

Amendment 53

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

Catch Level Adjustments and Allocations for Gag Grouper

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Discussion Document

October 2021

Background

The first assessment of the South Atlantic gag stock, assess through the Southeast Data,

History of Gag Grouper Stock Status		
Assessment	Overfished	Overfishing
SEDAR 10 (2006)		X
SEDAR 10 Update (2014)		X
SEDAR 71 (2021)	X	X

Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) occurred in 2006. This assessment (SEDAR 10) indicated that the stock was not overfished but was experiencing overfishing. In 2014, gag was assessed again through SEDAR 10 Update.

This assessment indicated that gag were not overfished but still undergoing overfishing. In response to this assessment, the gag total ACL was set to 95% of the ABC recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) through Regulatory Amendment 22 (2015). This amendment also reduced the shallow water grouper bag limit to allow for 1 gag or 1 black grouper within the aggregate. The current spawning season closure (January 1 through April 30) directed commercial quota, and allocations were established through Amendment 16 in 2009.

The current bag limit for gag (1 per day within the 3 grouper aggregate) was set in 2015 through Regulatory Amendment 15.

SEDAR 71 was completed in 2021. The terminal year of the assessment is 2019. This assessment used revised estimates for recreational catch from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) based on the Fishing Effort Survey (FES). The results of this assessment indicated that the South Atlantic gag stock is overfished and experiencing overfishing (**Figure 1**). The Council's SSC reviewed SEDAR 71 at their April 2021 meeting and determined that the assessment is based on the best scientific information available (BSIA).

