

Summary Report

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Meeting

April 21-23, 2021

The South Atlantic Council's Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) convened via webinar on April 21-23, 2021.

Jessica McCawley, Snapper Grouper Committee Chair, addressed the AP to provide updates on previous recommendations to the Council.

1. Update on recent regulations and status of amendments

Council staff updated the AP on the status of the following:

- Special Management Zones in NC & SC (Regulatory Amendment 34)
- Upcoming amendments for Red Snapper, Yellowtail Snapper, Snowy Grouper, Golden Tilefish, and Gag Grouper

2. Fishery Performance Report for Mutton Snapper

With input from the AP, Fishery Performance Reports (FPRs) have been developed for several snapper grouper species. The intent of the FPRs is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPRs will be provided to the SSC, the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP), and the Council to assist in their discussions. Council staff provided an overview of landings trends and other background information (see <https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/FPRAll/>) and the AP focused their input based on a series of discussion questions from which the FPR for Mutton Snapper will be developed. A benchmark assessment (SEDAR 79) will be underway for the Mutton Snapper stock in the South Atlantic and is scheduled for completion in Spring 2023.

3. Fishery Overview for Snowy Grouper – Recommendations on potential management measures

To assist in the consideration and development of management actions and alternatives following completed stock assessments, Council staff have begun developing fishery overview applications for recently assessed species. These overviews compile the history of management and information from the most recent stock assessment. An update of the SEDAR 36 assessment of Snowy Grouper was completed in 2020, which determined the stock to be overfished and experiencing overfishing. In March 2021, the Council initiated a plan amendment for Snowy Grouper. Council staff provided an introductory description of the overview application for Snowy Grouper ([Snowy Grouper Fishery Overview](#)). The AP had the following comments and recommendations:

- Some AP members are concerned about potential further restrictions from an overfished and overfishing status on this fishery that is already very limited by current regulations.
- Some AP members commented that Snowy Grouper are becoming more susceptible to harvest due to increasing technology (faster/stronger boats, GPS to find and record

fishing locations, electric reels, etc.) and interest in deep-dropping as a target or as a meat fishery after targeting offshore pelagic fish (like swordfish).

- Snowy grouper are harvested along with other deep water bottom fish, such as tilefish.
- Low limits can create discards, which have close to 100% mortality for this species.
- Few enforcement intercepts can limit regulatory efficiency for offshore fisheries.
- In addition to limiting fishing access, further restrictions could also impact data collection for future assessments. Limited fishery-independent and recreational sampling leads to much uncertainty in the recreational landings data used in the assessment.
- The AP commented it is important to improve estimates of recreational effort and landings for deep water species (snowy grouper, golden tilefish, blueline tilefish, etc.).

Recommendations:

- The AP recommends that a deep water stamp/endorsement/permit be added to the recreational license to improve recreational catch and effort estimates.
 - License renewal applications could include a question asking if that licensee is intending to fish for deep water species.
 - A subset of endorsed licenses could be annually sampled, similar to commercial discard logbook reporting.
 - A mobile application could also help recreational reporting efficiency.
 - If considered further, the Council would need to define whether this applies to a person or vessel.

MOTION 1: AP RECOMMENDS THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER AN ENDORSEMENT/PERMIT TO THE RECREATIONAL LICENSE AND TAKING THE FOLLOWING STEPS:

- DEFINE DEEP WATER SPECIES INCLUDED IN THE ENDORSEMENT/PERMIT
- DEFINE THE DEPTH AT WHICH THESE SPECIES START
- REQUIRE A RANDOMLY SELECTED PORTION OF THE ENDORSED/PERMITTED ENTITIES TO REPORT CATCH AND LANDINGS FOR THE YEAR

MOTION APPROVED

4. Fishery Overview for Yellowtail Snapper – Recommendations on potential management measures

The Council previously delayed action on Amendment 44 for Yellowtail Snapper for completion of the SEDAR 64 assessment, which was finished in 2018 and determined the stock to be not overfished and not experiencing overfishing. In December 2020, the Council directed staff to initiate an amendment to set a new ACL for Yellowtail Snapper. Council staff presented the fishery overview for Yellowtail Snapper ([Yellow Snapper Fishery Overview](#)), recommended catch levels, and a summary of actions that the Council considered in Amendment 44 and comments received on that amendment. The AP had the following comments and recommendations:

