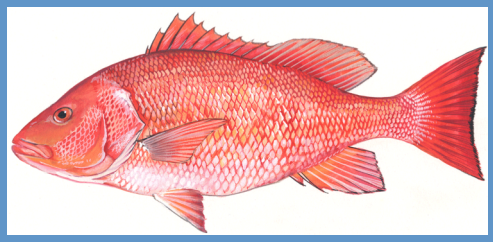
Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region Amendment 43



Public Comments

Summary of Public Comments on Snapper Grouper Amendment 43 (Revise Red Snapper Annual Catch Limits)

Below is a summary of comments that were received at three webinar public hearings held from August 8th and 10th, 2017. The summary also includes written comments received via the online comment form on the Council's website or other means such as by mail, fax, or email since July 20, 2017. In total, there were 113 comments for Amendment 43 provided during the public comment period that ended on August 15th. Of these comments, 6 were submitted verbally and 107 were submitted in writing. There is one action included in Amendment 43: **Action 1. Revise the Process to Determine the Annual Catch Limits (ACL) for Red Snapper.**

For the webinar public hearings, there were 70 attendees on the webinars and 6 commented verbally while at the meeting. Of the commenters, 4 identified themselves as commercial and 2 recreational.

Public Hearings:

Webinar (8/8): 22 attended and 2 commented. Of the attendees, 12 were from the public, 2 were state agency employees (not including Council members working for state agencies), 4 were Council members, and 4 were Council staff (not including staff running the webinar).

Webinar (8/10 AM): 28 attended and 2 commented. Of the attendees, 15 were from the public, 4 were federal employees, 3 were Council members, and 6 were Council staff (not including staff running the webinar).

Webinar (8/10 PM): 20 attended and 2 commented. Of the attendees, 16 were from the public, 2 were Council members, and 2 were Council staff (not including staff running the webinar).

Summary of Verbal Comments:

- Three of the six commenters were in favor of Alternative 5.
- Most indicated fishermen would like to have a season for red snapper.
- The ACL should be set to prevent a decline in the red snapper population.
- An open season in July does make much sense because it is overlapping with red snapper spawning.
- The amendment is moving too fast and needs to have additional review by the SSC.
- There should be education for descending devices and venting tools: including how to use them and when to use them.
- There needs to be a requirement for descending devices.
- A tagging program should be started through the Citizen Science Program.
- There is concern about fishermen high-grading.
- A slot limit might be beneficial to consider.
- The fishery has been closed essentially 8 years except mini-seasons. This should have allowed fish to get older.
- The fishery should not have been closed.
- There are larger and older red snapper in the stock than predicted in the stock assessment model.
- Red snapper population has expanded and can be found from Cape Hatteras to Key West.

Summary of Written Comments from July 20, 2017 through August 15, 2017:

There were 107 comments (online comment forum) submitted for Amendment 43 from July 20, 2017 through August 15, 2017, including 6 written comments (provide at end of summary) that were not included in the summary comments. The comments start at entry 80 on the online comment forum. The comments are loosely organized based on the subject of the comment. The tally of comment support for alternatives only included comments that expressly mentioned an alternative.

- Red snapper should be managed by state agencies.
- The abundance of red snapper is increasing.
- There are more, larger fish out there.
- Red snapper have recovered and are everywhere.
- Red snapper are being caught from 60 to 300 ft.
- Red snapper should have never been closed.
- The closure was needed but now snapper have recovered.

- Red snapper are one of the most commonly fish caught.
- Red snapper are one of the most commonly seen fish when diving.
- Fishermen are catching greater than 10 red snapper per trip. There is no shortage.
- Red snapper are impacting black sea bass populations and baitfish.
- It is hard to catch other species such as black sea bass or triggerfish and other reef fish due to the number of red snapper.
- Red snapper should be opened and grouper closed.
- Red snapper should be opened one weekend per month with a one fish per vessel limit.
- Allow 1 boat limit per month.
- Don't open red snapper during the spawning season.
- Do not open the season if there is a small craft advisory.
- Spread season out over several weeks instead of back to back.
- A six-day season is not long enough.
- Short openings will lead to a derby style fishery.
- Create a snapper grouper season in shallow water to minimize barotrauma
- Allow the next generation of fishermen a chance to catch red snapper.
- Opening the season now will shift the burden of stock recovery to future fishing generations.
- Regulate red snapper with a short season similar to snook, redfish, and trout with a slot limit and restrictive bag limits.
- Commercial harvest should remain closed.
- Commercial trip limit should be 50 to 100 pounds per trip.
- Reduce commercial catches.
- Management needs to be more restrictive on commercial boats.
- Discards should not be used to determine season.
- Discards and discard mortality should be considered in management.
- Require crew on for-hire vessels to monitor catches to "per-head" limit.
- Require party boat captains to move when limit is reached.
- Captain and crew on for-hire trips should not be allowed to keep their bag limit.
- Do not allow other bottom or reef species to be harvested if red snapper are harvested
- One fish per person could reduce dead discards.
- Recreational bag limit should be 1 fish per person.
- Recreational bag limit should be 1 or 2 fish per person.
- Recreational bag limit should be 1 fish per vessel and spread out the season.
- Recreational bag limit of 1 fish per person with a 20 inch size limit and spawning season closure.
- Recreational size limit and 1 fish per person or x fish per vessel.
- Do not have a size limit.
- There should be a slot limit.
- Set a minimum size limit at 18-20 inches.
- If overages occur, subtract it from the next year's annual catch limit.
- Climate change is increasing uncertainties.
- The estimate of discard mortality should be less than 10% not the current 28%.
- The discards are wasting red snapper.

- Some fish die even after they are vented.
- Venting increases the survival of released red snapper.
- Red snapper release mortality rate is extremely high.
- Sharks and barracuda are eating red snapper on the way up and when they are released.
- Education is needed on proper release techniques
- Education classes should be required for proper release techniques.
- Some fishermen have switched from hook and line fishing to dive fishing to avoid catching red snapper.
- Enforce the circle hook requirement.
- Have the science advisors review the catch levels to ensure we won't have multi-year closures after a mini-season.
- Use caution when setting the limits and opening the season.
- People are harvesting red snapper illegally.
- Continue to develop best fishing practices and data improvements in Amendment 46.
- Have a mechanism to improve data collection if the season opens.
- Identify data gaps prior to opening the season and have collection programs established to provide sound scientific data to managers.
- Fishermen are frustrated.
- Fishermen are choosing to fish in other regions or countries due to overly restrictive management.
- Gillnetting is impacting red snapper.
- The amendment does not include information to help make informed recommendations on the annual catch limits.
- Management is corrupt.
- Managers are not listening to the fishermen.
- One in support of Alternative 1.
- One in support of Alternative 3.
- Six in support of Alternative 5.

August 15, 2017

Re: SAFMC Amendment 43 Red Snapper

South Atlantic Marine Fisheries Members:

We are pleased to offer a few comments on the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's revised Amendment 43, which seeks to re-establish red snapper fishing in our offshore waters after years of closures.

The South Carolina Wildlife Federation has nearly 10,000 supporters across the state, from anglers to hunters to outdoor enthusiasts. Our mission is to conserve and restore South Carolina's wildlife and wildlife habitat through education and advocacy.

Our supporters and anglers celebrate the excellent rate of red snapper rebuilding now underway. Science-driven fishery management has brought us to where we are today. We need to ensure that science continues to lead the way forward.

With that in mind, we strongly encourage Council to take the following steps on Amendment 43:

Convene the Council's Statistics and Science Committee to review the amendment's alternatives for mini-season duration and catch levels.

Determine the impact of planned mini-seasons on the long-range red snapper recovery plan (Amendment 17A).

Provide a robust strategy for data collection and analysis of landings and dead discards during mini-seasons.

Prioritize and finish Amendment 46 (size limits, data and recreational reporting enhancements, mandatory use of descending devices, fishermen outreach and education) as soon as possible.

As lifelong fishermen, we have chased bass and trout from Lake Jocassee to the Santee. We have followed cobia along the coast in the spring, snapper-grouper, black sea bass and mackerel in summer, flounder and redfish in early fall. We have also noted the large decline of anadromous

fish runs (historically an important part of the marine food web) due to spawning habitat access blockage. We commend Council's recent years of work to establish spawning special management zones, which were officially enacted just a few weeks ago.

