area for snowy grouper – tilefish and snowy should coincide.
 - Golden tile is open year-round. Blueline tilefish is open when snowy is open.
 - Not in favor of a depth-based closure.
 - Recreational access is easier with updated technology.
- AP Concerns:
 - MRIP FES may be underestimating all recreational snowy catch.
 - Typically catching both snowy and tilefish on the relatively similar locations (around 360 feet).
 - Are fish north of Hatteras being accurately accounted for?
 - 100% release mortality may be inaccurate – descending devices are effective for this species. Improved education for deep water best fishing practices could be helpful.

Recommendations:

- Retain the 200 lbs gw trip limit (currently Preferred Alternative 1 (No Action) in Action 3).
- Consider increasing the commercial trip limit (Action 3).
- Choose Alternative 2 as preferred in Action 4 (recreational season). This will coincide with the opening for shallow water grouper.

MOTION 4: AP RECOMMENDS ADDING AN ALTERNATIVE THAT WOULD RETAIN THE IN-SEASON AM AND REMOVE THE STOCK STATUS FROM THE POST-SEASON AM.

MOTION APPROVED

7. Amendment 52 – Golden Tilefish and Blueline Tilefish

The Council received the results of the golden tilefish assessment ([SEDAR 66](#)) and the SSC's recommendations for the overfishing limit (OFL) and ABC at their June 2021 meeting. The SSC determined the stock is no longer experiencing overfishing, nor overfished. The Council directed staff to begin work on a plan amendment. The Council, during the December 2021 meeting, reviewed the AP's input in October 2021 and an options paper for golden tilefish. After receiving an overview from NMFS SERO on overages of the blueline tilefish, the Council added blueline tilefish to the amendment and approved it for scoping. Scoping was conducted in February of 2022 and during the March 2022 meeting the Council reviewed scoping comments and modified golden tilefish actions and alternatives and added actions to address postseason accountability measures for the blueline tilefish recreational sector and modification to recreational management measures. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

Comments:

Actions 1 and 2

- Clarify that catch levels are dependent on when the amendment is implemented.
- Continued concern about uncertainty of recreational data, especially for deepwater species, and improving technology that allows more people to access them.

Action 3

- Golden tilefish is important for the market when SWG are closed.
- Longline endorsement holders may benefit from a January 15 opening.
 - Social benefits to families at the start of the year.
 - Extend fishing closer to Easter.
- Retain the January 1 start date for the HL sector to allow them a “head start” for the year before the LL sector begins fishing.
- More and more participation in the HL fishery (also buoy gear in recent years) is rationale for consideration of a HL endorsement.

Action 4

- Public comments provided to AP members:
 - incidental allowance for the LL sector is not acceptable
 - LL fishermen would like consideration of a bycatch allowance
- After LL fishing is over, there is bycatch of golden tilefish and a bycatch allowance would reduce unnecessary mortality and allow for the fish to enter the market
- Some vessels with LL endorsements continue to fish for yellowedge grouper after the golden tilefish LL quota is caught. Also target sharks and wreckfish.
- Consider a hook and line endorsement to allow vessels that use longline to be allowed to retain golden tilefish after the LL quota is harvested
- Consider subtracting the bycatch allowance from the following year's LL quota
- Consider possible regional inequality in access (NC vs. FL)

Action 6

- North of Cape Hatteras, blueline tilefish are abundant in shallower water.
- Eliminating possession by captain and crew would be appropriate if needed; however, the Council could consider waiting until after the stock assessment is completed to consider changes to management measures.
- Blueline tilefish is an important species for the for-hire sector in northeastern NC. When dolphin or tuna are not available, blueline tilefish fill that gap.
- 3 per person with a maximum of 18.
- Consideration of current economic conditions to make changes to the possession limit for captain and crew.

Action 7

- Consider making the season coincide with the snowy grouper recreational season (alternative 4: May 1-June 30)

MOTION 5: RECOMMEND THAT THE COMMERCIAL LONGLINE SECTOR OPEN ON JANUARY 15. (ACTION 3, SUB-ALTERNATIVE 2a)

MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 6: CONSIDER A GOLDEN TILEFISH HOOK-AND-LINE ENDORSEMENT AND BRING BACK TO THE AP AT A LATER DATE

MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 7: CONVENE A MEETING OF THE LONGLINE ENDORSEMENT HOLDERS TO DISCUSS WAYS TO MANAGE THEIR FISHERY.

MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 8: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER CONVENING A MEETING OF THE LONGLINE ENDORSMENT HOLDERS TO EXPLORE WAYS TO ADDRESS THE BYCATCH ISSUE.

MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 9: RECOMMEND ALTERNATIVE 2 AS PREFERRED (ACTION 5; REC AMS FOR GT)
MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 10: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL SELECT ALTERNATIVE 1 AS PREFERRED (ACTION 7; BT REC SEASON)
MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 11: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL SELECT ALTERNATIVE 2 AS PREFERRED (ACTION 8; REC AMS FOR BT)
MOTION APPROVED

8. Update on Amendment 53 – Gag Grouper

The Council directed staff to start work on a plan amendment in June of 2021 in response to the most recent gag assessment (SEDAR 71 2021). This assessment indicated that the South Atlantic stock of gag is both overfished and experiencing overfishing. Amendment 53 will establish a rebuilding plan, update the ABC, ACL and OY, allocations, and management measures for gag. During the March 2022 meeting the Council reviewed scoping comments, which mainly discussed restrictions to spearfishing gear. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

Action 1

- The private recreational sector needs to be defined (i.e., tag or endorsement) for gag to have a better chance of rebuilding.

Action 3

- Both a 300 lbs (Alternative 3) and 400 lbs (Alternative 4) were noted as the AP's preferred alternatives for this action.
- An AP member noted that a smaller trip limit should be put in place if spearfishing is allowed during the rebuilding.
- The commercial sector would like to see a longer commercial season versus a larger trip limit.

Action 4

- An additional spring month added to the spawning season closure would be optimal.

Sub-action 5a

- The AP recommended a vessel limit of 4 or 6 fish per vessel (Alternatives 3 or 4).

Sub-action 5b

- Some AP members noted that an additional spring month added to the spawning season closure would be optimal, however it was also noted that it is crucial for the charter sector to open May 1.

9. Elect Chair/Vice Chair

The AP elected Bob Lorenz to be the new Chair and James Paskiewicz as the new Vice Chair.

MOTION 12: ELECT BOB LORENZ AS CHAIR AND JAMES PASKIEWICZ AS VICE CHAIR.

MOTION APPROVED

10. Other Business

The AP had a brief discussion about NMFS Observer Program and Commercial Discard Logbook Program noting the following:

- The AP was interested in knowing if there will there be an expense associated with carrying an observer?
- There was concern about liability and insurance associated with carrying observers.

The AP also expressed concern over the growing fishery for barrelfish and made the recommendation to consider adding barrelfish to the South Atlantic Snapper Grouper FMP.