



# SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

## Release Mortality Reduction and Red Snapper Catch Levels Public Scoping

February 2022

### WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

There are 55 species in the South Atlantic snapper grouper management complex. If you bottom fish in the South Atlantic, you've had to release fish, with Red Snapper likely topping the list. Red Snapper have been under a rebuilding plan since 2010 and are more abundant now than in the last 10 years – fishermen and the data agree. Yet harvest continues to be strictly limited.

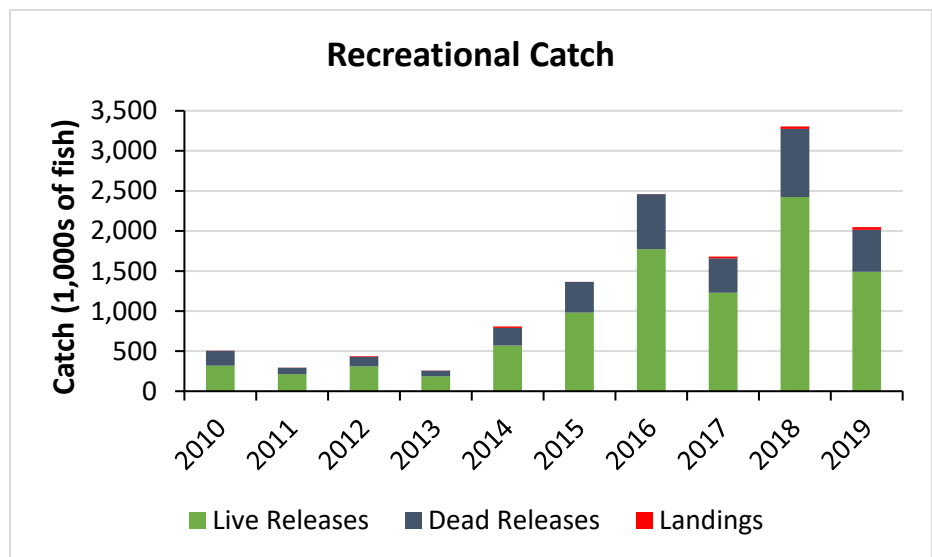
Managers have historically worked to increase fish populations by reducing the number that can be landed. However, in the case of Red Snapper, this approach has led to drastic increases in the number of fish that are caught and released, as well as the number of fish that die as a result (injuries from hooking or handling, barotrauma, shark depredation, etc.). This scenario is most notable within the recreational sector. As the number of Red Snapper has increased, so has the number of recreational fishermen, leading to more encounters and higher estimates of fish that die. While harvest is restricted, access to these fish is not. The issue of increased releases and deaths associated with those released fish spans beyond Red Snapper alone, affecting (to varying degrees) species throughout the snapper grouper fishery.



PC: Doug Haymans



PC: Mark Brown



Red Snapper recreational catches from 2010-2019 (SEDAR 73). Catches include live releases (green), dead releases (navy), and fish that are caught and harvested (red).

For more information, please visit: [safmc.net](http://safmc.net)

Or contact Mike Schmidtke at [mike.schmidtke@safmc.net](mailto:mike.schmidtke@safmc.net)