Red snapper will certainly benefit from the spawning protections. But more work for red snapper sustainability is needed today. We look forward to Council's continued work with its science advisors and needed management tools in Amendment 46 to keep our fishery healthy, our fishermen fishing and our local economies thriving.

Ben Gregg

Executive Director

Steve Gilbert

Special Project Manager
Fish and Wildlife Biologist

DIRECTED SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES, INC.

A SALT WATER FISHERIES CONSULTING COMPANY

15 August 2017

Mr. Gregg Waugh, Executive Director
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
North Charleston, SC 29405

Re: Snapper Grouper Amendment 43 Action 1 to Revise the Process to Determine the Annual Catch Limits for Red Snapper

To: Gregg Waugh,

Directed Sustainable Fisheries (DSF) on behalf of clients submits this written comment to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) voting members in support of the Red Snapper Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) obtained by Snapper Grouper (SG) Amendment 43 Action 1 Alternative 5 that is pasted below. Clients of the DSF consulting company desire to see the Alternative 5 implemented for Action 1, and become effective during 2018 as a sustainable ABC for Red Snappers. This would increase the socio-economic benefits for all the fishing sectors.

"ACTION 1. Revise the Process to Determine the Annual Catch Limits (ACL) for Red Snapper"

" Alternative 5. Remove the process and equation used to determine the red snapper ACL as specified in Snapper Grouper Amendment 28. Specify a total annual catch limit equal to 79,919 fish. Commercial annual catch limit equals 234,652 pounds (whole weight) and recreational annual catch limit equals 55,753 fish."

DSF clients concur with the Alternative 5 for Amendment 43 since it provides all fishing sectors an opportunity to land Red Snappers during the Summer to Fall of 2018, and beyond

SAFMC in the public hearing summary consideration includes the following quotes that DSF clients concur with in our written comment.

" The acceptable biological catch recommendation based on SEDAR 41 (2017) included both landings and dead discards. The National Marine Fisheries Service has stated the use of an acceptable biological catch based primarily on recreational discard estimates is likely ineffective for monitoring red snapper removals due to uncertainty in the estimate of discards and there are upcoming changes to the effort estimation for calculating recreational effort. The Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended that, until the changes are complete, Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) discard estimates from private recreational and charter vessels should not be used for management (SAFMC 2017)."

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DSF2009@AOL.COM

"While the acceptable biological catch estimate is revised and the estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program for private recreational and charter vessel are calibrated, the Council is considering conservative measures to allow a mini-season beginning in 2018. Such measures would remain in place until modified. The alternatives the Council is considering are based on red snapper landings from 2012, 2013, and 2014 with some of the alternatives adjusted based on increases in red snapper abundance observed through a scientific survey (Figure S-1)."

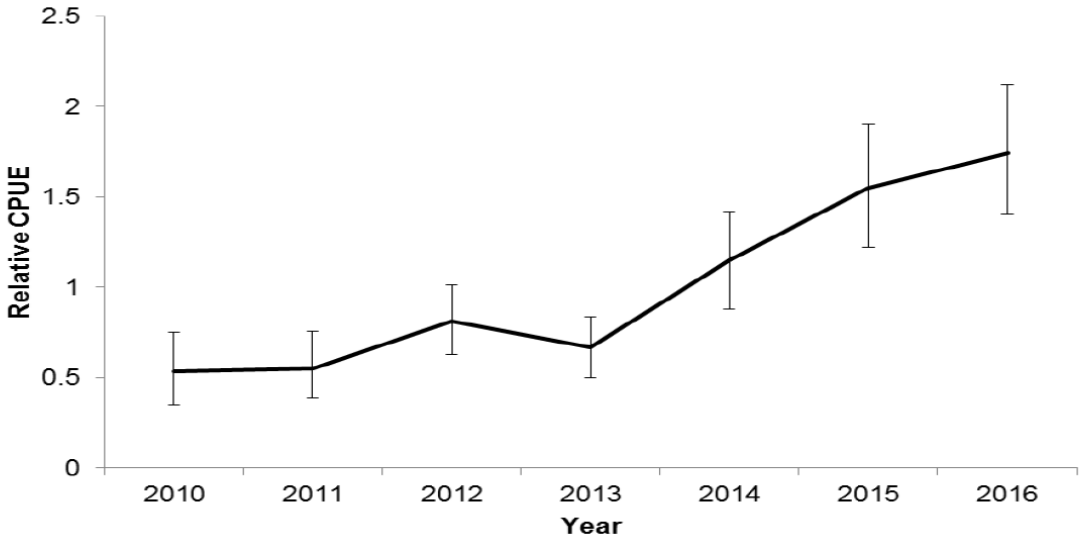

Figure S-1. Relative catch per unit effort (CPUE) with error bars from a scientific study of red snapper abundance in the South Atlantic region, 2010 to 2016.

" Additionally the Scientific and Statistical Committee stated, "a continuing upward trend in the fishery independent index has a high probability of reflecting increases in population size." (SAFMC 2017) Thus, based on the SSC reports and fishery independent abundance index trends, the risk of overfishing is likely reduced if annual catch limits are limited to recent catch levels. Overfishing is essentially a ratio of landings compared to population size. If landings are limited to recent levels and the population has grown, then the resulting fishing mortality and risk of overfishing is decreased."

"Allowing a limited amount of harvest would likely reduce the social and economic impacts of a year-round closure. Additionally, allowing some harvest will enable collection of scientific information on red snapper and the fishery. Fishery regulations for red snapper changed substantially in 2010 and fishery-dependent information, data collected from fishermen, has been limited during closed years. During the open seasons, scientists can collect information on the size of fish harvested, age of fish harvested, fishery selectivity, and fishermen's behavior on private recreational vessels. A recent publication from the Southeast Fishery Science Center has stated that collecting more age information for the snapper grouper fishery has the greatest influence on the accuracy of assessments (Siegfried et al. 2016)."

" The Council has moved additional actions related to red snapper management contained in previous drafts of Amendment 43 to a separate amendment (Amendment 46). That amendment will revisit red snapper management reference points, recreational reporting, and best fishing practices. Additionally, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center is exploring alternative methods to develop future ABCs for red snapper."

Historically, DSF became involved with the Atlantic Red Snapper SEDAR 15 results during 2008, and was hired in 2009 to represent clients from all three fishing sectors, commercial, for-hire and private entities to express their concerns. At that time SAFMC management choices that depended on a 7-6 vote from SAFMC voting members were used to close the Red Snapper fishery, effective 04 January 2010 from North Carolina south to the Florida Keys.

Coincidentally during the two years before the 2010 Red Snapper closure, the SAFMC commercial fishing fleet using no trip limits landed for sale in whole weight (ww) 252,146 pounds during 2008, and 362,386 pounds ww in 2009.[1] Those two years before prohibition were the best commercial Red Snapper landings documented since 1989 when 266,942 pounds ww were recorded as landed as compared to 2008, and 378,759 pounds ww were landed when compared to 2009 commercial landings of Red Snappers. Average sizes, numbers and ages are much higher now for Red Snappers throughout the SAMFC region as compared to 2008 & 2009.[2]

Both the for-hire and private recreational sectors also experienced higher estimated landings for 2008 and 2009 as seen in Table 3 on PDF page 355 of the Final SEDAR 41 stock assessment report revised during April 2017.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer oral and written comment, and DSF clients hope the SAFMC voting members are seeking a positive future for the Citizens that fish, and buy local fish from the SAFMC region. We are looking forward to the 2018 Atlantic Red Snapper fishing seasons.

