

Summary Report

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

Crowne Plaza
4831 Tanger Outlet Boulevard
North Charleston, SC

April 17-19, 2017

Members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council)'s Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP), convened at the Crowne Plaza in North Charleston, SC to discuss topics supporting management of the snapper grouper fishery in the South Atlantic region. Below is a summary of the AP's discussions and recommendations. Please note that unless noted or in the form of a motion, the comments below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

Update on Recent and Upcoming Management Changes

Council staff briefed the AP on the status of recently submitted amendments and the expected timeframe for new regulations to become effective. In addition, the AP received an overview of regulatory changes in the snapper grouper fishery since 2014.

Red Snapper Management and Recreational Reporting

Council staff presented an overview of the options paper focusing on possible management measures for red snapper, should there be a limited amount of harvest allowed. Staff explained that an Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for red snapper will be discussed at the April 2017 Scientific and Statistical Commercial meeting, hence the amount of red snapper harvest that would be allowed is still unknown. Scientists from the NOAA Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) and the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) will discuss approaches to arrive at an ABC for red snapper during an upcoming meeting.

On possible management measures for the commercial harvest of red snapper, the AP's remarks included the following:

- In the Gulf of Mexico there are different minimum size limits for the recreational and commercial sectors. Perhaps consider that for the South Atlantic also?
- Regarding a possible trip limit, the AP stated that specifying it in numbers of fish might lead to high grading. If the allowable harvest results in a low trip limit, then don't consider a size limit. Consider conducting analyses that would determine the trip limit level at which a minimum size limit would be appropriate.
- Some AP members remarked that, because of the depths where commercial harvest takes place, there shouldn't be a minimum size limit requirement due to barotrauma concerns. Consider full retention for the commercial sector.
- Red snapper should continue to be managed as a bycatch fishery in the commercial sector.

- Prohibiting spearfishing gear for the harvest of red snapper may create enforcement issues because most spearfishermen also use hook-and-line gear in the same trip.

On possible management measures for the recreational sector, the AP’s remarks included the following:

- Consider initially allowing a recreational harvest two days per week. That would make it easier for fishermen to plan trips and for enforcement.
- Also keep in mind that harvest in Florida state waters is still allowed.
- Include list of “acceptable” descending devices (NMFS-approved?)
- Staff noted that the Council prefers to not consider closed areas but they did not instruct staff to remove alternatives from consideration at this time.
- Of the season alternatives for recreational snapper grouper fishing, only sub-alternative 6c (fishing season October-December) makes sense since 6b (fishing season Jan-May) would overlap with the existing shallow-water grouper closed season and 6a (fishing season May-August) would allow fishing during the red snapper spawning season.
- Consider adding distance-off-beach to closed area alternatives (this would be challenging in the South Atlantic because of the structure of the shelf, etc.).
- AP members have observed a lot more discards of red snapper in the Keys in recent times in shallow water (therefore the Council should consider at broader range of depths).
- AP members reiterated their support for some type of Federal Reef Fish Stamp. They pointed out that the Magnuson Stevens Act is scheduled for reauthorization soon and a current bill would pave the way for this requirement.
- Staff reminded the AP that the Council approved an amendment that would require for a portion of private recreational anglers to report if selected. However that has never been implemented because of OMB requirements.
- Staff also informed the AP that a grant had been funded to develop a reporting app for private recreational anglers.

The AP approved the following motions:

MOTION: RECOMMEND ALTERNATIVE 2, SUB-ALTERNATIVE 2C, AS PREFERRED (UNDER ACTION TO DEVELOP A PERMIT FOR PRIVATE REC).

Alternative 2. Require a federal recreational permit in the South Atlantic Region (federal waters only) for recreational fishermen to fish for, harvest, or possess:

Sub-alternative 2c. All species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit.
APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUSLY)

MOTION: REQUEST THAT THE COUNCIL MOVE FORWARD WITH ALTERNATIVE 3, SUB-ALTERNATIVE 3B

Alternative 3. Establish conditions to renew or maintain a valid permit.

Sub-alternative 3b. A permit cannot be renewed until all logbook reports for the previous year have been filed.

APPROVED BY AP (16 IN FAVOR, 1 OPPOSED)

intent is to require reporting requirements to be fulfilled for the previous year (or fill out a survey) to renew permit

The AP had the following input regarding components for a possible recreational permit:

Fisher permit or vessel permit?