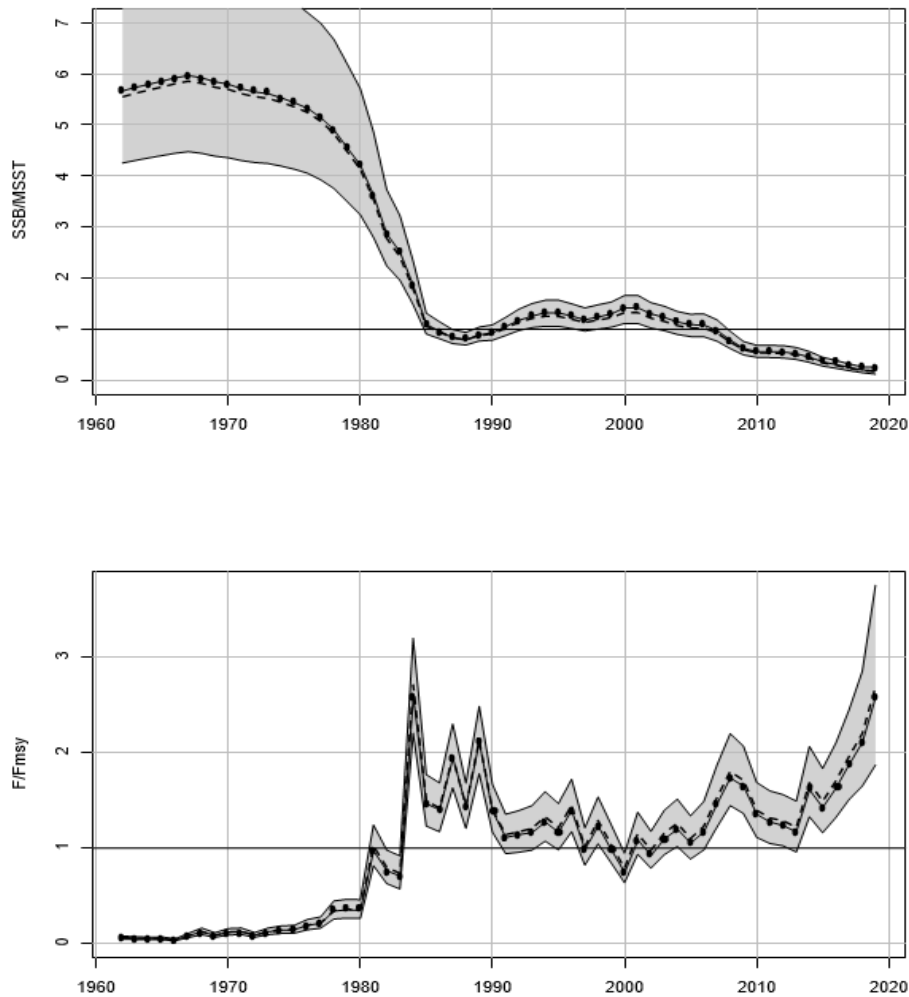


Figure 1. Estimated time series of spawning stock biomass (SSB) and fishing mortality (F) relative to benchmarks. Solid line indicates estimates from base run of the Beaufort Assessment Model; gray error bands indicate 5th and 95th percentiles of the ensemble modeling. Top panel: SSB relative to the minimum stock size threshold (MSST); if less than 1, stock is overfished. Bottom panel: F relative to F_{MSY} ; if > 1 stock is undergoing overfishing. *Source: SEDAR 71 (2021).*

An application providing an overview of the gag fishery, including management history, landings, and assessment information, has been developed and can be found here: https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/SA_FisheryDataGag/.

Objectives for this Meeting

- Provide recommendations on actions and range of alternatives to consider.

Tentative Amendment Timing

June 2021	Reviewed SEDAR 71 results and direct staff to begin a plan amendment
October 2021	AP review, provide recommendations
December 2021	Review AP comments, review preliminary analyses, provide guidance to staff, approve for scoping
January/February 2022	Conduct scoping
March 2022	Review scoping comments and modifications to the amendment, select preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings
April/May 2022	Conduct public hearings
June 2022	Review public hearing comments and approve all actions
September 2022	Review final draft amendment and consider approval for formal review

Amendment timing will be further defined at a future IPT meeting. The statutory deadline for these measures to be implemented is July 2023.

Acceptable Biological Catch and Overfishing Limit

The Council reviewed the assessment results and the SSC’s recommendations for the Overfishing Limit (OFL) at their June 2021. The Council directed staff to start a plan amendment to end overfishing and rebuild the South Atlantic stock of gag grouper, however additional clarification was needed to determine the rebuilding timeline. During the September meeting, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) clarified that gag are projected to rebuild within 7 years in the absence of all fishing-related mortality (including mortality due to landing and discarding). Therefore, the maximum timeframe for rebuilding is 10 years, and to account for both this timeline and discard mortality known to occur, a substantial decrease in allowable harvest will be needed. With this clarified rebuilding timeline, the SSC will provide its ABC/OFL levels at their October 2021 meeting. During the September 2021 meeting, Council requested multiple rebuilding scenarios reflecting different recruitment trends.

Proposed Management Changes

- **Create a rebuilding schedule for gag grouper in the South Atlantic**
 - Gag grouper does not currently have a rebuilding plan.
 - The maximum timeframe for rebuilding is 10 years.
 - During the September meeting the Council requested additional projections to determine options for total ACL during rebuilding.

- **Adjust catch levels (annual catch limit) and revise annual optimum yield**
 - New annual catch limits are needed because of the updated ABC/OFL recommendations that the SSC will provide at their October 2021 meeting.
 - The current ACL (734,350 lbs gw) is based on Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) data. SEDAR 71 includes landings data using the MRIP Fishing Effort Survey (FES). A new ACL would be specified based on the SSC’s recommended ABCs and the most recent assessment. The recreational portion of the new ACL will be tracked in FES units for private and charter modes.
 - The current ACL was set at 95% of the ABC.
 - The SSC provided OFL recommendations (see below) at their May 2021 meeting of 367,000 lbs gw in 2023, which is approximately 185,000 lbs gw (or 34%) lower than the average estimated total landings from 2015-2019 (551,780 lbs gw, SEDAR 71). The forthcoming ABC from the SSC’s October meeting will likely be lower than this OFL. The OFL in subsequent years increase as the stock rebuilds.

