

Summary of Public Comment Session Comments on Amendment 53 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan

Below is a summary of comments that were submitted electronically and received during the two public hearing webinars held of January 10th and 11th, 2023. Comments provided during the webinars (n=8) are included in this document. Online comments (n=11) are available to view in full [HERE](#).

Note: The comment form contains comments that pertain to other active amendments, this summary covers only those comments that pertain to Amendment 53.

Respondent Characteristics:

State	Number of Respondents ¹	Affiliation (SA Region Only)	Number of Respondents ^{1,2}
North Carolina	3	Private Recreational	6
Florida	5	For-Hire	6
South Carolina	0	Commercial	2
Georgia	0	Non-Gov't Organization	1
Gulf of Mexico (FL, LA, TX)	0	Wholesale/Dealer/Retail	1
Other	0	Other	0

¹Includes online respondents and individuals that provided state and sector affiliation.

²Some respondents chose more than one affiliation.

Gag Sector Allocations (Action 3)

- Retain the current 51% commercial and 49% recreational allocation.
 - Reducing the commercial allocation will disproportionately effect NC fishermen.

Gag Commercial Fishery/Trip Limit Modifications (Action 4)

- The commercial trip should be low enough to allow for the longest season.
- Keep the current commercial season length (with regards to the spawning season closure date).

Gag Recreational Fishery/Vessel Limit (Sub-Action 5a)

- 1 gag per person per vessel, 6 fish max vessel limit.

Additional Suggestions

- The SG 2 for 1 limited entry should be removed.
- \$6.00/lbs (ex-vessel) is too low, \$8.00/lbs is more realistic.
- Multiple comments received stating that both sharks and red snapper are the reason for grouper declines and will hinder rebuilding.
- Create a Gag stocking program.
- Habitat improvement.
 - Additional offshore artificial reefs.
- Trust issues between government and fishermen is a pervasive problem in the snapper grouper fishery.

PUBLIC HEARING WEBINAR COMMENTS

JANUARY 10, 2023

Jack Cox: We painted a pretty picture here but, I can tell from my area in Morehead City that I don't think we are going to be even close to being successful with the alternatives. I've been in this fishery for gags for a long time, about 40 years; and just like we are going down the road with snowies, triggers, red grouper, red porgy, you know, I mean, these recreational estimates are killing us - we have no clue. When I was on Council 2013, we were talking about a way to do something to permit the recreational fishery. Until that's done, we're just not going to achieve these goals. All the effort that the Council puts in it and me being on the AP and what we do, it's just a waste of time because these recreational estimates are absolutely killing us. We need to be on fast track with permitting the recreational fishery.

In the for-hire open access, how is it fair that the commercial industry is restrained, but we still have open access fisheries that are in decline like this. It makes no sense at all, and it's not fair. The commercial guys, a lot of these guys stay at sea for 2 to 4, 5 days and they interact with some fish and just don't do well and some fish that have barotrauma, they don't go down and so when we have these low ACLs in the commercial fishery, I would have proposed for the commercial sector to have a small bycatch fishery for red snapper, for the gag and black grouper fishery to have like a 100 bycatch fishery. It wouldn't carry all the way through the year, but it would certainly let some of the guys that are having trouble with fish bite to bring something home that is not going to live. That's exactly how I feel. My area is Morehead City; other people may see things differently, but the recreational fishery is absolutely destroying us, and there is no accountability. I have to come home from fishing, and I've spent hours and hours filling out logbooks and being accountable and filling out discards. It's time for the Council to do the right thing and all I ask is to speed it up, and let's not drag our feet for 4 or 5 years permitting the recreational industry; and it's time to do away with this for-hire open access fisheries when we have so many fisheries in decline.

