UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

THE DIRECTOR

FEB 18 2016

The Honorable Walter B. Jones
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Jones:

Thank you for your cosigned letter regarding the South Atlantic red snapper fishery.

You asked several questions about red snapper science, cooperative research, and the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Responses to each question are provided below.

Question 1

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) estimates total removals from commercial and recreational landings and discard data. Dealers and commercial fishermen provide commercial landings and discard data through dealer reports, state trip tickets, and logbooks. Headboat operators provide headboat landings and discard data through logbooks, which are partially verified by dockside samplers and at-sea observers. NMFS' MRIP estimates charter and private angler landings and discard data using three complementary survey methods, which are carried out in cooperation with the states. The states also supplement those data with state-specific surveys.

Estimates of red snapper total removals in 2013 and 2014 were 97,563 and 205,859 fish, respectively. There are several reasons why the increase in total removals was greater in 2014 than 2013. First, the commercial and recreational fishing seasons were longer in 2014 (the commercial season was 14 days longer in 2014 than 2013 and the recreational season was 5 days longer in 2014 than 2013, representing an approximately 32% and 166% increase in number of days for the commercial and recreational sectors, respectively). Second, increases in overall fishing effort and/or an increase in stock abundance as a result of strong recent recruitment can cause increases in total removals.

The average weight of 6.42-lb per fish is derived from projections computed after the last benchmark assessment and was used by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (South Atlantic Council) during its June 2015 meeting to report an interim poundage estimate. The 5.68-lb average weight per fish is from actual samples collected at the dock and is the weight used in the determination of final removals in weight (lbs).

THE ASSISTANT ADMINISTRATOR
FOR FISHERIES

Question 2

An opportunity for cooperative research in the Southeast region is via our annual call for cooperative research proposals. Incoming proposals are evaluated against a set of criteria that include scientific merit and relevance to current management issues. The process is highly competitive, and the number of proposed projects exceeds the resources available to fund them. In FY 2015 we provided funding for thirteen cooperative research projects, including funding a cooperative research project to assess the size-selectivity of hook and line gear, chevron traps, and underwater cameras for red snapper and other reef fishes in the U.S South Atlantic. Working cooperatively with our stakeholders on red snapper projects in the South Atlantic is an important priority in the Southeast, but we must also balance critical research needs for the many fisheries in the South Atlantic, Caribbean, and Gulf of Mexico ecosystems and highly migratory species.

We also are collaborating with the South Atlantic Council to explore Citizen Science as a means of strengthening the collection of data and information to support fisheries management. We will continue to communicate with fishing industry members and other stakeholders to design and execute cooperative research that contributes to the state of knowledge required for successful fisheries management.

Question 3

The last stock assessment for red snapper indicated the stock was undergoing overfishing and was overfished. The South Atlantic Council implemented a 35-year rebuilding plan in 2010. A fishery-independent survey was initiated in 2010 to complement ongoing data collections under the Marine Resources Monitoring, Assessment, and Prediction (MARMAP) program to monitor the abundance of reef fish, including red snapper, in the South Atlantic. The longer the time series data, the more reliably stock assessment scientists can interpret trends seen in those data. A red snapper stock assessment was scheduled to begin in 2014. However, soon after the assessment was initiated, questions regarding one of the data inputs to the model were raised by industry representatives, requiring the assessment to be postponed until those issues were thoroughly addressed. The red snapper stock assessment is underway now and the peer-reviewed results will be delivered to the South Atlantic Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee at its 2016 spring meeting.

Question 4

We agree with the recommendation from the Stock Assessment Program Review that consistent funding for fishery-independent surveys is critical for improving our assessments and is a priority for the Southeast Fisheries Science Center. The FY 2016 omnibus includes a $5 million increase for the Gulf of Mexico reef stock assessments. The FY 2017 President's Budget requests an increase of $5.9 million to support an initiative on Ecosystem-based Solutions for Fishery Management that will promote understanding of the importance of inshore and offshore habitat to the productivity and recovery of fisheries and protected species.

