

Regulatory Amendment 35

Snapper Grouper Release Mortality Reduction and Red Snapper Catch Levels

Advisory Panel Discussion Document

April 2022

Background

Red snapper have been in a rebuilding plan since 2011, with the stock scheduled to be rebuilt by 2044. The most recent stock assessment for South Atlantic red snapper, SEDAR 73 (2021) with data through 2019, determined the stock to still be overfished and undergoing overfishing. Since initial implementation of the rebuilding plan, red snapper fishing has been limited by few days of recreational harvest allowed annually and a low ACL for the commercial sector with a season beginning each year in July until the ACL is met. These measures, combined with growing effort in the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery, particularly from the recreational sector, have led to a drastic increase in the number of red snapper that must be released after being caught. The increase in releases has, in turn, led to an increase in the number of fish that die after being caught and released, despite efforts from management and fishermen to improve survival after release through best practices and use of descending devices. The number of dead red snapper releases far outnumbers fish removed from the population by harvest.

Large numbers of releases limit managers' ability to prevent overfishing and reduce the number of fish that can be landed by the fishery. Overfishing occurs when the number of total removals exceeds the overfishing limit. If more of these removals occur from fish dying after release, fewer fish may be landed.

In September 2021, the SSC recommended new ABCs for red snapper based on the results of SEDAR 73 (2021). Implementation of the recommended ABCs would initially entail an approximate one third reduction from the current ABC, further limiting the fishery and not addressing the primary source of mortality for the stock, which comes from fish that do not

survive after being released. Therefore, the Council directed work to begin on a regulatory amendment that would implement management measures to reduce releases of red snapper, recognizing that such a measure would necessarily affect multiple species in the snapper grouper fishery. The Council intends for this management change to also be accounted for by the SSC in reconsidering assumptions about future management conditions in projections that support their ABC recommendation for red snapper.

In March 2022, the Council formally initiated Regulatory Amendment 35 and directed staff to compile analyses that could inform Council consideration of area, time, or depth-based closures for the recreational and commercial components of the snapper grouper fishery. Council staff also gave a presentation depicting the magnitude of releases in the snapper grouper fishery, which can be found [HERE](#).

Objective for this meeting

Provide input for Council consideration in developing Regulatory Amendment 35.

Discussion Questions

1. What time of year do you typically fish shallower water? What time of year do you typically fish deeper water?
 - a. Generally speaking, what depth do you consider “deeper water” for your fishing practices? Please state region and sector/component so this can be noted with response.
2. Consider species that are targeted in areas of your region where red snapper are frequently caught and released while out of season. Consider local and sector effects in responses to the following questions:
 - a. What are these target species?
 - b. What are the most critical times of year to retain access to these species? Are there times of year when fishing for these species could be closed if it meant a greater ACL and a longer season for red snapper?
 - c. Considering decreased release survival at greater depths (increased barotrauma effects), if it meant a greater ACL and a longer season for red snapper, are there specific areas or depths of water that could be closed during non-critical times of year?
 - d. How would any potential closures discussed in response to questions 2b or 2c impact your user group and region?
 - e. What percent (approximately) of the red snapper you release each year are encountered during the times and areas discussed thus far?
 - f. Are high numbers of other species such as black sea bass, vermilion snapper, greater amberjack, red grouper, gag grouper, or gray triggerfish caught and released in the discussed times and areas? What percent of releases for those species occur in the discussed times and areas?