- Some AP members are concerned with the abundance of vessels interfering with commercial fishing operations, making it much more difficult to catch fish commercially and possibly causing commercial effort to drop dramatically.
- Offshore fishing for for-hire vessels has been difficult, leading to more targeting of Yellowtail Snapper.
- Discarding of Yellowtail Snapper during June and July occurred in the past because the in-season closure for Yellowtail Snapper was occurring at a time when fishermen target Mangrove Snapper.
- Some AP members previously expressed concern with “bad apple practices” – discarding of small fish when fishermen encounter mixed sizes and fish are being caught very quickly, resulting in increased mortality. This practice has really diminished since 2018 (when AP previously brought this up).
- Some AP members are concerned that abundance of Yellowtail Snapper is not what has been in years past. There are not as many fish in the upper water column where they can be targeted by commercial vessels.
- The commercial sector likely will not come close to catching the annual catch limit this year (2021).
- During the pandemic, in general, there have been many more vessels on the water and this may be a factor in how fisheries are adjusting.
- The charter industry in the lower Keys may not support a reduction to 5 fish per person. If necessary, perhaps consider reducing the bag limit for captain and crew only, but prefer no action.

Recommendations:

- Recommend that the Yellowtail Snapper recreational bag limit be reduced to 5 fish per person within the Snappers Aggregate. The Mangrove Snapper limit is already at 5 fish and consistent regulations for these two species would be beneficial.

5. Fishery Overview for Greater Amberjack and Amendment 49 – Greater Amberjack and Recreational ACTs

Amendment 49 considers adjustments to the Greater Amberjack total annual catch limit and sector allocations and removal of recreational annual catch targets (ACT) from the Snapper Grouper FMP. Consideration of catch level adjustments for Greater Amberjack was initiated in response to SEDAR 59 (2020), the most recent stock assessment for the species, which determined the stock to be not overfished and not experiencing overfishing. More recently, the Council directed staff to include consideration for the removal of recreational ACTs throughout the FMP, as these numbers are not used to set management measures. Council staff presented the fishery overview application for Greater Amberjack ([Greater Amberjack Fishery Overview](#)), currently considered actions and alternatives for Amendment 49, preliminary analyses based on acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels recommended by the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee, and a summary of current management measures. AP members had the following comments and recommendations:

- The AP discussed decreasing the commercial minimum size limit. A fish near 36 inches is quite large and means fish near this limit are more likely to need to be gaffed to be measured. This could impact survivorship of the fish after release.
- The AP also discussed a consistent/constant ACL that is the same throughout the projection period and does not result in a large, immediate upswing. Use a number approximately in the middle, so that the “surplus” is not completely used up in a short timeframe.
- Florida’s state commercial minimum size limit is 36 inches, which was part of the reasoning for setting the federal minimum size limit at that length, as opposed to other options considered.
- Consider the potential of increased pressure on Greater Amberjack as other fisheries become more restricted.
- Consider economic implications of a large increase to the recreational ACL possibly resulting in an influx of new entrants into the fishery, followed by reductions to the ACL over time and limiting use of the resource to the recent entrants.
- There is not a huge public demand for Greater Amberjack, so no need for very large increase to the commercial ACL (i.e., the supply). This could negatively impact the price, which currently is pretty good.
- Smaller Greater Amberjack are preferred due to fewer potential for worms, less potential for ciguatera toxin, easier/quicker to board for increased trip efficiency and to reduce damage to fish that are potentially discarded due to the size limit.
- Some AP members want the recreational minimum size limit to remain at 28 inches.
- Increasing harvest of preferred, smaller fish may be biologically beneficial, as larger fish won’t be harvested as often and will be left to spawn in the future.
- The AP noted that 28-inch Greater Amberjack are at 50% sexual maturity. Consideration should be given to reproductive capabilities in potentially changing the size limit(s).
- Greater Amberjack are a redirected target for the Florida charter fishery when they are not able to target Dolphin.

Recommendations:

- For Action 1 (Total Annual Catch Limit and Optimum Yield), rather than the Preferred Alternative that results in a large, short-term increase to the ACL, the AP recommends a more conservative approach that benefits both sectors and consideration of a consistent ACL. The AP also recommends the Council consider the potential economic implications of large, sudden changes in the ACL.
- Consider decreasing the commercial minimum size limit (34 inches, 32 inches, or 30 inches)
- Consider equal commercial and recreational size limit of 28 inches, 30 inches, or 32 inches.
- Consider increasing the commercial Season 2 (September-February) trip limit to 1,200 pounds (same as Season 1/March-August).
- Consider including the recreational sector in the April closure of Greater Amberjack, allowing sale of commercially-landed fish during April , or full closure for both sectors (This recommendation was not unanimous).

MOTION 2: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL CONSIDER AN ADDITIONAL ACTION 1 ALTERNATIVE OF A CONSISTENT 2.8 MILLION POUND TOTAL ACL AND A PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE OF ACTION 2-ALTERNATIVE 1 (MAINTAIN CURRENT SECTOR ALLOCATIONS).

MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 3: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL SELECT ACTION 3-ALTERNATIVE 2 AS PREFERRED (REMOVING RECREATIONAL ACTS).