Other examples of steps to improve fishery-independent data in the South Atlantic include:

- A new fishery-independent survey was conducted in fall 2015 to monitor the distribution and density of deep water species such as blueline tilefish, golden tilefish, and snowy grouper. The survey design was a product of a workshop held in spring 2015 with fishing industry and South Atlantic Council representatives and academic, state, and federal scientists.
- A study was conducted to investigate nursery habitats for red snapper in the South Atlantic.
- Ageing gray triggerfish is challenging, and a study is underway to strengthen our ability to age this species and standardize those improved methodologies across cooperating laboratories.

Question 5

Many of the stocks managed by the South Atlantic Council can be characterized as "data poor." For example, data on some stocks are limited to total catch, requiring the application of data-poor techniques for setting annual catch limits. However, the data available for red snapper in the South Atlantic are adequate to support a more complex analysis, specifically an age-structured stock assessment. Inclusion of these data significantly strengthens our ability to monitor the rebuilding of this important stock.

Question 6

The quality and quantity of data inputs into a stock assessment influence the level of uncertainty in the results. If the data inputs are weak, the uncertainty of the assessment is generally greater. When scientific advice is provided to a Fishery Management Council, it includes a characterization of the level of scientific uncertainty associated with that advice. When Scientific and Statistical Committees provide acceptable biological catch levels to their Councils, they may mitigate for scientific uncertainty by incorporating buffers in those levels, which reduces the amount of fish available to the commercial and recreational fishermen for harvest. Additional investments in the quality and quantity of these data inputs can reduce the uncertainty of a stock assessment, which in turn reduces the magnitude of buffers for scientific uncertainty and can lead to higher annual catch limits.

Prior to the assessment underway right now, stock assessments for South Atlantic red snapper were heavily reliant on fishery-dependent data. In FY2010, a new, fishery-independent survey was initiated to improve the quality of stock assessments going forward. Data from this survey are included in the red snapper stock assessment that is currently underway. As noted above, the peer-reviewed results of the red snapper stock assessment will be delivered to the South Atlantic Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee this spring.

Question 7

MRIP implemented a new survey design for the Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) in 2013. The new survey design addresses the recommendations of the 2006 findings of the National Research Council regarding sources of potential bias in estimates of recreational catch, and therefore results in more accurate catch estimates. In September 2013, NMFS conducted a workshop in conjunction with the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review program that convened experts in fisheries survey design and stock assessment to make recommendations regarding how best to integrate catch estimates using the new APAIS design with the time series of estimates from the previous survey design. The workshop identified three options for recalibrating the legacy data, one of which could be used in the short term, and two that required additional years of data collected using the new APAIS design. The workshop participants recommended using the short-term method as required until sufficient data had been developed to enable a full evaluation of the three options and a final choice of the most effective calibration solution. More recently, the MRIP Transition Team has recommended integrating the calibration of the APAIS with another calibration that is in progress for the new mail survey that MRIP was developed to replace the household telephone survey for estimating the number of angler trips. A detailed Transition Plan for the APAIS component of the calibration is currently in development by a sub-group of the Transition Team. It is expected that the combined calibration of historic catch estimates to account for both the changes in the APAIS and the mail survey will take place beginning in 2017. We believe that this timing will allow for completion of the necessary sampling to fully evaluate the three options for the APAIS calibration, and will also ensure a single calibration for both survey method changes, thus avoiding the disruption of two separate recalibrations of historic data.

The new survey design will improve the accuracy of red snapper catch estimates. The precision of survey estimates is a function of sample size. The change to the new survey design has increased the potential for improved statistical precision but will not, by itself, bring about that improvement. MRIP is working with our partners in the region to develop and evaluate additional survey improvements, including supplemental survey methods to improve the precision and timeliness of estimates of catch for certain species and evaluating the cost effectiveness of increasing sample sizes in the current MRIP surveys. We are working with the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program to develop a Regional Implementation Plan for MRIP in 2016 that will identify the needs, priorities, and costs for future improvements to our surveys.

You have my commitment that we are doing everything we can to improve the science that will allow us to increase fishing opportunities to all fishing sectors in the near future and for the long term.

If you have any further questions, please contact Coby Dolan, Director, NOAA's Office of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, at (202) 482-4981.

Sincerely,

Eileen Sobeck