Rusty

Russell Howard Hudson, President
Directed Sustainable Fisheries, Inc. (DSF)
PO Box 9351
Daytona Beach, Florida 32120-9351

[1] http://sedarweb.org/docs/sar/S41_SA_RS_SAR_REVISION1_Final_4.24.2017.pdf
See PDF page 355 for Table 3 commercial and recreational landings.
[2] http://sedarweb.org/docs/sar/S41_SA_RS_SAR_REVISION1_Final_4.24.2017.pdf

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Sixth Generation Waterman from Central Florida (FL) East Coast
Seafood Coalition (SFC) member
American Elasmobranch Society (AES) member 2004-2017
Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program (ACCSP) Advisory Committee FL member
ACCSP Biological Review Panel (BRP) member
ACCSP Bycatch Prioritization Committee (BPC) member
Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) Coastal Shark (CS) Advisory Panel (AP) FL commercial & for-hire recreational member [former Chair of CS AP]
National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Highly Migratory Species (HMS) AP Commercial Shark member 2016-2018
NMFS HMS SouthEast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR) AP Pool member 2016-2021
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) SEDAR AP Pool member no term limits
SAFMC Fisheries Citizen Science Workshop Participant 2016
SAFMC Snapper-Grouper (SG) AP FL commercial member 2015-2017
SAFMC Marine Protected Area (MPA) Expert Work Group (EWG) participant 2012-2013
Former SAFMC MPA AP FL commercial member
Former NMFS Atlantic Large Whale Take Reduction Team FL participant (ALWTRT)
Former NMFS Bottlenose Dolphin Take Reduction Team FL participant (BDTRT)
Participant, observer and/or contributor to US coastal shark stock assessments during 1992, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010-2015 and 2017
Participant, observer and/or contributor SEDAR 11 (Large Coastal Sharks), 13 (Small Coastal Sharks), 16 (King Mackerel), 19 (Red Grouper/Black Grouper), 21 (Large Coastal Sharks/Small Coastal Shark), 24 (Red Snapper), 25 (Black Sea Bass/Golden Tilefish), 28 (Spanish Mackerel/Cobia), 29 (Gulf Blacktip Shark), 32 (~~Gray Triggerfish~~/Blueline Tilefish), 34 (Atlantic Sharpnose Shark/Bonnethead Shark), 36 (Snowy Grouper), 38 (King Mackerel), 39 (Smoothhound Sharks), 41 (Red Snapper/~~Gray Triggerfish~~), 50 (Blueline Tilefish), 53 (Red Grouper) and SEDAR 54 (Sandbar Shark)

To: South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Members, August 11, 2017

Re: Amendment 43 Comments – Red Snapper

1) An Open season in July does not make sense because it would be in the peak of the red snapper spawning season (contradictive to good management practices) – It should be pushed back to October or November.

2) Seems like we're moving too fast on this mini season for next year without evaluating what impact this will have on the rebuilding plan – how many years will it push back the rebuilding plan or by how much will the future ABC's be lowered by this? These potential impacts should be estimated before we're asked to weigh in on this. Since the discards over the past 2 years have increased at an exponential rate with a closed season I'm really concerned about what will happen during the proposed mini season.

3) We worked extremely hard for several years on the snapper-grouper AP to develop creative, sustainable approaches to rebuild red snapper and the entire snapper-grouper complex. To lump all those good ideas, all that hard work, into plans for a new amendment falls short of what is needed now. There is time to get this job done right before next summer if we all roll up our sleeves and keep working.

4) I recommend changing the bag limit from 1 per person to 1 per vessel to minimize discards whilst allowing the ACL to be landed. The primary goal that I've been hearing about this amendment is to reduce dead discards. The proposed alternatives in this amendment will only do this for 4 to 28 days. So this amendment falls way short of reducing the high number of dead discards. With the longest proposed mini season there will still be greater than 370,000 dead discards in addition to the landings and discards during the mini season.

5) We should run this by the SSC and get their recommendations on the mini season before picking one of the alternatives. They are a great resource and should be used. Let's not put the cart in front of the horse.

6) Not following the SSC review procedure will set a bad precedent and will erode the scientific integrity of Council and its processes.

7) We've come too far in our successful rebuilding program for red snapper to potentially lose ground now and end up right back where we were a few years ago.

8) What impact could the potentially excessive landings in a 2018 mini season affect the quality of the 2018 stock assessment of red snapper?

The current rebuilding plan had a 53% chance of rebuilding the stock by 2040. It is very encouraging that the index of abundance has increased a lot since 2009 and there are more and more red snapper being caught and seen in our waters. Fishery management is working and the stock appears to be rebuilding at a much quicker pace than was estimated in Amendment 17A. Even though the stock is still overfished and over fishing is still occurring whilst the restock is rebuilding it is not wise to totally ignore the large amount dead discards (as this amendment proposes) and increase landings as proposed. These actions could change the stock status to not rebuilding very quickly.

Therefore I strongly recommend the options in Amendment 43 be sent to the SSC and to get their recommendation's prior to moving this amendment forward.

Sincerely,

Jim Atack

Snapper Grouper AP Member

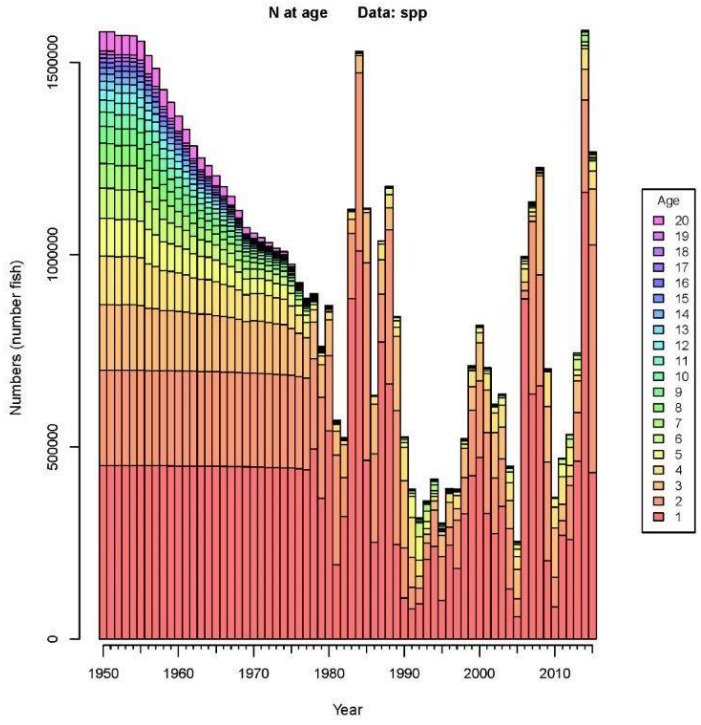
Oak Island, NC

09 August 2017

Gregg Waugh, Executive Director
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC)
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
North Charleston, South Carolina 29405

Re: Snapper Grouper (SG) Amendment 43 comment

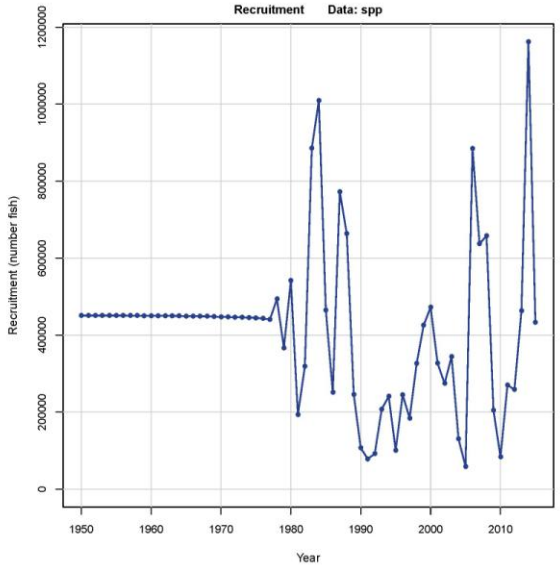
The opening of the South Atlantic Red Snapper fishery is way past due. The fishery should never have been closed by the SAFMC with a 7 to 6 vote. We Fishermen who have interacted with this stock all of our lives on the ocean commented before the closure that the stock was rebuilding since 2009. This is about the time that the SEDAR stock assessment 15 showed the stock was in extreme decline. Now information from the SEDAR 41 (See S-41 Graph Below) shows that the population in Numbers of fish is larger than at any time with observed Data and assumed Catch history. We Fishermen commented many times to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) staff, Scientists and SAFMC members during this time of rapid rebuilding that has been occurring since before 2009.