- AP members feel it should be an individual permit (many fishermen have multiple vessels)
- Effort is measured at the individual level so the permit should go to the individual.

What type of data?

- Is this the general information supplied by individual applying for permit or the information the permit-holder is required to provide once he obtains a permit?
- Some AP members feel that requesting too much information from fishermen will cloud the intent of identifying who is fishing for snapper grouper species.
- Make the requirement very basic to begin with.
- Request information on gear type. Look at templates from state-run programs (i.e., Florida charterboat program)

Permit Requirements?

- Consider lower percentages of mandatory reporting to make the requirement less intimidating and lessen the likelihood that the reported data will be inaccurate (biased).
- Consider adding more alternatives to broaden range.
- Consider adding flexibility to alternatives that would allow for percentage of anglers required to report to be easily changed. Also, first focus on narrowing down universe of reef fish anglers before determining how many of them need to report.

Frequency of Reporting?

- Opposition to requirement to report prior to disembarking due to safety issues, etc.

MOTION: RECOMMEND COUNCIL ADD SUB-ALTERNATIVES FOR 1% AND 10% OF PRIVATE RECREATIONAL ANGLERS SELECTED EACH YEAR TO ELECTRONICALLY REPORT THEIR CATCH.

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUSLY)

CLARIFY THAT REPORTING REQUIREMENT ALTERNATIVES PERTAIN ONLY TO WHATEVER PERCENTAGE OF PRIVATE ANGLERS IS SELECTED TO REPORT ELECTRONICALLY UNDER ALTERNATIVE 2

The AP had the following input regarding Best Fishing Practices:

- Descending devices are easier to use than venting tools. Recommend moving away from venting.
- Voluntary vs. requirement? AP members recommend voluntary.
- If descending devices will be required, then there should be a depth component to promote compliance.
- Require descending devices for all snapper grouper species. Device should be on the vessel and be a requirement for permit.
- Single-hook rigs: for red snapper only or all SG species? Only reasonable alternative is to require for all snapper grouper species. Fishermen are using double-hook rigs now and the possession limit for red snapper is zero.
- Single-hook rigs make sense only for deep-water species.

The AP had the following input on circle-hooks:

- Not required south of 28 degrees because yellowtail fishermen use dehookers that only work on J hooks.
- Some AP members stated that the circle hook exemption should apply only to the yellowtail fishery and the Council should consider removing the requirement to use circle hooks north of 28 degrees.
- The initial requirement to use circle hooks was to avoid hook trauma on red snapper. This benefit is limited to red snapper only, however. Some AP members, therefore, do not support removing restriction on circle hooks because they have proven beneficial for red snapper and that is the “choke” species in the region.

Vision Blueprint Regulatory Amendment 26 - Recreational Management Measures

Council staff facilitated discussion on the suite of actions and alternatives included in the amendment and requested the AP’s input on each action. The AP had the following comments and recommendations on each of the actions currently included in the amendment:

Action 1. Establish a recreational aggregate bag limit and recreational season for deep-water species

- Concern that alternatives for 1-fish of any one species would significantly increase discards.
- Concern that available recreational data are minimal.
- Season for deepwater species is a good idea.
- Include information on PSEs for deepwater species.
- Concern that ACLs are being exceeded and will continue to be.
- Need for better region-wide survey to get information on deepwater species.
- Recreational effort for deepwater species in south Florida has increased.
- Recommend excluding sand tilefish from deep-water species aggregate.

MOTION: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL CONSIDER A SUB-ALTERNATIVE FROM MAY 1 TO JUNE 30 AS SEASON FOR DEEPWATER SPECIES.
APPROVED BY AP (2 OPPOSED, 1 ABSTENTION)

Action 2. Establish a recreational aggregate bag limit for shallow-water grouper species

- Need information on whether limits are being met, how many fishermen are meeting the aggregate bag limits. Council staff conducted some preliminary analyses indicating very few fishermen were meeting aggregate bag limit.
- In the Florida Keys, fishermen are seeing abundance of black grouper.
- Concern about red grouper becoming a “choke species.”

