

## **Mutton Snapper Spawn Issues Paper**

### **Law Enforcement Committee June 14, 2012**

Mutton snapper aggregate to spawn during the full moon of May in waters off the Florida Keys. The “mutton spawn” is an annual event marked by derby-style conditions as fishermen (commercial and recreational) take advantage of the abundance of fish during this time. In November 2010, the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel alerted the Council of the need to consider management regulations to diminish the impact on the spawning population. The AP made the following recommendation:

*The AP recommends that the Council consider a traditional spawning area (e.g. Western Dry Rocks) and/or seasonal closure in May and June (both commercial and recreational) to protect spawning aggregations of mutton snapper and reduce the bag limit to 3 per person per day.*

Moreover, members of the public have expressed their concern and desire for the Council to address this issue.

Council staff were contacted on May 20 by a NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) Agent stationed in the Florida Keys to report continuing complaints from recreational and commercial fishermen during the mutton snapper spawn. Council staff scheduled a conference call with Law Enforcement Committee Chairman Duane Harris to brief him on the situation. The Agent who made the initial contact and his partner were on the call.

The Agents identified the following issues in the Florida Keys:

- Most of the fishing activity centers around the full moon in May, when mutton snapper spawning is at its peak.
- Much of the activity takes place at two specific areas open to the public: Western Dry Rocks (in state waters) and Eyeglass (in federal waters) off Key West.
- Law enforcement officers report witnessing many fishermen making multiple trips in one day and harvesting over the individual or vessel limit (the current bag limit in federal waters is 10 fish per person per day).
- Law enforcement officers suspect that many of the fish are being sold directly to local restaurants and the harvest is likely not being properly monitored.
- This is one time of the year when the 10 fish bag limit of mutton snapper is likely to be caught. During the remainder of the year, mutton snapper are not plentiful enough in the area for most fishermen to catch their bag limit.
- Amberjack spawn during March and April in waters off the Keys. Fishermen are targeting amberjack during their spawn to obtain roe used as bait for mutton snapper. Amberjack are often harvested mainly for their roe and the rest of the fish sold as secondary income.

- The derby-style conditions during the mutton spawn are creating user conflicts.
- The public's perception tends to be that managers are allowing harvest on a spawning stock at a time when spawning area closures are being considered to protect other snapper grouper species (speckled hind and warsaw grouper).
- Derby-style fishing conditions may be impacting habitat if vessels are anchoring.
- A seasonal and/or area closure (or partial closure) during the spawning season would greatly diminish impacts on the stock as well as user conflicts.
- A reduction in the bag limit may help alleviate the existing problems.
- The mutton spawn is creating biological, social, enforcement and possibly habitat issues.

**Additional information on mutton snapper:**

Mutton snapper was last assessed through the SEDAR process in 2007 (SEDAR 15A 2007) with data through 2006. The assessment considered a single stock of mutton snapper in the South Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico centered primarily in South Florida and the Florida Keys. At the time of the assessment the stock was determined to be *not undergoing overfishing*. However, the assessment report noted that although the estimated spawning biomass of the base run was above  $SSB_{F30\%}$  (SSB ratio = 1.14), the spawning biomass estimates for many of the sensitivity runs were below the Councils' objective. Therefore, the results are equivocal and *it would be precautionary to declare the stock overfished*.

The SEDAR 15A Review Panel recommended that there be a relatively short interval (on the order 3 years) before the next mutton snapper stock assessment. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute is currently conducting a stock assessment for mutton snapper that will be completed late in 2012.

The Comprehensive ACL Amendment established jurisdictional allocations, recreational and commercial ACLs and AMs for mutton snapper. The South Atlantic allocation is currently 82% whereas the recreational and commercial sectors are allocated 17% and 82%, respectively. The recreational ACL is 768,857 pounds whole weight (ww), and the commercial ACL is 157,707 pounds ww. These regulations became effective on April 16, 2012.

Current federal and Florida recreational and commercial size and bag limits are 16" TL and 10 per person per day during May and June. Federal commercial regulations state:

- (2) Mutton snapper spawning season. During May and June, each year, the possession of mutton snapper in or from the EEZ on board a vessel that has a commercial permit for South Atlantic snapper-grouper is limited to 10 per person per day *or 10 per person per trip*, whichever is more restrictive.