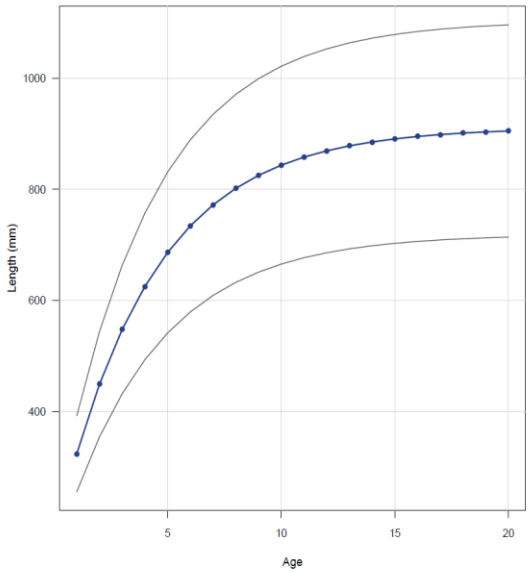
Prior to 1978 the straight lines on the graph above from SEDAR 41 are ASSUMPTIONS created by theoretical mathematical computer models guided by analyses using the NMFS statistics.

We Fishermen have commented that the Red Snapper stock rises and falls with recruitment and environmental factors, (See Graph from S-41 below), of which we have had favorable conditions since 2009.

The straight lines prior to 1978 are assumptions with no observed data.

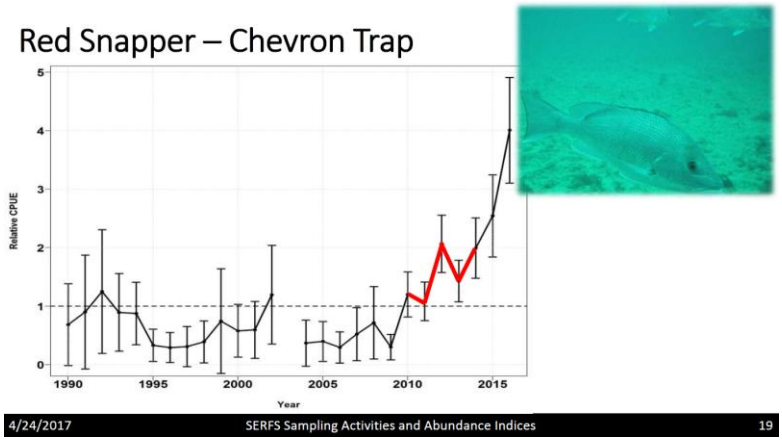


We Fishermen believe that the Age structure Assumptions of the stock has been mischaracterized by the SEDAR 41 assessment. We Fishermen believe this stock is made up of highly productive, aggressive fish living in a very competitive ocean, where they eat and are eaten. Very few Red Snapper will ever survive beyond 20-years of age. That is the way it was prior to the 1970's and is the way it is now 47-years later. By the time Red Snappers are 10-years old they are as Large and Fecund as the 20-year old plus ages. The average Age of Red Snapper used to calculate acceptable biological catch (ABC) options in SG Amendment 43 is 10-years old. The 2012 to 2014 mini-season average ages by 2018 will be 14-year old Red Snappers, and nearing maximum sizes.



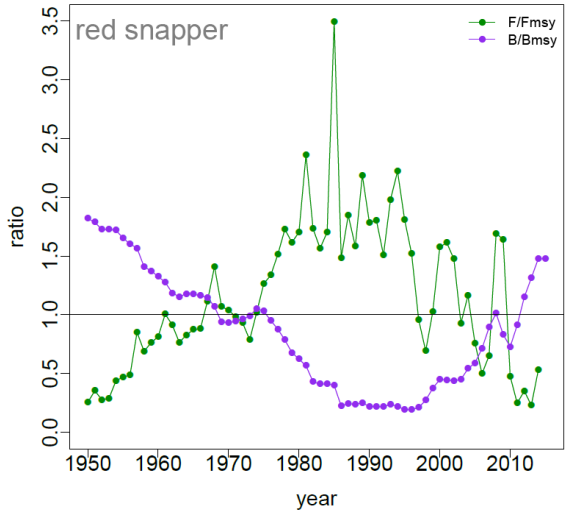
We Fishermen believe that the current Red Snapper stock is made up of much larger and older animals than the results of SEDAR 41 show. Also, the stock is rebuilt to support sustainable fisheries, which can only be proven and managed with an open fishery, collecting cooperative and fisheries dependent data.

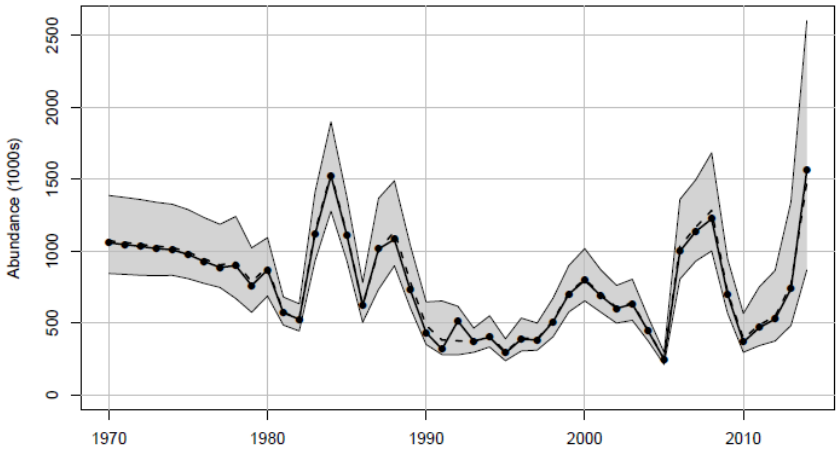
The SG Amendment 43 has a single Action to obtain an ABC and is complete, contains all of the justification, recommendations, guidance and information necessary for the SAFMC voting members to set a sustainable 2018 ABC, and open the Atlantic Red Snapper Fishery. The SG Amendment 43 contains observed fishery independent data from the MARMAP chevron trap index of abundance that shows a rapidly increasing and abundant population of Red Snappers. This fits and aligns well with population information from SEDAR 41, and endless amounts of anecdotal public comments since before and after the 2010 Atlantic Red Snapper closure.



Most of the key questions we address in stock assessments have to do with abundance, which is directly related to fishing pressure. The greater the abundance the lower the fishing pressure must have been.

ASPIC PRODUCTION MODEL RESULTS





These indexes of abundance along with the LIFE History information from SEDAR 41 justify opening this fishery with a substantial ABC level. We Fishermen recommend Action 1, Alternative 5 to allow **79,919** animals to be harvested as an ABC for the 2018 season. This will allow for enough observed data to be collected to obtain an ABC for 2019.

We Fishermen commend the Voting members and Staff of the SAFMC for taking the responsibility, and making the commitment to obtain an ABC to open the Red Snapper fishery during 2018. This fishery is one of the greatest in value, and currently one of the most abundant reef fish resources from North Carolina to Key West, Florida. The SAFMC should celebrate the Success of this stock, and the future SG Amendment 43 by opening the Red Snapper Fishery for the Citizens in the SAFMC regions.

Our Words are True,

Sincerely

Jimmy Hull

Chairman of the Board SFA
SG AP Member
SEDAR Participant/Pool
Citizen Science Action Team Member
MARFIN Panelist
BDTRT Member

August 15, 2017

Dr. Michelle Duval
Chairman, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
Charleston, SC 29405

Re: Snapper Grouper Amendment 43

Dear Dr. Duval,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the development of Amendment 43 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan. With the exception of "mini-seasons" in 2012-2014, fishing for South Atlantic red snapper has been prohibited since 2010 because the stock assessments have indicated that its population is overfished and overfishing is occurring.[1, 2] Yet fishermen report that it is one of the easiest fish to catch in much of the region and that their numbers are increasing, leading to wasteful discards.

How to address this perplexing and frustrating paradox is one of the most important decisions the Council will make in a long time.