Action 3. Modify the 10-snapper and 20-fish recreational aggregate bag limits

- Concern about making regulations too complicated. Sub-alternatives 2c and 2d (2c: Within the 20-fish aggregate, no more than 10 fish can be of any one species; 2d: Within the 20-fish aggregate, no more than 5 fish can be of any one species) may be enough to capture the need to reduce take for some species.
- Five yellowtail within the aggregate may be too low for fishermen in the Keys.
- Consider adding flexibility in aggregate bag limits since fishery is so diverse and certain species are not available in some areas.

MOTION: AP RECOMMENDS ALTERNATIVE 1, NO ACTION, FOR ACTION 3.
APPROVED BY AP (11 IN FAVOR/6 OPPOSED/ 1 ABSTENTION)

MOTION: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL EXPLORE BAG LIMIT OF PORGIES (3 FISH, 5 FISH) WITHIN THE 20-FISH AGGREGATE
APPROVED BY AP (1 OPPOSED)

MOTION: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL EXPLORE A 20 FISH AGGREGATE OF SPECIES CURRENTLY IN THE 10-SNAPPER AGGREGATE AND THE 20-FISH AGGREGATE

APPROVED BY AP (1 OPPOSED/1 ABSTENTION)

INTENT TO MAINTAIN THE CURRENT BAG LIMITS WITHIN THE AGGREGATE (I.E., GRAY SNAPPER IS 10)

Action 4. Modify the seasonal prohibition on recreational harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers

- Concern about not having results of stock assessment on red grouper. May be premature until it is known whether a reduction in harvest, and if so how much, is needed.
- Concern that after closure having been in place for many years there is no apparent increase in population.
- Existing closure already covers the bulk of spawn for these species.

MOTION: AP RECOMMENDS NO ACTION ON MODIFYING THE SHALLOW-WATER GROUPER CLOSURE

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUSLY)

Action 5. Remove the recreational minimum size limits for deep-water snapper species

MOTION: RECOMMEND REMOVAL OF MINIMUM SIZE LIMIT FOR DEEP-WATER SPECIES
APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUSLY)

Action 6. Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for black sea bass

- Concern about how change in size limit would affect bag limit and length of season

MOTION: AP RECOMMENDS REDUCING RECREATIONAL MINIMUM SIZE LIMIT FOR BLACK SEA BASS TO 12 INCHES (ALTERNATIVE 2)
APPROVED BY AP (6 OPPOSED)

Action 7. Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for gray triggerfish in federal waters off East Florida

MOTION: AP RECOMMENDS ALTERNATIVE 2, REDUCING THE MSL FOR GRAY TRIGGERFISH OFF EAST FLORIDA TO 12 INCHES
APPROVED BY AP (1 ABSTENTION)

Vision Blueprint Regulatory Amendment 27 - Commercial Management Measures

Council staff facilitated discussion on the suite of actions and alternatives included in the amendment and requested the AP's input on each action. The AP had the following comments and recommendations on each of the actions currently included in the amendment:

Action 1. Establish a commercial split season for blueline tilefish

- Commercial harvest of blueline and snowy needs to be kept in line, especially important for fishery off the Carolinas after vermilion and gray triggerfish close. However, fishermen are also targeting blueline and snowy early in the year.
- Concern about ongoing assessment. Possibly wait to take action until after the assessment results are available?

MOTION: AP RECOMMENDS ALTERNATIVE 1, NO ACTION, ON SPLITTING THE COMMERCIAL SEASON FOR BLUELINE TILEFISH
APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUSLY)

Action 2. Establish a commercial split season for red porgy

- Discard issue exists but there is also a market issue. Red porgy is important for the market when vermilion snapper and gray triggerfish close.
- Concern about moving forward with management changes ahead of the stock assessment.
- Concern that the fishery-independent survey (MARMAP) only samples in warm months of the year and fishermen report seeing large schools off NC during cold months.

- Consider trip limit modification to address discards and still consider split season. Consider a low trip limit (bycatch allowance) when vermilion and triggerfish are still open.

MOTION: CONSIDER TRIP LIMIT MODIFICATION TO ADDRESS DISCARDS AND STILL CONSIDER SPLIT SEASON. ANALYZE A RANGE OF TRIP LIMIT OPTIONS: 30 FISH TO 60 FISH IN SEASON 1 (DURING THE MONTHS OF THE SPAWNING CLOSURE).