Year	Landed LBS (GW, 1,000 LB)	Landed Number (1,000)
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2023	367	36
2024	494	45
2025	605	53
2026	706	60
2027	808	68

- **Revise sector allocations**

- Sector allocations need to be revised due to the updated total ACL and the change in recreational data from CHTS to FES.
- The current allocations for gag grouper for the recreational and commercial sector are 49% and 51% respectively. This allocation was based on landings from ALS, MRFSS, and headboat databases using landings from 1999-2003.
- Applying the same allocation method to recreational FES data, where applicable, would result in allocations of approximately 64.4% and 35.6% for the recreational and commercial sectors, respectively.

- **Consider other changes to management**

- Current recreational regulations:
 - Season: May 1 – December 31
 - Bag limit: 1 fish/person/day, no more than 1 gag grouper within the 3-grouper aggregate
 - Size limit: 24-inch total length
 - Gear requirements: dehooking tool required, descending device required onboard vessel, non-stainless steel circle hooks required north of 28° North latitude
- Current commercial regulations:
 - Season: May 1 – December 31
 - Trip Limit: 1,000 lbs gutted weight (1,180 lbs whole weight) until 75% of the annual catch limit is met or projected to be met. Then the trip limit is 500 lbs gutted weight (590 lbs whole weight)
 - Size limit: 24-inch total length
 - Gear requirements: dehooking tool required, descending device required onboard vessel, non-stainless steel circle hooks required north of 28° North latitude, smalltooth sawfish and sea turtle release gear
- Current accountability measures
 - Recreational:
 - (i) If recreational landings for gag, as estimated by the SRD, reach or are projected to reach the recreational ACL, the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to close the recreational sector for the remainder of the fishing year regardless if the stock is overfished, unless NMFS determines that no closure is necessary based on the best scientific information available. On and after the effective date of such notification, the bag and possession limits for gag in or from the South Atlantic EEZ are zero.

(ii) If recreational landings for gag, as estimated by the SRD, exceed the recreational ACL, then during the following fishing year recreational landings will be monitored for a persistence in increased landings, and if necessary, the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to reduce the length of the recreational fishing season and the recreational ACL by the amount of the recreational ACL overage, if the species is overfished based on the most recent Status of U.S. Fisheries Report to Congress, and if the combined commercial and recreational ACL specified in [§ 622.193\(c\)\(1\)\(iv\)](#) is exceeded during the same fishing year. NMFS will use the best scientific information available to determine if reducing the length of the recreational fishing season and recreational ACL is necessary. When the recreational sector is closed as a result of NMFS reducing the length of the recreational fishing season and ACL, the bag and possession limits for gag in or from the South Atlantic EEZ are zero.

▪ **Commercial:**

(i) If commercial landings for gag, as estimated by the SRD, reach or are projected to reach the commercial quota specified in [§ 622.190\(a\)\(7\)](#), the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to close the commercial sector for gag for the remainder of the fishing year. Applicable restrictions after a commercial quota closure are specified in [§ 622.190\(c\)](#).

(ii) If the commercial landings for gag, as estimated by the SRD, exceed the commercial ACL specified in [§ 622.193\(c\)\(1\)\(iii\)](#), and the combined commercial and recreational ACL specified in [§ 622.193\(c\)\(1\)\(iv\)](#), is exceeded during the same fishing year, and gag are overfished based on the most recent Status of U.S. Fisheries Report to Congress, the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to reduce the commercial ACL for that following fishing year by the amount of the commercial ACL overage in the prior fishing year.

AP Action:

RECOMMEND CHANGES THAT SHOULD BE INITIALLY CONSIDERED FOR THE GAG FISHERY THROUGH THIS AMENDMENT.

Discussion Questions

The rebuilding plan for gag grouper (10 years or less) will result in substantial decreases to annual catch limits. The AP may want to consider the following discussion questions:

1. **Commercial:** What should management priorities be for the commercial fishery during this rebuilding time frame?
2. **Commercial:** Should changes to commercial management measures other than annual catch limits also be considered?

3. **Recreational:** What should management priorities be for the recreational fishery during this rebuilding time frame?
4. **Recreational:** Should changes to recreational management measures other than annual catch limits also be considered?