South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Spend Plan

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

In the enacted FY22 Appropriations, NMFS received language that read,

"NMFS is encouraged to leverage efficiencies learned through the Gulf of Mexico red snapper process to better the science and management of the South Atlantic red snapper and other reef fish. NMFS shall consider employing the independent and alternative stock assessment strategies used in the Gulf of Mexico to supplement NMFS assessments of reef fish in the South Atlantic."

This language and funding is a continuation of language and funding provided in FY20 and FY21.

Using the funding from FY 2020 and FY 2021, NOAA Fisheries and NOAA Sea Grant funded a study to conduct close-kin mark recapture with South Atlantic red snapper. The original intent for the FY22 funds was to continue funding for this project. However, this project has been more successful at collecting the needed samples than anticipated, in part due to thousands of samples obtained from the NMFS Southeast Reef Fish Survey, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission hook and line survey, and comprehensive dockside sampling of the recreational harvest. In addition, the cost of processing the genetic samples has decreased owing to improvements in the technology. As a result, the principal investigators have indicated that they are on track to get reliable estimates of the number of red snapper in the South Atlantic using their state of art genetic tagging approach and do not require additional funds beyond the $3.3M appropriated in FY 2020 and FY 2021. Accordingly, the $1.8 M appropriated in FY 2022 is available to meet other priority needs for South Atlantic Reef Fish.

NOAA has developed a draft spend plan for FY 2022 (see below) that we believe is consistent with the congressional language and meets high priority science needs for reef fish management South Atlantic. NOAA plans to ask for congressional approval for this change, and would like to solicit feedback from the Council.

Proposed FY22 Spend Plan

Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute hook and line reef fish survey

- Increase spatial coverage of the existing survey into Georgia and south of Cape Canaveral to account for the expanding distribution of red snapper
- Estimate size selection of different gears by adding stereo-video cameras
- Map and better characterize reef fish habitat in the study area

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources biological sample processing

- Process backlog of otoliths and gonad samples obtained through MARMAP, SEAMAP-SA, and the Sea Grant South Atlantic Great Red Snapper Count

Sea Grant Reef Fish Extension Program

- Facilitate communication, outreach, and delivery of fisheries research science products to end users, including fisheries managers, commercial and recreational industry stakeholders, and the Sea Grant Extension Network.
- Support and build capacity in fisheries by working directly with stakeholders to identify additional research needs and communicating those needs to fisheries managers and the research community.

Reef fish Discard Estimation Project

- The Red snapper count will provide us with an estimate of the number of red snapper in the population, but in order to manage the fishery properly, it is necessary to know the number of red snapper that are removed. For red snapper, and many other species, the number of fish that are discarded and later die is believed to far exceed the number landed. However, the discard information we have is self-reported and considered highly uncertain. The South Atlantic Council has identified the estimation of discards as one of their most critical needs. Currently, the best way to do this for the commercial fishery is through an observer program. We propose to contract sufficient observers to cover about 6% of the commercial reef fish fishery for one year, similar to the level of coverage achieved for the Gulf of Mexico. This would allow reliable estimates of commercial discards of red snapper and other reef fish in the South Atlantic to be calculated for the first time.