



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

RECEIVED

MAR 5 2015

South Atlantic Fishery  
Management Council

Mr. Ben Hartig  
Chairman  
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201  
North Charleston, SC 29405

Dear Mr. Hartig:

Thank you for your letter regarding the Council's concern about the quality of information that was available for the blueline tilefish stock assessment (SEDAR 32). The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) appreciates the importance of the blueline tilefish stock in the South Atlantic.

With respect to the three issues you raise concerning the blueline tilefish stock assessment:

1. "MRIP is inadequate for rare event species"

The current MRIP surveys implemented in the South Atlantic sub-region are designed to provide annual marine recreational fishery catch statistics for all fish species. For species commonly caught on recreational fishing trips, MRIP catch statistics are sufficiently precise to support stock assessment and management requirements. We agree that MRIP catch statistics are much less precise for rarely caught species. This is a sample size issue and not a shortcoming of the current general recreational fishery surveys. The precision of annual catch statistics for rare event species like blueline tilefish, golden tilefish, and snowy grouper could be improved by increasing sample sizes and/or reallocating the spatial or temporal distribution of sampling for the on-site Access Point Angler Intercept Survey. However, it is likely that a more specialized survey design would be needed to obtain the level of statistical precision desired for annual statistics. Alternative survey approaches that focus on certain rare event fisheries are possible. For example, the current Atlantic Large Pelagic Survey was instituted to improve the accuracy and precision of catch estimates for Atlantic Bluefin tuna to meet international management requirements. In another example, the MRIP staff and consultants are working cooperatively with our Gulf of Mexico partners to develop and test alternative data collection approaches for red snapper.

I want my MRIP staff to work with the South Atlantic Council to develop options for improving the recreational catch estimates for blueline tilefish and other rare event fisheries in the sub-region. MRIP staff will contact the Council in the near future to initiate that discussion.

2. "Adequate Funding for Fishery-Independent Surveys"

You are correct that there is a data gap for deep water stocks in the South Atlantic region. Inclusion of fishery-independent data in stock assessments for the deep water stocks in your jurisdiction would certainly strengthen the stock assessment. Finding a



cost-effective means of conducting these surveys is critical. Some resources have been allocated for exploratory work in FY15. My Southeast Fisheries Science Center will host a workshop this year that will include commercial and for-hire captains, survey specialists and stock assessment scientists to discuss the type of data that is needed to address the short-term questions on the stock as well as to explore sampling strategies that address the long-term data needs.

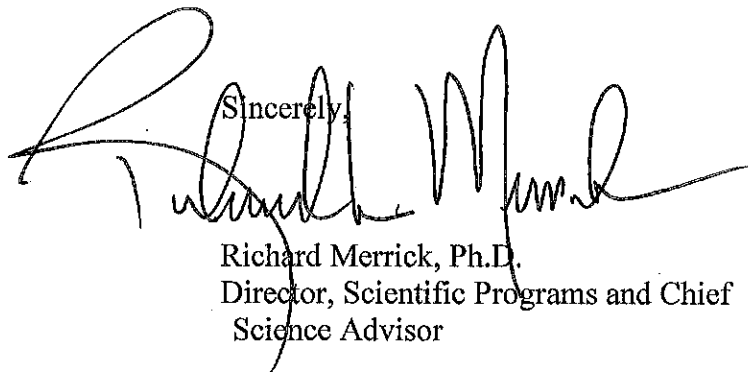
3. “Assessment-focused Cooperative Research/Monitoring”

NOAA continues to support stock assessment related cooperative research in all regions, with the Southeast region expected to receive at least a quarter of the FY14 and 15 funds available nationally from the Cooperative Research budget line. We also expect the SE to receive significant funding from this year’s Saltonstall Kennedy grant program (though grantees have not yet been selected).

We anticipate using some of the results of this cooperative research and monitoring (e.g., the FY14 data) in the upcoming workshop on South Atlantic deep water stocks. Establishing a long-term monitoring program via cooperative research may be the most cost effective means of gathering the data and has an added benefit of strengthening the engagement of the fishing industry in this effort. Even if this is not the solution that is selected, cooperative research and monitoring can be used to complement the data collected through a standardized survey. The workshop discussion of the data needs and the best mechanism for obtaining them will shed light on this.

On each of these issues, NMFS shares your concerns regarding the importance of the quality of data that feeds into the bluefin tilefish stock assessment and consequently provides the basis to inform management. My staff and I look forward to working with the Council to find workable solutions to address both immediate and long-term data needs for the bluefin tilefish stock.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Merrick', written over the word 'Sincerely,'.

Richard Merrick, Ph.D.  
Director, Scientific Programs and Chief  
Science Advisor