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUSLY)

Action 3. Establish a commercial split season for snowy grouper

- AP reiterates that snowy and blueline seasons, if implemented, should be in line.

MOTION: CONSIDER A TRIP LIMIT STEP-DOWN/REDUCTION IN THE SNOWY AND BLUELINE TRIP LIMITS TO COINCIDE WITH OPENING OF SHALLOW-WATER GROUPER ON MAY 1. CONSIDER OTHER OPTIONS TO LENGTHEN SEASON (INCLUDING STEP-DOWN WHEN A CERTAIN PERCENTAGE OF THE ACL IS MET).

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUSLY)

Action 4. Establish a commercial split season for greater amberjack

- AP supports exploring use of commercial split season to lengthen amberjack harvest
- Consider trip limit reduction or step-down to achieve objective of lengthening season and improving access.
- Consider reduction in trip limit and/or step-down to allow season to last all year.

Action 5. Modify the commercial trip limit for vermilion snapper in the second season

- AP supports exploring alternatives as presented.
- Perhaps also consider trip limit reduction in first season as well (although some AP members stated concern about weather being a factor in some areas that would disadvantage some fishermen at a lower trip limit than the current one and not that many species available for market during first season).

MOTION: AP RECOMMENDS ALTERNATIVE 2

Alternative 2. Implement a 750 lbs gw vermilion snapper commercial trip limit for the second season (July 1 through December 31). The commercial trip limit is reduced to 500 lbs gw when 75% of the second season quota is met or is projected to be met.

APPROVED BY AP (2 ABSTENTIONS)

Action 6. Implement a commercial trip limit for the Other Jacks Complex

- AP reiterates concern over almaco jack. AP had previously recommended removing almaco from the complex and implementing a trip limit on that species.
- Analysis should include season length under no trip limit and under proposed trip limits.

- If possible, break down landings by species to determine whether a single species is driving the harvest.

Action 7. Modify the seasonal prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers

MOTION: AP RECOMENDS ALTERNATIVE 1, NO ACTION, FOR MODIFYING THE SHALLOW WATER GROUPEr CLOSURE FOR THE COMMERCIAL SECTOR

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUSLY)

Action 8. Remove the commercial minimum size limits for deep-water snapper species
AP had the same recommendation on this action as for the recreational sector.

Action 9. Reduce the commercial minimum size limit for gray triggerfish in federal waters off East Florida.

AP had the same recommendation on this action as for the recreational sector.

Discussion on Buoy Gear

The AP briefly discussed use of buoy gear in the snapper grouper fishery. The AP made the following comments:

- Currently, this type of gear is being used to target golden tilefish. It is very expensive gear and used exclusively (off NC) on golden tilefish. Gear is very effective and shortens golden tilefish trips. Being used to harvest the hook-and-line trip limit on golden tilefish because it covers a large area and makes trips more efficient.
- Gear is not soaking for long periods of time; it is being monitored continuously and there appears to be no issue with discards.
- There appear to be no concerns at this time regarding impacts to protected resources.
- Chain is being used instead of a weight on the bottom by vessels targeting snowy, yellowedge, and blueline tilefish off SC.
- Buoy gear used in west Florida shelf to target red grouper. Was used at one time for red grouper in Onslow Bay.
- Suggestion to check on whether there are proposed modifications to buoy gear in the Gulf. Look at trip ticket data to determine extend that this gear is being used? Are there requirements to report lost buoy gear?
- Ghost fishing does not appear to be an issue.
- South Carolina boats are using 7 or less sets of buoy gear.

Discussion on limited-entry for the for-hire component of the snapper grouper fishery

The AP had the following comments regarding the Council's possible consideration of a limited entry program for the for-hire component of the snapper grouper fishery:

- Concern about number of charter vessels operating without federal permits in federal waters.