Jim Attack. I agree with a lot of comments Jack just made about permitting the recreational. I was on the AP for my 3 terms, and we were pushing this back in 2010, whatever. Even when we tried to get North Carolina to put a little box in their license where you could check this—I'm going to go get some oysters, or I'm going

to fish in snapper grouper fishery so at least you know how many people in North Carolina were fishing in snapper grouper fishery so you could then adjust your survey and get better data. I agree with also the permit. If they are going to fish in snapper grouper, they have a permit because we don't know. Landings are probably way understated for the recreational so that's what's probably killing the fishery along with the lion fish out there. The other thing that makes no sense to me is to have a 300-pound trip limit on commercial and like Jack said, we're going to have dead discards. I'd rather have, their saying July 15th it's going to close, why wouldn't you want to have a longer season and at least you're bringing some fish home later on instead of dead discards. That's just going to hurt the rebuilding plan, the dead discards because nobody is going to be able to _____. The same thing with the open access for-hire, I mean, we tried to get that put through 3 years ago. We've been talking about permitting for probably 20 years ago. I think it should be fast tracked; it should be in effect by now; I don't know what's so hard about that.

Mark Stewart. I just wanted to comment more from the recreational side for what it's worth. I support permitting what the other guys were talking about as well. I agree that until we get better data, all of this I sort of mute. We are making guesses and not helping anybody out on either side. I appreciate what everybody here has done and presented. I think given that we are all working off estimates, this I probably the best we can do at the moment. I, like those guys, would prefer us to get harder data to base everything off of. I think like the previous commenter, I don't understand why it's so challenging to put that in place either.

Jeff Marinko. I own and operate Salina Grace which is a 100% diving, spearfishing vessel. We travel Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and all the way up to North Carolina, and we try to stay on the gags. That's what we do, and that's why I built the boat. I want to make a quick comment. My boat, I finished it in 2019 and started doing this traveling up and down staying on the biomass of gags so my _____ is not really even in all the stuff that you're looking at; I just wanted to make note of that. I had 3 trips this year out of 30 that I had less than 750 pounds of gag on a trip. I'm a trip boat so we do whatever it takes. Sometimes it's 2 days; sometimes it's 8 days, whatever it takes to get that limit of gags is what we do. It's how we make our money and feed the country. I just wanted to say, any reduction is going to hurt crazy bad for us, but anything less than 500 is going to put my operation out of business that I worked my whole life to build and I just hope we consider that and

do something to consider the trip boats. I have 6-knot boat, and it's very efficient. I leave a tiny carbon footprint. I can burn 70-80 gallons in a week; that's all I burn. You are kind of encouraging the go fast boats that burn a lot of fuel and then everybody's just sort of a hamster on a wheel in my opinion. They all go out there, get a few hundred pounds of gags and then it all just goes to fuel money. I'm not a parttime fisherman; fulltime, me and my crew. We don't have other jobs, and I just hope you all consider us.

JANUARY 11, 2023

Mike McKinney. I was just wondering if there was any consideration given to, it seems like areas north of Jacksonville, it seems like most of the boats up there are slow boats. It takes a day to get out there, a day to get back, and with the limited grouper, that would really hurt compared to a boat that's got 3 or 4 engines on it that could get out there in an hour and get their limit, go back in, and it wouldn't make much money with their fuel bill. Has there been any consideration for those boats; multi-day boats? The boat I work on, I've worked on several boats, and they all seem to want to target grouper which is one of the better fish to target. Without grouper, that's really going to hurt the commercial fishermen especially north of Jacksonville who go out for anywhere from 4 to 7 days at a time. I would just like you to consider coming up with a way that maybe you could say a 350-pound trip limit, it a boat goes out for 5 days, maybe make it a little bit more than 300 pounds. I would appreciate any consideration for that.