The Amendment 43 proposal to reopen the fishery in 2018 poses challenges and opportunities. We urge you to carefully consider the scientific guidelines and legal mandates of the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA) and offer the following recommendations before approving this action:

1. Ensure that Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) are based on and do not exceed fishing level recommendations provided by the SSC.
2. Include a payback provision to prevent overfishing and ensure that progress made towards rebuilding is not reversed.
3. Identify data gaps and specify data collection plans prior to any established season, as happened during the 2012-2014 "mini-seasons".
4. Require the use of descending devices while continuing to look for ways to reduce discards in all snapper grouper fisheries; and
5. Prioritize development of strategies to reduce discard mortality and improve data collection, which were recently moved from Amendment 43 to Amendment 46, including a snapper grouper season, depth-based management measures, and electronic reporting for the private anglers fishing for snapper and grouper.

[1] SEDAR (2016). SEDAR 41 – South Atlantic Red Snapper Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 660 pp. available online at: http://sedarweb.org/sedar-41.
[2] SEDAR (2010). SEDAR 24 – South Atlantic Red Snapper Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston, SC. 524 pp. Available online at: http://sedarweb.org/sedar-24

Background

A 2016 stock assessment of red snapper indicates that this economically and ecologically important species is still overfished and undergoing overfishing.[3] The good news is that the assessment estimates that since 2010, the South Atlantic population has been increasing at a modest rate and is now at levels comparable to those in the 1970s.

This is consistent with the increased number of red snapper that fishermen report observing on the water. However, despite the fishing moratorium established by the Council in Amendment 17A,[4] the assessment finds that the population is still below a healthy level, with too few of the older and bigger fish needed for long term sustainability. The stock assessment also indicates that the primary driver of overfishing is the high number of dead discards. During capture, red snapper are often brought to the surface quickly from deep depths resulting in barotrauma, including ruptured swim bladders, bloating, and protrusions of stomachs, intestines and eyes. The impacts can be lethal.[5] This problem is likely to worsen if the population continues to show signs of recovery because as abundance increases, fishermen will encounter them more often.

While the high number of dead discards hampers full recovery of red snapper, uncertainty surrounding the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) discard data further complicates their management. That data is based on what fishermen report and is therefore limited when fishing is restricted.

Recommendation 1: Ensure that Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) are based on and do not exceed fishing level recommendations provided by the SSC.

During its May 2016 meeting, the SSC certified the red snapper stock assessment as "best scientific information available" and established an Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC)[6], but acknowledged that while overfishing is occurring, uncertainty in some of the data and model components makes it difficult to determine the degree of overfishing.

In February 2017, the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) sent a letter to the Council stating that the uncertainty surrounding the 2016 red snapper stock assessment "inhibits the ability to set an ABC that can be effectively monitored".[7] Much of this uncertainty was focused on the MRIP discard data.

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[3] SEDAR (2016). SEDAR 41 – South Atlantic Red Snapper Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 660 pp. available online at: http://sedarweb.org/sedar-41.

[4] SAFMC (2010). Amendment 17A to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region. Available online at: http://www.safmc.net/Library/pdf/Amend17Afinal071910.pdf

[5] Drumhiller et al (2014). Venting or Rapid Recompression Increase Survival and Improve Recovery of Red Snapper with Barotrauma. Marine and Coastal Fisheries, 6(1): 190-199.

[6] SAFMC (2016). SSC Meeting Final Report May 3-5, 2016. Snapper Grouper Committee Attachment A6. June SAFMC Briefing Book. Available online at: http://safmc.net/download/Briefing%20Book%20June%202016/Snapper%20Grouper/A6_SSC-May2016SSCReportFinalRevised-v2.pdf

[7] SAFMC (2017). Red Snapper Projections. Snapper Grouper Committee Attachment A04a in March 2017 SAFMC Briefing Book. Found online at:

Subsequently, during its April 2017 meeting, the SSC was presented with an updated stock assessment using corrected headboat data, and the new information from NOAA stating that there was too much uncertainty in the discard projections to allow them to be used "to effectively monitor red snapper catch levels". However, during this meeting, the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Administrator (RA) also clarified that questions about the discard projections did not change the stock status determination and red snapper is still experiencing overfishing.[8,9]

At that time, the SSC determined that in the case of red snapper, where fishery-dependent data are limited, new, carefully-designed, and peer-reviewed methodologies focused on fishery-independent data may be necessary to set and monitor future catch limits. This led the SSC to delay revising its ABC recommendation until a new approach for determining an ABC could be developed. They discussed using an index of abundance as an alternative method. At that time, the NOAA Fisheries Southeast RA told the SSC to take the time necessary to fully explore, develop, and review this new method to ensure that it is the correct path forward. Thus, further discussions about setting an ABC were put on hold until an index of abundance is developed and the SSC is given an opportunity to review the proposed methods.

Council and SEFSC staff are currently exploring potential approaches to address the issue and focus on fishery-independent data. We encourage these two groups to work together and with the SSC to ensure that any new method for determining an ABC meets MSA science and legal requirements, improves upon the current method, and takes into account the biological and other circumstances that currently make catch and bycatch of this population difficult to estimate.

Given the RA's instructions and the uniqueness of the situation, we suggest that the Council either use the most recent ABC recommendations from the SSC in May 2016 or delay setting an ACL until the SSC has an opportunity to review the index of abundance approach being developed and revise the ABC recommendation accordingly. The Council should request that the SEFSC prioritize developing its index of abundance approach to allow for the SSC to review prior to the December SAFMC meeting.

It is essential that any fishing levels set by the Council follow the law, prevent overfishing, and not jeopardize progress made in rebuilding red snapper. National Standard 2 guidelines state:

> *"Each scientific and statistical committee shall provide its Council ongoing scientific advice for fishery management decisions, including recommendations for acceptable biological catch, preventing overfishing, maximum sustainable yield, achieving rebuilding targets, and reports on stock status and health, bycatch, habitat status, social and economic impacts of management measures, and sustainability of fishing practices*." [10]

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http://safmc.net/download/Briefing%20Book%20March%202017/TAB%2007%20Snapper%20Grouper%20Committee/A04a_SG_RSProjections_021517.pdf

[8] SAFMC (2017). SSC Meeting Report April 25-27, 2017. June SAFMC Briefing Book. Available online at: http://safmc.net/download/Briefing%20Book%20Jun%202017/SSCReport_Apr2017Final.pdf

[9] NMFS (2017). Stock Status Updates Quarter 2. Available online at: http://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/sfa/fisheries_eco/status_of_fisheries/archive/2017/second/q2-2017-stock-status-update.pdf

[10] § 600.315 (c)

Furthermore, National Standard 1 guidelines state:

> *"Each Council shall develop ACLs for each of its managed fisheries that may not exceed the "fishing level recommendations" of its SSC or peer review process (Magnuson-Stevens Act section 302(h)(6)). The SSC recommendation that is the most relevant to ACLs is ABC, as both ACL and ABC are levels of annual catch."*[11]

Sidestepping SSC input ignores these guidelines, sets a dangerous precedent, and threatens to undermine the scientific integrity of the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) and Council processes.

Recommendation 2: Include a payback provision to prevent overfishing and ensure that progress made towards rebuilding is not reversed

Catch limits on their own are often not enough to ensure healthy, sustainable fisheries. Red snapper are overfished and undergoing overfishing and deliberate measures must be put into place to ensure that overfishing is not allowed to continue. National Standard 1 guidelines state:

> *"For stocks and stock complexes in rebuilding plans, the AMs [accountability measures] should include overage adjustments that reduce the ACLs in the next fishing year by the full amount of the overage, unless the best scientific information available shows that a reduced overage adjustment, or no adjustment, is needed to mitigate the effects of the overage".*[12]

Simply establishing a set number of fishing days or weight limit for the season is not enough to guarantee that overfishing will not occur and recovery of the species will not be compromised. Too much fishing too soon may jeopardize progress made over the last seven years at the expense of the fishing community's access to this popular species. We recommend that the Council carry over the payback provision in Amendment 28 as a more robust accountability measure.