MOTION APPROVED

6. Amendment 50 – Red Porgy

Amendment 50 to the Snapper Grouper FMP will adjust catch levels of Red Porgy in response to SEDAR 60 (2020), the most recent stock assessment for the species. The assessment found the South Atlantic stock of Red Porgy is overfished and undergoing overfishing. To end overfishing and rebuild the stock, the Council must put in place a rebuilding plan, adjust the annual catch limits, and modify management measures (trip limits, bag limits, etc.). Council staff presented current actions and alternatives as modified by the Council in March 2021 and updated analyses. The AP had the following comments and recommendations:

- June-Aug is the peak time for landings in the Carolinas.
- Per person limit (as opposed to a vessel limit) is better for the recreational sector from a fairness standpoint.

Recommendations

- Close commercial and recreational fisheries for Red Porgy during the Snapper Grouper Shallow Water closure (January-April). For the commercial fishery, open in May with a low trip limit to keep the season open as long as possible.
- Keep the fishery open as long as possible to continue data collection. A longer rebuilding period is preferred.
- For the charter/headboat industry, probably better to keep a per person limit rather than per vessel limit for tracking purposes.
- Consider open recreational season during summer (June-August) to give the recreational sector the opportunity to have red porgy as a species that could be retained during the peak months for recreational fishing.

7. Discussion on possible approaches to reduce recreational discards

The Snapper Grouper Committee requested that the AP discuss possible approaches to reduce recreational discards, addressing a concern raised by the AP and the public. Recreational discards of Red Snapper have been of particular concern recently, so Council staff presented recent data for this species to initiate AP discussions of specific or general approaches for the Council to consider in the future. The AP had the following comments and recommendations:

- The AP had mixed opinions on the starting time of the Red Snapper fishery. Some members suggested opening earlier (spring) or later (fall) in the year could alleviate the big start to the fishery that has happened in summer months to potentially extend the

season. Other members commented that they were opposed to previous non-summer seasons, as anglers want to maximize the short season with good weather.

- Consider Red Snapper season before Shallow Water Grouper opening (May). May be better in some locations to fish (weatherwise) earlier in the year.
- Fishing outside the Red Snapper spawning season (May-Oct) may help.
- Potential gear changes:
 - Large hooks
 - Single hook rig
 - Smaller leader
 - No natural bait
- The Council could consider a spatial- or time-closure or consider closing bottom area by depth.
- Descending devices have helped, but not everyone may have descending devices, so continue education on releasing best practices.
 - Some fish still may not survive barotrauma effects, so discard mortality may still have strong impacts on allowable harvest levels and season length.
- Some members suggested possibly having differing seasons for Red Snapper and Red Grouper to have one of those species to target for a longer portion of the year.
- The AP reiterated the need to improve estimates of recreational fishery participants.
- The AP discussed a potential Red Snapper tag, though noted logistical difficulties and that such a tag would not reduce release mortality when targeting other species.
- The AP also discussed the possibility of a Red Snapper stocking program.

8. Vermilion Snapper Commercial Trip Limit (*Attachment 8*)

On September 16, 2020, NOAA Fisheries announced an emergency rule to increase the commercial trip limit for vermilion snapper from 1,000 pounds gutted weight (lbs gw) to 1,500 lbs gw in federal waters of the South Atlantic Region. This emergency rule expired, reverting the trip limit back to 1,000 lbs gw, on March 16, 2021. The Council requested AP input on whether more permanent action should be taken to change the commercial trip limit through an amendment. Council staff presented analyses from the Council's previous request for the temporary emergency rule to indicate potential impacts on the fishery. The AP had the following comments and recommendations:

- Distances traveled to fishing grounds can be 40-60 miles in some areas (e.g., off the Carolinas). A larger trip limit could make trips more efficient.
- Closures to Red Grouper and potential closures to Red Porgy and Snowy Grouper make Vermilion Snapper more important. The most critical time to have the season open is in May and June.
 - If the Council considers increasing the trip limit to 1,500 pounds, they should consider re-establishing the stepdown. Possibly consider a 1,000 pound limit at 50% of the seasonal quota and a 500 pound limit at 75% of the seasonal quota.
- The AP asked about information that would indicate how many boats benefitted from the increased trip limit.

9. Council Research Plan

SEDAR stock assessments include research recommendations that can improve future assessments. Council staff compiled short-term and long-term research needs derived from recently completed assessments, upcoming assessments, and management and monitoring programs. Staff presented the Draft South Atlantic Research and Monitoring Prioritization Plan for 2022-2027. This draft plan will be reviewed by the Council at their June 2021 meeting. The AP recommended the following research items be prioritized:

- Investigate time-out-of-water impacts on survival of snapper grouper species.
- Conduct more cooperative research on snapper grouper species including Red Snapper and through a region wide program (expand FWRI regionally).
- Evaluate the Special Management Zones and Marine Protected Areas and potential benefits of these areas.
- More fishery-independent data are needed.
- Improved estimates of natural mortality.
- Conduct underwater drone surveys to monitor populations not adequately sampled by conventional fishery-independent methods.
- Species observations to be investigated:
 - Mutton snapper are potentially moving north.
 - Keys fishermen are observing small Red Grouper in shallow water.
 - Yellowtail Snapper – investigate the behavior or catch rates of Yellowtail Snapper in high traffic areas.
- Provide an update to SG AP on performance of managed areas.