Jack Cox. I commented last night but this fishery is mighty near and dear to my heart because I'm a 40-year veteran on gag fishing out of North Carolina. I definitely understand what that previous commenter said, and I understand that everybody's trying to make a living in the fishery and I don't want to hurt anybody, but I have to say in my area of Morehead City, where I've made my living on gags, I'm very happy to see that we have finally gotten to a place that it's time to do some work on gags. I'm happy to see at least a 75% reduction in the quota; I'm not real happy to see the timetable that thinks we're going to have this fishery rebuilt like we are because I know it's not going to happen based on the information we're getting from the recreational industry. That is one of the reasons we're in the trouble we're in in a lot of fisheries because we don't know what kind of information is coming in from there. But, speaking from my area, the further northern part of the range, different

from the man that just spoke, it's rough. My fishery, it hurts me to go out there and see places that I have fished over the years and where I would have a nice catch in December; I would come in with 5-6-700 pounds of fish a day. Now, it's all I can do to go scrap up a hundred pounds of fish fishing a 10-hour day of gags. It certainly wouldn't hurt my feelings if we took a better approach, a more conservative approach, than what we are on the timetable rebuilding. I just want to say that I think that the only way the objectives can be reached for this fisheries is probably like we did with the red snapper; that's not a very popular statement to say but with 40 years of experience, I feel like that I can say that.

Bob Lorenz. One of the conservation measures was in noting the red grouper. The fact that they spawn here a little later - that's been implemented, a longer closed season for shallow water grouper in North Carolina. This grouper is the shallowest of the shallow water groupers. But at the time of year, I never thought of it as much of a big deal because, for those of us that recreational fish, these fish are going deeper earlier in the year than they will later. In the fall you might be able to get these at like 60ft - earlier, they are going to be out there with the reds in about 140 – 220 ft feet of water where some of us frequently fish. So out of thing of fairness, a longer closure for shallow water grouper in North Carolina may have to go out the window or it may be a little punitive because that will give North Carolina fishermen, for sure, less time or possibility of being able to catch less gag grouper because of the accountability measure if they closed at a certain time in the season. Other states would get a month to fish ahead of us up here so the only way it would make it fair - and we wouldn't have a 5-month closure up here [North Carolina] for shallow water grouper, for others, to observe a month closure for some other time. And also the interest is up here, I know it is tied to black [grouper] but recreationally we don't get many black [grouper] like gags here and we speak of the misidentification as you know, you go down to Florida you hear all the guys in the Keys saying we don't have that many gags, we fish for blacks [grouper] so there will be considerations there with respect to the shallow water grouper closure that we need to discuss in the of fairness if it implemented as discussed.

Jeff Marinko. I commented last night but just wanted to touch on a couple things. I appreciate Jack's comment and last night too up in Morehead. I went up to Morehead a couple of times this year and did really well in two days. I had no problem getting our limit of gags, but the biomass just hasn't been going that far

north in my opinion the last two years. Furthermore, this morning after some time I went through my old logbooks for the year, for the whole year, and we fished 63 days and had just under 19,000 pounds of gags. I don't think there is as much of a problem with the fishery; I think a lot of guys are not trying as hard. It's not as easy as it used to be, of course, nothing is. Driving down the road is not as easy as it used to be. I still vote for the highest trip limit and the highest ACL we can get. In ten years, I feel like this crazy long unfairness to red snapper what has happened. In most of the South Atlantic is red snapper over the last five years has been unbelievable and here we are, 75 pounds, I can't stomach that same thing happening again.

On the black and gag confusion, I think that's ludicrous. I have had federal observers on the boat that can't tell the difference between a scamp and a yellowmouth or an almaco and an amberjack; but never a black and jack. That's crazy. I just hope like Mike said – I hope there's consideration for the slow boat fishery that maybe we can get a little something more than 300. I would love to see if the ACL is not met, in the future years like you all are talking about, I don't understand why we can't go get those fish with a higher trip limit for the very small percentage of boats as the charts say that I am one of those percent. It seems like most people get 100-250-pound a trip, but I don't know. I just feel like we're getting singled out a little bit so hopefully someone will take it to heart and help us a little bit; help us keep going. I don't believe there's as big of a problem as there is.