



## **Dolphin Wahoo Advisory Panel Fishery Performance Report for Wahoo October 28, 2020**

On October 28, 2020, the Dolphin Wahoo Advisory Panel (AP) of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) reviewed fishery information for wahoo and developed this fishery performance report (FPR). The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR for wahoo will be provided to the SSC, the Socio-Economic Panel, and the Council as needed to inform future management.

### **Advisory Panel Members present:**

Ray Rosher, Chair (FL;

Charter/Commercial)

Christopher Burrows, Vice-Chair (NC;  
Charter)

Brice Barr (FL; Charter)

Robert Frevert (FL; Private Recreational)

Richard Harris (NC; Charter)

Timothy Scalise (SC; Charter)

Jonathon Reynolds (FL;

Charter/Commercial)

Harris Huddle (NC; Private Recreational)

Jay Kavanaugh (NC; Charter)

Fred Kinard (SC; Private Recreational)

Daniel Owsley (GA; Private Recreational)

### ***Fishery Overview***

Summary information on the wahoo fishery was presented in a fishery information application (<http://data.safmc.net/FPRAll/>) intended to provide an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history of the species, trends in landings and fishery economics for both the commercial and recreational (for-hire and private) sectors. The information was provided as background to elicit the discussion presented in this Fishery Performance Report. The fishery information application presents data from 2000 through 2018.

### ***Observations on Stock Abundance and Catch Levels***

AP members generally agreed that the timing of runs and general location of wahoo has not notably changed beyond typical season variations. There seems to be a general increase in wahoo abundance and availability to the fishery across the South Atlantic Region. It was noted that wahoo presence can be particularly sporadic in the Outer Banks area of North Carolina.

### ***Observations on Fish Size***

AP members generally agreed that the average size of wahoo landed has been steady or has increased in recent years. While there is variation in the size of wahoo landed, no AP members felt that the average fish size was decreasing over time.

### ***Observations on Effort Shifts and Discards***

It seems like there may be some shift in effort to wahoo as show in increased presence of the species on social media and sharing of methods to target wahoo. In Mid and Southeast coastal North Carolina, it was noted that there has been a shift to wahoo with the decline of the yellowfin tuna fishery in the area.

AP members in South Florida stated that there is concern over increased fishing pressure, particularly from divers using spearfishing gear. It was noted that some divers seem to be targeting spawning aggregations and that divers were accounting for a notable number of wahoo harvested directly and through delayed mortality due to wahoo being speared but escaping when the spear pulls out of the fish. These were referred to as “lost fish” that do not show up as harvest.

### ***Observations on Price and Demand***

There is demand from customers on charter trips that want to target wahoo. There appears to be increased general recreational demand for wahoo. This has been shown through an increase in trips using high speed trolling methods to target wahoo and the rise of wahoo-specific tournaments. One AP member noted that the wahoo tournament records could be a potential data source to assess trends in regional wahoo landings, size, and popularity.

It was noted that in South Carolina, trips targeting wahoo help fill in during times that are typically the “slow season” such as late winter or early spring, and in particular the month of March. Four years ago, the selection of wahoo tackle and lures was fairly sparse in tackle shops but now shops have entire sections dedicated to wahoo.

The commercial price for wahoo was very low in the spring and early summer due to the economic effects of COVID-19 and restaurants shutting down, which decreased demand for the species and other similar species. Prices rebounded in July and through the rest of the summer/fall as restaurants and retailers reopened, thereby increasing demand. Wahoo tend to have a relatively short “shelf life” and thus prices are greatly affected if demand from restaurants and retail outlets that utilize the fish drops.

### ***Observations on Management Measures***

No specific management measures were identified that needed to be changed or examined. Some AP members mentioned potentially monitoring spearfishing landings of wahoo and practices targeting the species to mitigate potential outsized future negative impacts to wahoo stocks.

### ***Environmental and Habitat Observations***

Wahoo tend to prefer specific habitats based on their size. Larger specimens are often found closer to shore around the shelf break and over structure. Smaller specimens are typically found further offshore and in deeper water. These smaller fish often orient themselves around floating structure such as *Sargassum* mats and marine debris such as logs or branches. AP members mentioned occasionally catching very small specimens (a.k.a “weehos”) on sabiki rigs around *Sargassum* mats when targeting baitfish.

In the Outer Banks of North Carolina, it was noted that small specimens sporadically migrate through the area all at once and in large numbers but then may not appear again for a long period of time. There does not seem to be an apparent pattern to this regional migration of

small fish.

***Other observations***

It was noted that an increase in the population of many shark species is having an impact on the wahoo fishery as well as many other fisheries in the South Atlantic. This is causing increased mortality on wahoo and other prized species such as sailfish through changing fishing behavior that concentrates fishermen in certain areas and effort towards species that can be feasibly landed without the likelihood of extreme shark predation. It is also a significant additional source of mortality for the fish species that are often eaten by sharks while hooked.

One AP member from South Florida noted that there appeared to be a temporary decrease in localized shark predation after a commercial shark fishing vessel was active in the area. It was speculated that this occurrence could have been due to a decrease in localized shark abundance and/or a change in shark behavior in reaction to the fishing pressure that caused sharks to generally avoid fishing vessels for a period of time.