- A limited entry program would identify the universe of for-hire vessels in the South Atlantic region.
- For vessels with dual permits, there is concern about losing catch history because there is no way of tracking open access permits since they are not numbered. This needs to be considered if a limited entry program were to be developed.
- Concern about number of for-hire vessels not having proper safety requirements under current system.
- Concern about permits being consolidated and acquiring a high value under a limited entry system. If one were to be considered, a sunset provision would alleviate these concerns.
- Concern about proper enforcement. Perception that some fishermen are already breaking the law so what would a limited entry system do to alleviate that?
- Suggestion to evaluate changes in number and distribution of permits in all the South Atlantic states since 2012.
- Out of 500 for-hire vessels in South Carolina, 180 are federally permitted (A. Dukes). South Carolina has engaged in a lot of education and outreach to reduce number of vessels without federal permits.
- Design elements of a potential limited-entry system for the for-hire sector are very important.
- Suggestion to not allow permits to be sold, or that they go back into a pool for new entrants.
- Concern about limited entry leading to sector separation and individual fishing quotas.
- Suggestion for a sunset provision in 5-10 years so that the Council can evaluate the limited entry system and remove/modify the system.
- Recommendation to include historical captains who may not have the current permit, but have worked in the for-hire sector.
- Consider the concept of “vesting” in the fishery to promote stewardship.
- Explore concept of “decal” or some sort of identifier for vessels with federal permits?
- Concern over for-hire industry being tied to private recreational component and resulting accountability issues.
- Suggestion that there is no need to cap the number of permits because the overall number has not varied much over the past ten years.
- Concern that limited entry may exclude participants in other fisheries/sectors who are planning to get a SG for-hire permit in the future.
- Recommendation to start with assigning numbers to the permits first, so that they can be tracked, before considering limited entry.
- The Council should be clear about the goals of limited entry before developing the system.
- Suggestion to include an outreach component directed at tourists, so that they know how to identify a properly permitted for-hire vessel.
- Concern that limited entry permits will be giving a public resource to a service provider.

SAFMC Research Plan, 2015-2019

The AP had the following comments regarding research priorities:

- Expansion of SEAMAP survey south of Ponce Inlet would be useful.
- Cooperative data collection needs a higher priority – can be used as a hook and line survey for red snapper.
- Consistent deepwater survey (longline?) – work with fishermen to improve on the sampling methodology.
- Should have people on the vessel familiar with the area and the longline gear – cooperative training/survey work with fishermen.
- Survey/study on juvenile grouper in estuaries.
- Priorities should be given to projects/surveys that count fish/provide abundance estimates.

SEDAR Update

SEDAR staff provided a detailed overview of the status of ongoing stock assessments as well as the schedule of upcoming assessments. Staff also requested volunteers to participate in the upcoming vermilion snapper and scamp assessments.

AP members expressed concern about the timing for wreckfish assessment. Some AP members felt the assessment needed to be moved up in priority.

Socio-Economic Characterization of the Snapper Grouper Fishery

Council staff presented a proposed outline for the developing project and requested input from the AP on specific components. The AP's input on each topic is below:

Geographic regions:

- Palm Beach inlet boundary – better fit would be the St. Lucie Inlet since this line in Florida defines the spatial boundary for the prohibition on the use of longlines.
- Outer Banks (north of Hatteras) should be a region since fishing in that area is different than in other regions.
- Topsail, NC, south to GA would be another region.

Description of permit holders:

- SERO is in the midst of updating their permit application – there will be more information to include in the characterization.
- Should include a description of holders of corporations and their structure.
- Include a description of permit leases.
- Portfolios – important to include information on permits for other fisheries (CMP, etc.).
- Describe issues with transferring permits from vessels to be able to fish for other species.

Description of permits and permitted vessels:

- Speed should be a factor in determining what constitutes a “traditional bandit boat”. Size should not be a factor. It is more about the length of the trip than anything else.

- Traditional bandit boats typically target everything, but day boats target specific species.
- Traditional bandit boats have bandit gear, which in general is not removed from the boat. Day boats use electric reels.
- Vessels in Florida have evolved from trip boats to day boats to adapt to regulations, and changes in available/affordable slips (boats are trailered in and out).
- AP expressed concern about trying to define a ‘latent permit’ because this may result in someone losing a permit. Instead, the discussion indicated that staff should focus on the types of fishermen holding permits but not participating in the commercial fishery regularly.
- “Leased” permits – some fishermen who are no longer fishing have two SG permits and lease them both. This has undermined the 2 for 1 program. Suggest seeking legal clarification of such issues.
- Look at income qualifiers in relation to permits with low landings or look at which permit is generating income.
- Working waterfronts – how reduction of working waterfronts is affecting the fishery; leasing of waterfront property vs. ownership that provides no protection for existing fishing operations (fish houses, boat slips, etc.).
- As far as looking into permits with low landings, should there be a distinction between the unlimited and trip-limited permits? Yes, because the trip-limited permits are not transferable. For years to be included in characterization, suggest looking at time post Amendment 8 (when the 2 for 1 program went into place).
- Suggest looking at changes in fishermen behavior since implementation of the 2 for 1 program.
- Include information on how many 225 permits have any landings and how the permit holders have changed over the years.