Recommendation 3: Identify data gaps and specific data collection plans prior to any established season, as happened during the 2012-2014 "mini-seasons"

Even brief fishing seasons provide a window of opportunity to collect biological data needed for the next red snapper stock assessment. Should the Council and NOAA Fisheries decide to move forward with a "mini-season" for red snapper, SEDAR 41 identifies several data needs that could be further addressed with fishery-dependent samples, such as reproductive information. Stock assessment reviewers also found that the Florida creel survey[13] provided valuable data used in

[11] § 600.310 (b)(2)(v)(D)
[12] § 600.310 (g)(3)
[13] Sauls, B.J., R.P. Cody and A.J. Strelcheck. 2017. Survey Methods for Estimating Red Snapper Landings in a High-Effort Recreational Fishery Managed with a Small Annual Catch Limit. North American Journal of Fisheries Management, 37:2, 302-313.

SEDAR 41, especially during previous "mini-seasons". During those times, intense sampling was conducted at inlets that provide access to offshore fishing areas to better estimate landings and effort. SEDAR 41 recommended that similar programs would be useful in all South Atlantic states.[14]

In addition to these sampling efforts, current pilot programs being tested to collect information on catch and effort, such as the mobile application being developed in partnership with the Snook and Game Foundation,[15] offer promising new ways to collect fishery dependent data that complement MRIP and target offshore species like red snapper. Although these programs are still in development, effort should be made to advance them as quickly as possible to allow them to be tested during the potential 2018 mini-season.

There seems to be public consensus on the need for more information on red snapper and willingness to participate in data collection efforts. Capitalizing on this momentum and including fishermen in data collection efforts, especially the planning phase, are likely to improve the information available and increase positive engagement by the fishing community in the assessment process.

Recommendation 4: Require the use of descending devices and continue to look for ways to reduce discards in snapper grouper fisheries.

Several research studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of descending devices in improving the survival of released fish.[16] Laboratory experiments using red snapper indicated that rapidly recompressed fish had 100% survival from 30 meters and 83% survival from 60 meters.[17] Another study examining Gulf of Mexico red snapper showed that surface released fish (non-vented) were three times more likely to die than rapidly descended fish. Results also showed that mortality varied according to depth and season.[18] Current research at North Carolina State University indicates that use of a SeaQualizer™ resulted in 60-90% survival rates for snowy grouper, scamp grouper, and speckled hind which are other species in the snapper grouper complex.[19] These studies all show promising results and suggest that descending devices are a

[14] SEDAR (2016). SEDAR 41 – South Atlantic Red Snapper Assessment Report. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 660 pp. available online at: http://sedarweb.org/sedar-41.
[15] SAFMC (2017). Snapper Grouper Permit and Reporting Application. Snapper Grouper Committee Attachment A06c in June 2017 Briefing Book. Found online at: http://safmc.net/download/Briefing%20Book%20Jun%202017/10%20Snapper%20Grouper/A06c_SG_Reporting%20App.pdf
[16] SAFMC (2016). Literature Review of Red Snapper Discard Mortality. Attachment A04b in March 2017 SAFMC Briefing Book. Found online at: http://safmc.net/download/Briefing%20Book%20March%202017/TAB%2007%20Snapper%20Grouper%20Committee/A04b_LitRev_RedSnapperDiscardMortality.pdf
[17] Drumhiller et al (2014). Venting or Rapid Recompression Increase Survival and Improve Recovery of Red Snapper with Barotrauma. Marine and Coastal Fisheries, 6(1): 190-199.
[18] Curtis, J.M., M.W. Johnson, S.L. Diamond, and G.W. Stunz. 2015. Quantifying Delayed Mortality from Barotrauma Impairment in Discarded Red Snapper Using Acoustic Telemetry. Marine and Coastal Fisheries: Dynamics, Management, and Ecosystem Science 7: 434-449.
[19] SAFMC (2016). Online briefing book for the December 5-9, 2016 meeting of the SAFMC: Snapper Grouper Committee, Attachment A03.

useful tool for decreasing discard mortality. Unlike other tools, such as venting devices, there is less risk of using them incorrectly and causing unintentional harm to the released fish.

At the June 2017 Council meeting in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, the Council held a workshop to discuss best practices for releasing fish, especially those susceptible to barotrauma. Speakers demonstrated a variety of descending devices, including "lip grip and drop," "hook and drop," and "elevator," and discussed education and outreach strategies. As a follow-up to these discussions and as a way to address the red snapper discard problem in this region, the Council should consider requiring the use of descending devices in Amendment 43, including that they be rigged up and ready for use on snapper grouper trips. It should also implement a plan to train anglers on effective use of descending devices and the benefits to the fishery.

Science advisors should identify a plan to quantify changes in overall discard mortality rates that incorporates effectiveness of any required descending device and compliance rates by recreational and commercial fishermen. Any necessary research on compliance rates should be done concurrently with the development of this amendment to allow for this information to be factored into future discard mortality rates used in stock assessments. Monitoring discard mortality and the use of descending devices should be included in fishery-dependent monitoring programs. More reliable data on discard mortality rates would greatly improve catch accounting and future assessments of red snapper and other species.

Recommendation 5: Prioritize development of strategies recently moved from Amendment 43 to Amendment 46, including a snapper grouper season, depth-based management strategies, and electronic reporting for the private anglers fishing for snapper and grouper

Over the past year the Council has considered a variety of long term management solutions to reduce the number of red snapper dead discards and improve discard data. While some of these options, such as a snapper grouper permit, tag program, private recreational reporting, depth-based management strategies, and a snapper grouper season, will take more time to fully analyze, we urge the Council to continue to pursue each of these and determine whether they would be viable management tools in the South Atlantic. We agree with the comments made by several Council members at the June meeting that the new version of Amendment 43 is not a long term solution for red snapper management and is designed only to be a temporary measure for 2018.

We look forward to working together on creative solutions to ensure red snapper and other species are sustainably managed.

Sincerely,

Leda A. Cunningham
Manager, U.S. Oceans, Southeast

August 15, 2017

Gregg Waugh
Executive Director
SAFMC
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
N. Charleston, SC 29405

Dear Director Waugh:

The American Sportfishing Association (ASA) appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on Snapper Grouper Amendment 43 to modify the Annual Catch Limit (ACL) for red snapper.

The continued closure of the red snapper fishery in the South Atlantic has been extremely frustrating for all, and ASA commends the Council for looking at alternative ways to calculate an ACL for red snapper to open a season in 2018.

The South Atlantic red snapper stock has increased in abundance over the last several years at an even faster rate than predicted by the rebuilding plan, with abundance surveys and angler reports pointing to a quickly rebuilding fishery. While the stock was determined to be undergoing overfishing by SEDAR 41, it has continued to increase dramatically according to the ongoing chevron trap abundance surveys. This disparity indicates that the stock is not currently undergoing overfishing and that it can sustain at least the level of harvest that occurred in 2014, potentially at even greater levels based on the projected growth of the population since that time. Increasing numbers of discards and landings from 2012-2014 also suggest a growing stock.

ASA supports opening a red snapper season in 2018 that balances season length with sustainability. The use of an index based approach using increasing levels of abundance coupled with landings from what were extremely conservative seasons (2012-2014) is a responsible approach to reopening red snapper to harvest in 2018. Such a season will not only provide access and opportunity for anglers, but will also provide much needed data for a more accurate assessment of the red snapper stock. The continued lack of harvest data and determination of more precise discard mortality rates due to continued closures have prevented the development of a reliable stock assessment and Allowable Biological Catch.

While Amendment 43 is an admirable step in South Atlantic red snapper management, additional issues remain to be addressed in the long-term. ASA continues to support the use of descending devices and best fishing practices, the re-evaluation of biological reference points, and the development of meaningful recreational reporting for this fishery through Snapper Grouper Amendment 46. In addition, we support a robust evaluation of the index based approach employed here to determine its applicability for other stocks.

AMERICAN SPORTFISHING ASSOCIATION
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Thank you for your consideration of our comments. We look forward to continuing to working with the Council on these issues as they move forward.