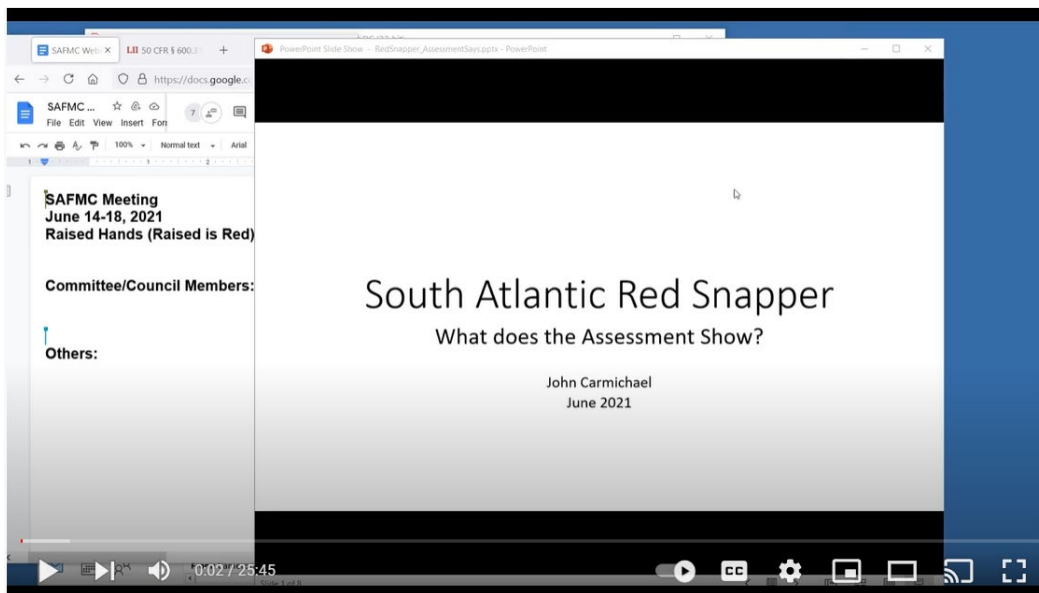
# Release Mortality Reduction and Red Snapper

## WHAT DOES THE LATEST STOCK ASSESSMENT MEAN FOR RED SNAPPER MANAGEMENT?

A stock assessment is used to estimate the number of fish that can be sustainably removed from a population. The most recent stock assessment for Red Snapper ([SEDAR 73](#)), completed in 2021, indicates their abundance is increasing, but overfishing is still occurring, primarily due to deaths of released fish rather than landed fish. Based on the assessment and current management and fishing practices, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommends an acceptable biological catch (ABC), the landings level that is expected to be sustainable while accounting for scientific uncertainty. More fish that die due to catch and release results in fewer fish that can be sustainably kept and landed. In 2021, the SSC used SEDAR 73 to recommend an ABC of 25,000 Red Snapper (for both recreational and commercial fisheries) moving forward. The current total annual catch limit (ACL) for Red Snapper is 42,510 fish.

By law, the Council is required to end overfishing of Red Snapper and change catch levels based on recommendations from its SSC. The ACL may not exceed the ABC. However, as shown in the figure above, due to the high number of Red Snapper dead releases, reducing the Red Snapper ACL and harvest alone is unlikely to end overfishing. Also, because of the very short allowable harvest season, most fishing-related Red Snapper removals occur while fishing for other snapper grouper species throughout the year.

In June 2021, Council staff provided an explanation of SEDAR 73 results and initial implications for management of Red Snapper and the snapper grouper fishery as a whole. A video recording of that presentation is linked below:



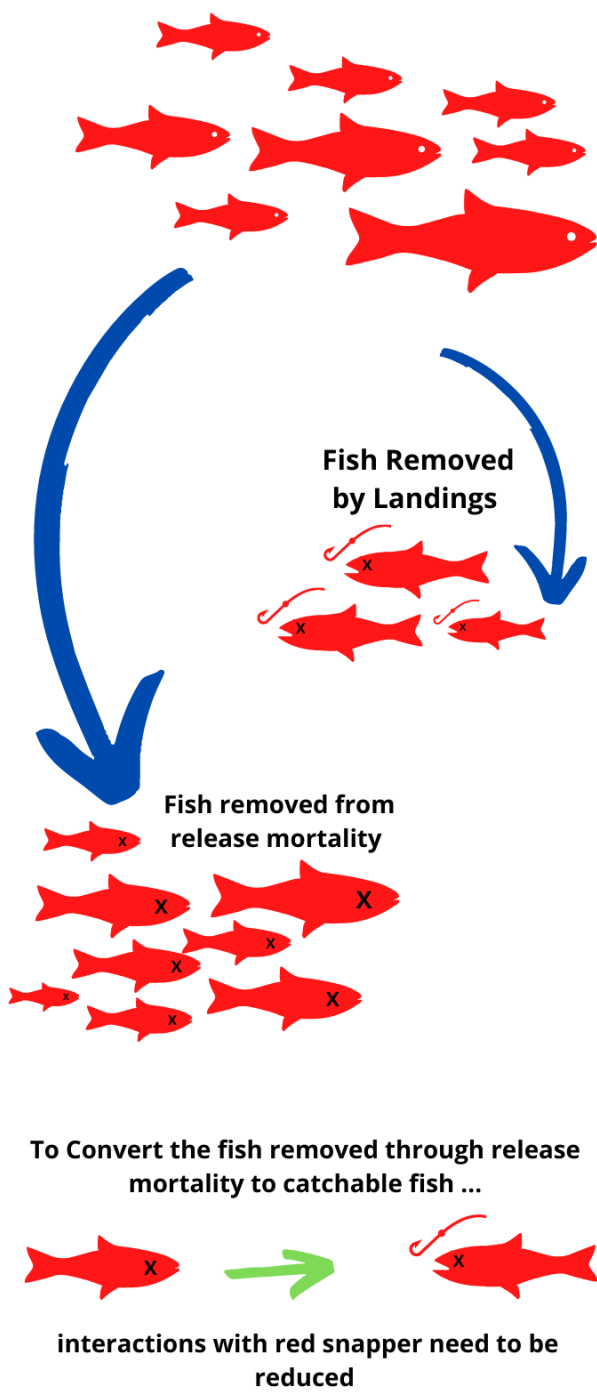
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# Release Mortality Reduction and Red Snapper

## Red Snapper Stock



## WHAT CAN BE DONE NOW TO ADDRESS RELEASE MORTALITY?

The Council is looking for public input and ideas to investigate and consider through an amendment to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan that will reduce release mortality.

There are two ways to reduce dead releases:

1. Increase survival of fish that are released.
2. Reduce the number of interactions with fish that must be released.

The Council has and continues to promote improving the survival of released fish through gear requirements and education on [best fishing practices](#), including circle hooks and use of descending devices when appropriate. Estimates of increased survival from recent and future regulations and best practices were included in SEDAR 73 and projections of future landings. However, descending devices have a limited depth range where they can be effective. In shallow depths, descending is not necessary. In deeper depths, barotrauma effects can result in mortality even if fish are descended. Therefore, the Council is looking for additional ways to reduce dead releases by reducing the number of interactions with fish that cannot be kept.

If management or fishing practices were to effectively reduce interactions with Red Snapper, assumptions used to estimate future catch, landings, and dead releases could be changed. This could provide a basis to attribute more of the allowable removals to harvest rather than dead releases and lead to potentially higher catch levels.

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# Release Mortality Reduction and Red Snapper

## YOUR INPUT!

To help the Council develop ideas to investigate and consider, the Council is requesting public feedback to the following questions:

- 1. What do you do to avoid catching fish that cannot be kept?*
- 2. What measures would be most efficient to avoid catching fish that must be released?*
- 3. What measures or fishing techniques would help you reduce non-targeted interactions with Red Snapper?*
- 4. What changes are necessary for a sustainable snapper grouper fishery in the future?*

The Council will continue to solicit public comment throughout the development of this amendment. An online comment form is currently available from the Council's website at: <https://safmc.net/safmc-meetings/public-hearings-scoping-meetings/>. Comments received by **February 4, 2022** will be included as part of the briefing book materials for the Council to consider during its March 7-11, 2022 meeting in Jekyll Island, GA.

Future opportunities for public comment will include the online form (which will remain open), as well as scoping meetings, Council meetings, and public hearings to be held later in 2022. Sign up now at [www.safmc.net](http://www.safmc.net) to receive general email notifications from the Council office, including additional opportunities for public comment.

**For current regulations, please  
download and visit the Fish Rules app:**



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