10. Updates

SEDAR (Red Snapper, Golden Tilefish, Gag) – SEDAR Staff updated the AP on the status of SEDAR stock assessments that were near completion and next steps in consideration for management use.

Amendment 48 – Wreckfish ITQ Modernization – A review of the Wreckfish ITQ Program was completed in 2019 and included recommendations for improvement, particularly with respect to confidentiality issues and related constraints; moving away from a paper coupon-based program to an electronic program; cost recovery; wreckfish permit requirement; allocation issues; offloading sites and times; and economic data collection. At their March 2021 meeting the Council reviewed preliminary actions and alternatives and comments from the Law Enforcement AP and Wreckfish shareholders. Actions and alternatives are being further developed by staff from review and approval by the Council at their September 2021 meeting.

The AP had the following comments:

- An updated stock assessment is needed.
- Some AP members support reallocation of unused quota from the recreational to the commercial sector. Some do not think that should happen at this time.
- Need improved recreational catch and effort monitoring.
- Wreckfish would fit into a potential recreational deep water stamp/endorsement.

Citizen Science – Staff presented an update on the Council’s Citizen Science Program and pilot projects, highlighting activities that have occurred since the fall 2020 Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel meeting. The presentation also included updates on the SciFish mobile app, followed by a brief demo. The AP had the following comments:

- SciFish could be a method to implement a potential Red Snapper tagging system, as well as provide additional data for future assessments.
- Young Red Snapper (10 years and younger) could be considered for applying FISHstory methods to increase size and age composition data.
- Location information can be very sensitive, but there may be ways to get fishermen to provide some level of helpful location without being too specific. Possibly buffers or latitude/depth information. Small number of decimal places or depth ranges may be useful.
- Important to get wide app use to start data-gathering, then can refine data after use becomes accepted.
- The AP supports the funding, use, and expansion of the Citizen Science Program, and has done so through providing fishing location information as well as participating and encouraging participation in Citizen Science projects.

Climate Change – At their September 2020 meeting, the Council requested that the AP be provided regular updates on efforts to address management challenges related to climate change. Council staff briefed the AP on potential and upcoming initiatives related to the Scenario Planning project led by the Northeast Region Coordinating Council (NRCC).

11. Chair/Vice Chair Election

Rather than hold the scheduled election at this meeting via webinar, the AP passed the following motion:

MOTION 4: JIMMY HULL AND ROBERT LORENZ REMAIN AS AP CHAIR AND VICE CHAIR FOR ANOTHER YEAR, UNTIL AN ELECTION CAN BE HELD IN-PERSON.

MOTION APPROVED

12. Other Business

Restructuring of 2-for-1 Commercial Permit Policy

- Prior to the AP meeting, AP member Andrew Mahoney circulated a proposal addressing commercial permits and new entry into the commercial fishery.
- Number of commercial Snapper Grouper permits has been greatly reduced. Consider whether the number of permits has “reached the goal” for the 2 for 1 policy
 - Consider technology impacts on efficiency
- A white paper detailing information and discussions surrounding the 2 for 1 policy would be useful.
 - Should include analysis or survey of commercial fishermen to determine value of permits to retired permittees
 - Should include information on where (geographically) current permits are active.

- Investigate permit use (owner-operator or leased permit)
- Enforcement needs to be more efficient. Small number of bad actors doing great damage.
- Fishery may not be able to sustain additional permits. Several populations have shown declines.
- Small portion of permits are catching a large portion of the landings.
- Majority of management has been toward decreasing pressure on fish stocks, may be counterproductive to increase the number of permits, leading to increased fishing pressure.
- Consider age of fleet and development of new participants.
 - See if we can estimate average age of fishery participants.
- Consider monetary value of permit and how that can be affected by policy change.
- Consider the cause of reductions to populations (sector, too many participants overall, etc.)

Federal Recreational License

- Need improved enforcement in the commercial fishery. Few bad actors doing great damage to the resource.
- Need accountability for recreational and commercial fisheries throughout the coast. A start would be a recreational license for this fishery.

MOTION 5: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL CONSIDER REQUESTING NMFS TO HAVE A RECREATIONAL FEDERAL FISHING LICENSE FOR THE SNAPPER GROUPER FISHERY.

MOTION APPROVED