Sincerely,

Kellie Ralston
Florida Fishery Policy Director
American Sportfishing Association

15 August 2017

Mr. Gregg Waugh, Executive Director
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
North Charleston, SC 29405

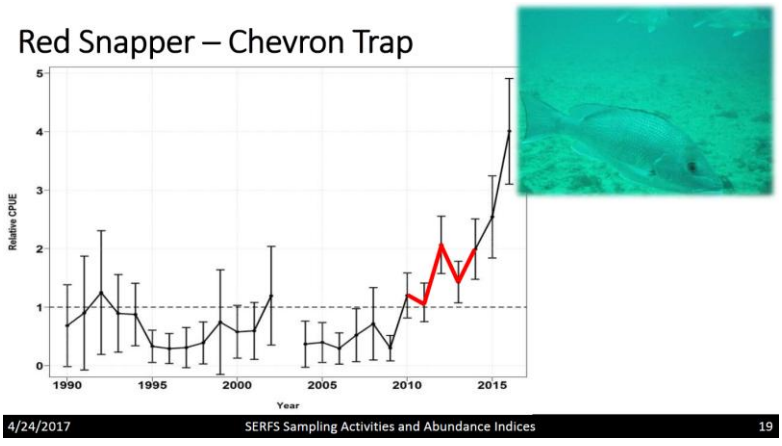
Re: Snapper Grouper Amendment 43 Atlantic Red Snapper Acceptable Biological Catch

To: Mr. Waugh,

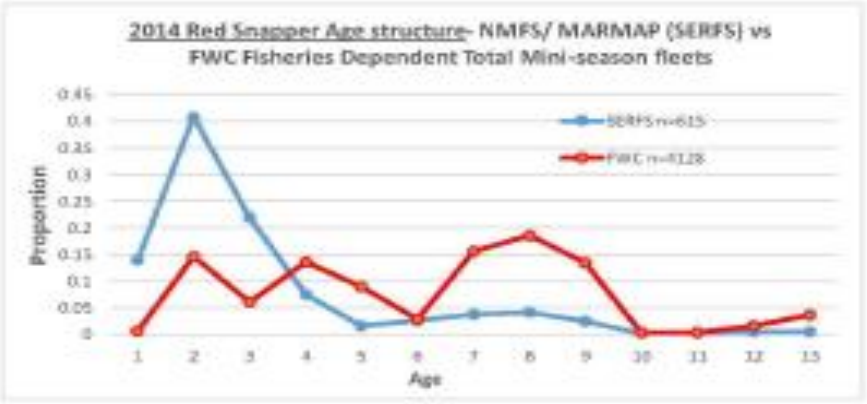
The Southeastern Fisheries Association, East Coast Fisheries Section (SFA ECFS) provides the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) members with this written comment on the Snapper Grouper (SG) Amendment 43. The single Action has four alternatives that will revise the process and equation to calculate an acceptable biological catch (ABC) for Atlantic Red snapper. SFA ECFS supports Alternative 5 for Action 1 that provides an ABC of 79,919 fish during 2018.

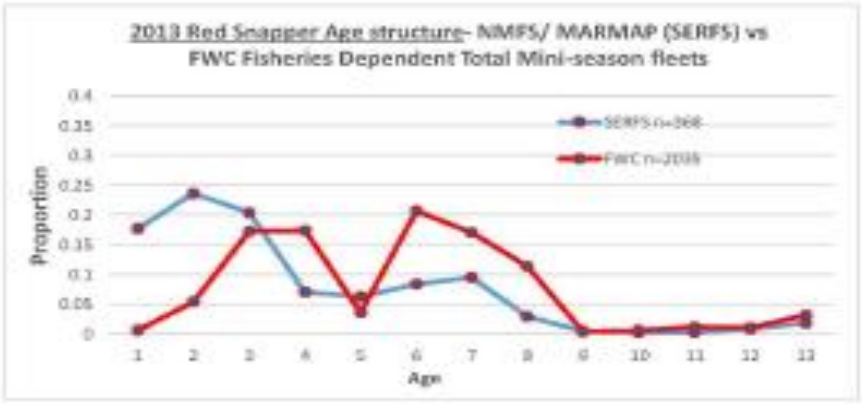
The old equation used to calculate the ABC process was finalized with SG Amendment 28 in 2013, and has not allowed for an ABC to be fished since the end of the 2014 mini-season because of high estimated recreational dead discards. We commend the SAFMC voting members and staff for developing SG Amendment 43 in this streamlined way to establish an ABC for 2018 to land some Red snappers next year. Other actions originally included in SG Amendment 43 will be transferred into SG Amendment 46, and we support that SAFMC strategy.

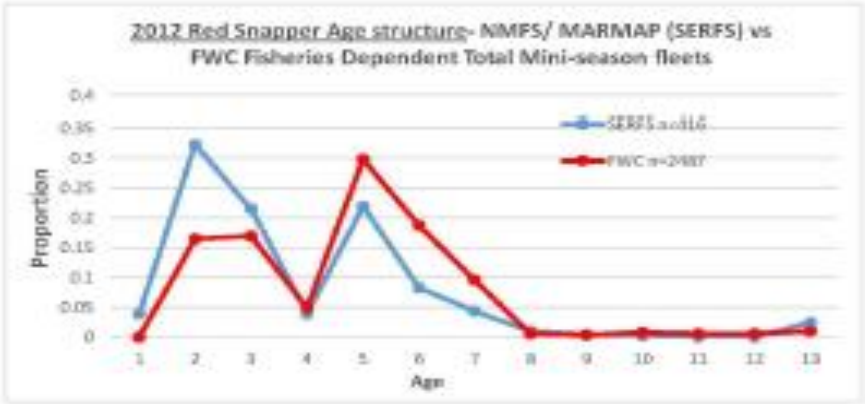
Two years before the Atlantic Red snapper closed at the beginning of 2010 fishermen witnessed the best Red snapper fishing in decades. Since the prohibition began the Red snapper population has been increasing as evidenced by fishery independent and fishery dependent surveys. See the graphs pasted below that illustrate how larger age classes are seen each year in the surveys.

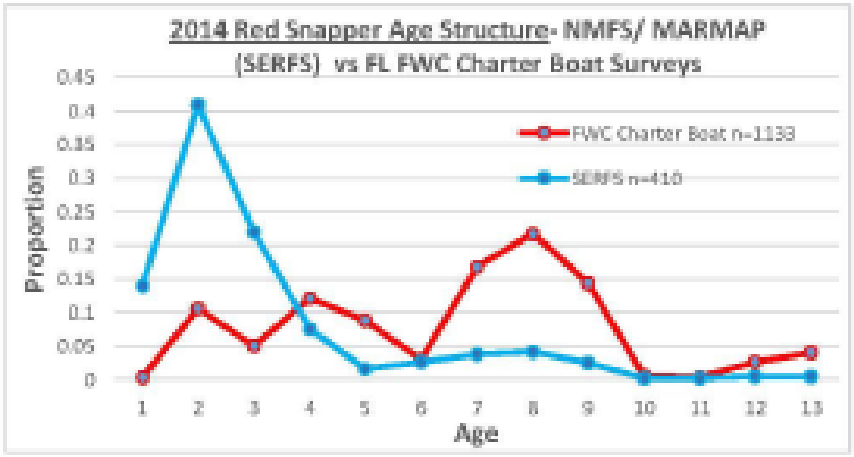


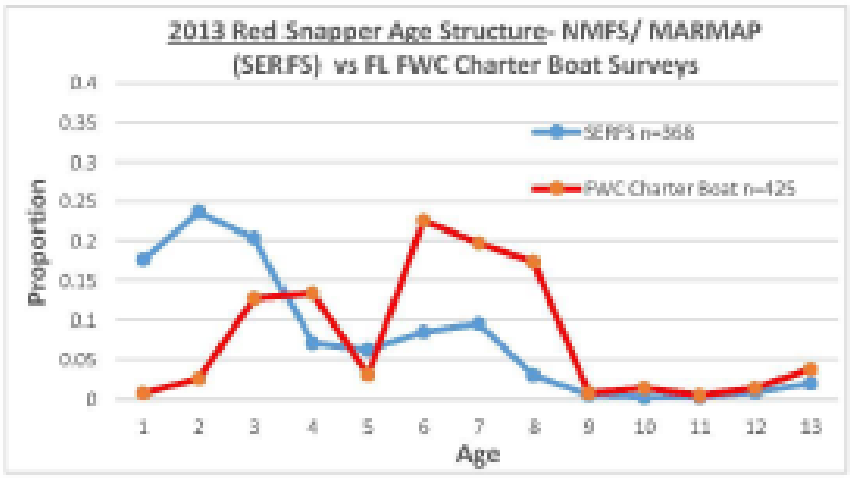
The Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation (FWC) hook and line survey samples are important data inputs for stock assessment modeling, and show the age class structure proportions of Red snappers when compared to the Southeast Reef Fish Survey (SERFS) chevron trap work during the 2012-2014 mini-seasons that provided the age data for the graphs.