Dealers:

- How many fishermen are also acting as their dealers? Which dealers are fishermen selling their catch to? This would be directly related to the number of fish houses.
- Obtain demographic information on captains (age, etc.). This is important information that may provide insight on how the fishery is shaping up for the future.
- How have fishing businesses adapted with the decrease in fish houses?

Other:

- Examine ages of permit holders, captain, crew. There are not a lot of young people entering the fishery.
- What are the obstacles to entering the fishery, in addition to the capital needed to purchase a permit, vessel, gear, etc.?
- What is the cost for a permit (or two), and how has this changed?
- How do people get the capital to enter the fishery?

Fishery Performance Report - Red Grouper

Council staff facilitated discussion on observations pertaining to the red grouper fishery. The AP's input was used to draft a Fishery Performance Report (FPR) that will be reviewed by the Socio-Economic Panel of the SSC and by the SSC, and also provided to the Council. 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 draft FPR is attached to this summary report.

Yellowtail Snapper, Golden Tilefish, and the ABC Control Rule

Council staff provided updates on Council actions pertaining to management of yellowtail snapper and golden tilefish and proposed changes to the ABC Control Rule. The AP had the following recommendations pertaining to management of yellowtail snapper:

MOTION: MAKE THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COUNCIL FOR YELLOWTAIL SNAPPER MANAGEMENT:

1. Combine commercial ACLs, South Atlantic and Gulf, for yellowtail snapper to be managed by the South Atlantic.
2. Keep the fishing year August 1 through July 31.
3. Make a day and trip limit between May 1 and July 31.
4. The daily limit for "day boats" between May 1 and July 31 would be 500 pounds per day.
5. The trip limit for the "trip boats" between May 1 and July 31 would be 3,500 pounds per trip per week.
6. Trip boats would have VMS to make this "enforceable by law". Law enforcers can distinguish between "day boats" and "trip boats."

* Most trip boats already have VMS on their boats.

APPROVED BY AP

Update on Citizen Science Program and Charter Vessel Electronic Reporting Pilot

Council staff gave a brief update on the status of the Citizen Science Program and explained the Council's approach to engage stakeholders from the South Atlantic regions through creation of Action Teams ("A" Teams) who will work on developing program components for Volunteers, Finance, Data Management, Project/Topics Management, and Communication/Outreach/Education. AP members were encouraged to apply to possible serve on "A" Teams.

Due to lack of time, the update on the charter vessel electronic reporting pilot program was postponed to the Fall 2017 meeting.

Elections & Other Business

David Moss was elected as Chair and Jimmy Hull was elected as Vice-Chair.

Under Other Business, the AP made a request to review recreational landings for wreckfish to determine whether the current recreational allocation is appropriate. The AP requested that the Council consider this item at their June 2017 meeting. Furthermore,

the AP made approved the motion below pertaining to the upcoming review of Limited Access Privilege Programs:

MOTION: AP REQUESTS THAT THE COUNCIL NOT CONSIDER RE-ALLOCATING THE WRECKFISH ITQ ALLOCATIONS AND CONSIDER RE-CONVENING THE AD-HOC WRECKFISH ADVISORY PANEL.
APPROVED BY AP (2 ABSTENTIONS)

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel
Red Grouper Fishery Performance Report
April 2017

At their April 2017 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for Red Grouper and developed a 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 Red Grouper is the first Snapper Grouper FPR for the South Atlantic, and will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP). The format of future FPRs may change based on input from the AP, SSC, SEP, and the South Atlantic Council.