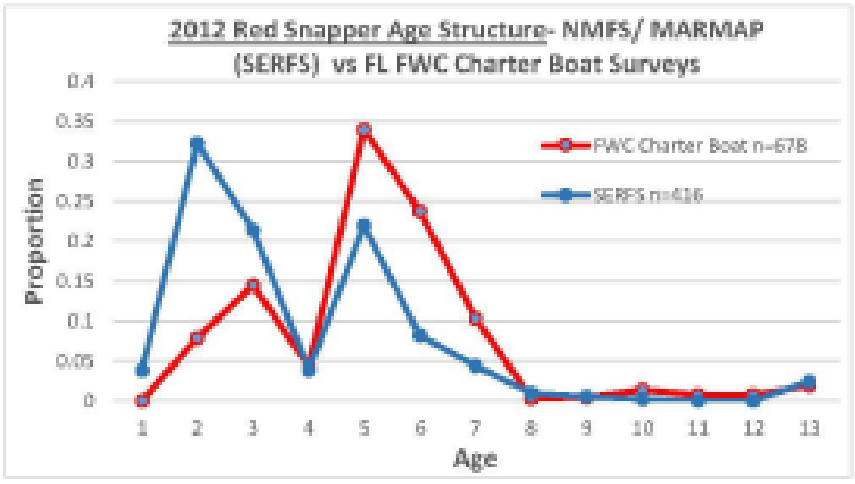


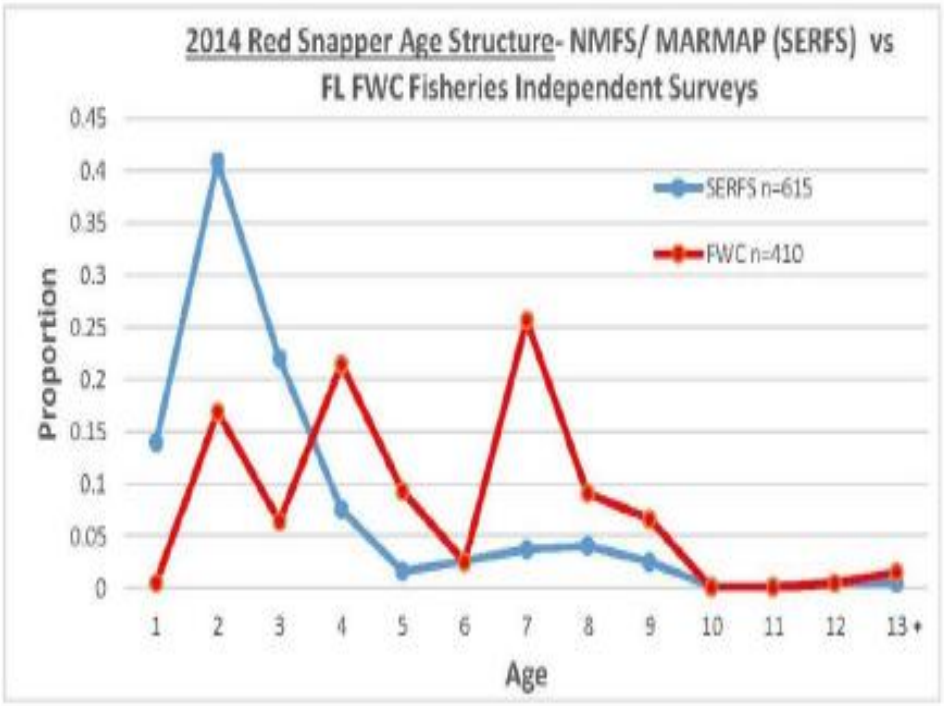


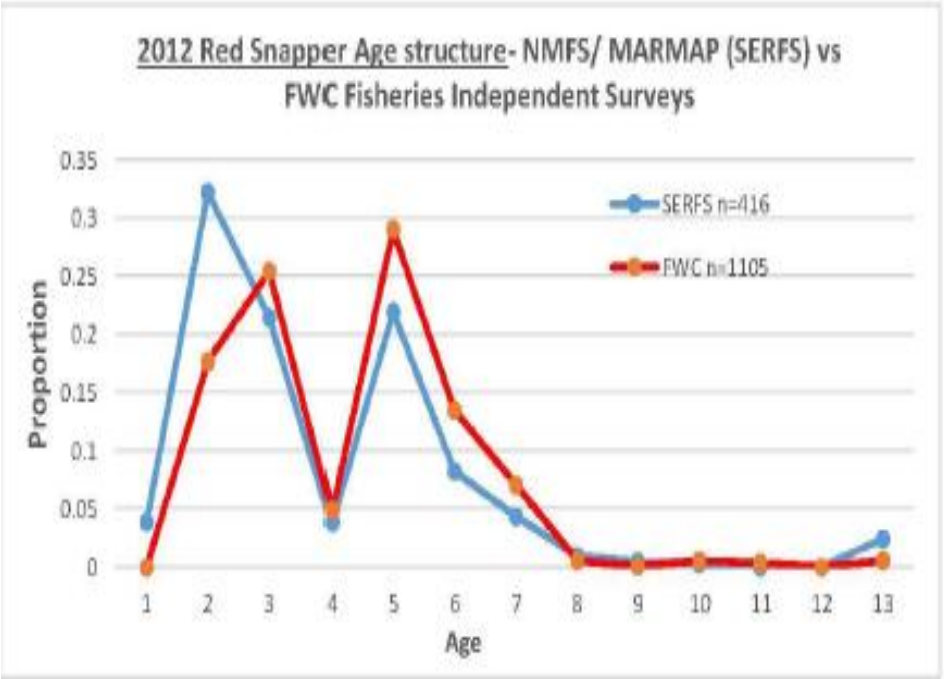



2014 Red Snapper Age Structure- NMFS/ MARMAP
(SERFS) vs FL FWC Charter Boat Surveys
FWC Charter Boat n=1133
SERFS n=410
Proportion
Age


2013 Red Snapper Age Structure- NMFS/ MARMAP
(SERFS) vs FL FWC Charter Boat Surveys
SERFS n=368
FWC Charter Boat n=425
Proportion
Age


2012 Red Snapper Age Structure- NMFS/ MARMAP
(SERFS) vs FL FWC Charter Boat Surveys
FWC Charter Boat n=678
SERFS n=416
Proportion
Age


2014 Red Snapper Age Structure- NMFS/ MARMAP (SERFS) vs
FL FWC Fisheries Independent Surveys
SERFS n=615
FWC n=410
Proportion
0.45
0.4
0.35
0.3
0.25
0.2
0.15
0.1
0.05
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13+
Age


2012 Red Snapper Age structure- NMFS/ MARMAP (SERFS) vs
FWC Fisheries Independent Surveys
SERFS n=416
FWC n=1105
Proportion
0.35
0.3
0.25
0.2
0.15
0.1
0.05
0
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13
Age

SFA ECFS members are looking forward to the SG Amendment 43 Final Rule to allow Atlantic Red snapper fishing and landings during 2018, and beyond. We see that the Red snapper ages, numbers and size structure are all increasing, while becoming the dominant fish on many reefs in the SAFMC region. Open seasons going forward need to occur to provide more fishery dependent data for monitoring the Red snapper stock, and to use in future stock assessments to provide the best scientific information available.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this positive development.

Jimmy Hull, Chairman
SFA ECFS
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Ormond Beach, FL 32174-6303