Advisory Panel members:

Kenny Fex (Chairman) (Commercial/NC)
David Moss (Vice-Chairman)
(Recreational/FL)
Robert Johnson (Charter/FL)
Jim Atack (Recreational/NC)
Red Munden (Conservation/NC)
Richard Stiglitz (Commercial/FL)
Rusty Hudson (Commercial/FL)
Robert Thompson (Charter/SC)
Jimmy Hull (Commercial/Dealer/Retail/FL)
David Snyder (Consumer Rep/GA)
James Freeman (Commercial/FL)
Kerry Marhefka (Commercial/Dealer SC)

Todd Kellison (At-large/NOAA)
Robert Lorenz (Recreational/NC)
Dick Brame (NGO/Recreational/NC)
Wes Covington (Recreational/SC)*
Manny Herrera (Commercial/FL)
Deidra Jeffcoat (Charter/GA)
Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)
Greg Mercurio (Charter/FL)
Wayne Mershon (Commercial/Dealer/SC)
Andy Piland (Charter/NC)*
Scott Buff (Commercial/NC)
Lange Sykes (Recreational/FL)*

*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Based on data through 2008, the SEDAR 19 (2010) stock assessment concluded that Red Grouper were overfished and overfishing was occurring. The 2008 fishing mortality rate was found to be about 35% higher than the fishing mortality rate that would produce maximum sustainable yield (MSY). The spawning stock biomass (SSB) in 2008 was found to be just below the level at which the stock is considered to be overfished (Minimum Stock Size Threshold). Hence, in 2011, the Council developed Amendment 24 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan. The amendment implemented new fishing levels based on results of SEDAR 19 (2010) and put in place a rebuilding plan¹ with the aim of ending overfishing and rebuilding the Red Grouper stock. An update to the SEDAR 19 (2010) assessment was just completed and will be reviewed by the SSC in April 2017. The South Atlantic Council will obtain the SSC's recommendations at their June 2017 meeting and move forward with any needed management changes.

¹ Amendment 24 changed the definition of MSST so the Red Grouper stock is not considered overfished. Nonetheless, the Council adopted a rebuilding plan in the same amendment.

Detailed landings and economic information was provided to the Snapper Grouper AP. This document is attached at the end of the FPR.

Stock observations

Red Grouper is primarily a regional fishery mostly based in North Carolina. Availability of fish has not changed in recent years and size is consistent. In North Carolina, AP members reported that Red Grouper are caught at depths of 80-100 ft. or 140-180 ft., and the sizes have been consistent in recent years. Red Grouper are usually not the primary target commercial species but are commonly caught on multi-species commercial trips. AP members reported that Scamp were the target species on many of these trips with incidental Red Grouper catch.

In the private recreational sector, Red Grouper have been rare in the past two years. In 2012, Red Grouper were biting but not large, maybe 5-12 lbs. One AP member reported that older fishermen have observed a 7-9 year cycle of Red Grouper abundance, and this may be a period of lower availability. However, the AP observed that there have been less Red Grouper available overall in North Carolina waters since about 2008.

Commercial fishermen based out of Morehead City, NC, reported that Red Grouper has never been a primary species for them and they do not target Red Grouper. They can be caught in 140-180 ft. of water and are mixed in with triggerfish on the edge. There have been posts on social media from the recreational sector in that area.

Smaller Red Grouper are found in depths of 80-100 ft. in North Carolina. AP members noted that they may not be seeing as many older fish because they are getting taken as younger fish in shallower water. Observations from a commercial diver from North Carolina on the AP do indicate a decline in abundance of red grouper since the late 2000s (from about 2008-2009). Used so see them in 80-110 ft.

In waters off Charleston, SC, Red Grouper can be found in low relief bottom (“porgy bottom”) and there would be a lot of fish in compacted areas. There may be an impact on availability due to habitat damage by use of roller trawls in the past. Since mid-1980s, it’s been a bycatch species in South Carolina.

Off the coast of Georgia, charter captains on the AP reported that Red Grouper are incidental catch and are not commonly seen.

For charter vessels off North Florida, red grouper are not a target species. However, fishermen are still seeing the fish and they can catch them in 140-180 ft. near the shelf edge. Size hasn’t changed and has been consistent through time. For commercial day boats working in waters off the Florida east coast, Red Grouper is more of an incidental catch. AP members reported that the availability has not changed in recent years. When commercial vessels were trip boats, they would catch a couple of boxes but because most vessels function as day boats, Red Grouper catch is only a small part of multi-species fishery. Other AP members agreed that Red Grouper is more incidental catch, and can be found on inshore reefs to the big ledge ranging from 7-20 lbs. Generally they do not see small ones like there are in the Gulf, but Red Grouper are available

in waters around Volusia County (Daytona, Ormond Beach, Port Orange, Ponce Inlet). One AP member suggested that perhaps there is some “spillover” in the Florida Straits from fish in the Gulf.

In South Florida, recreational fishermen catch them in about 60 feet of water and shallower. One AP member reported that there is more targeting of Red Grouper in the spearfishing sector off the Florida east coast, possibly due to upcoming restrictions on hogfish. Popularity of Red Grouper for spearfishing has grown because the fish can be found in shallow waters and are easy to shoot. There has also been an overall increase in the number of recreational boats on the Florida east coast and a significant increase in the popularity of spearfishing.

In waters off the Florida east coast, smaller fish around 5-6 inches are sometimes caught in the estuaries. Red Grouper that are under 20 inches can be found in patches in shallow waters up and down the coast.

In the Florida Keys, Red Grouper are found somewhat abundantly on the shallow end of the reef, especially in the Lower Keys. However, big fish are sometimes caught in the outer reef. In the Lower Keys, there seems to be no issue with abundance. The fish are more abundant when water temperatures are lower, however, but this coincides with the seasonal closure. Smaller fish are found in shallow reef waters. During the time of year when the commercial harvest is open, Red Grouper are in deeper water and not as accessible. Increased spearfishing may also be affecting the stock.

AP members reported that the increasing abundance of lionfish (all areas) may be negatively affecting Red Grouper, along with the increase in the Goliath Grouper population in Florida. AP members maintain that Goliath Groupers prey extensively on red grouper (“probably their favorite fish to eat”).

An AP member observed that there has definitely been a decline in abundance since the 4-month closure went in to place. He maintains that because there was a delay in implementing the closure, fishermen off North Carolina (Cape Fear area) increased their effort on red grouper immediately prior to the closure. The AP member stated that he was able to harvest 900 pounds of red grouper in three days that winter.

Other members stated that observations on abundance are very regional and should not be generalized. Fishermen off Florida have not seen a similar decline to that which reportedly has occurred off North Carolina.

Commercial market observations

Off the east coast of Florida, Red Grouper is not a key commercial species. AP members noted that while there is a demand for grouper in general, there is not a lot of demand for Red Grouper specifically. The fish does not have a high yield compared to other species due to the large head and not a lot of meat. Restaurants do not prefer Red Grouper and commercial trips marketing to restaurants will try to sell any caught on a multi-species trip, but there is not consumer and restaurant demand.

In the Florida Keys, the ex-vessel price for Gulf Red Grouper can be up to \$6/lb but due to seasonal access issues for South Atlantic Red Grouper, the Keys fishermen cannot take advantage of this price. This is especially relevant now that Mexico has a closure as well and dealers in the Florida Keys can fetch up to \$10.99 per pound during that time. In general, when demand is high, the price can be \$5-10 per pound.

Management measures

AP members discussed the minimum size limit. Some AP members noted that the minimum size limit may not have any effect because of the depth, and that discard mortality may be high anyway. Keys fishermen felt that Red Grouper are hardier and are less likely to suffer barotrauma, and the current minimum size limit is sufficient. The seasonal closure is important to keep in place. AP members reported that the current management measures do not significantly affect their ability to catch and keep Red Grouper.

Research Recommendations

AP members recommended research on life history, specifically with studies on the fish inshore to get information on juveniles. The AP recommended additional research on abundance of Red Groupers during MPA research. One AP member stated that red grouper used to be abundant on the “tropical bottom” in what is currently the North Edisto MPA. One suggestion was the SEFSC ROV studies, although it was noted by NOAA Fisheries staff that the trap video survey is not currently properly designed to collect specific info on Red Grouper inside and outside of the existing MPAs. Since frequency of occurrence for all groupers in fishery independent surveys is generally low, a large sample size would be necessary to detect differences. Additional recommendations include research on the potential impact of lionfish on Red Grouper recruitment, and collecting information on the impact of spearfishing for Red Grouper.