Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel
Red Grouper Fishery Performance Report
Discussion Questions
October 2026

The Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) is being asked to provide information to update the fishery performance report (FPR) for red grouper. The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR for red grouper will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in the upcoming stock assessment and to inform future management.

The questions listed below are intended to provoke thoughts about the current state and changes to the red grouper stock and fishery. However, some questions may not be applicable at this time. The scope of the FPR is not limited to the questions listed below, as the intent is to incorporate all relevant observational information that can help with assessing and developing management measures for red grouper.

Notes from the current Red Grouper FPR are listed under each of the question categories. The AP is asked to review these notes to determine whether they are still applicable and respond with any updates that should be made.

Questions for Advisory Panel:

The AP is asked to provide the following information about red grouper based on their expertise, as appropriate:

1) Have there been **substantial changes** in the red grouper fishery since 2015 (terminal year of the last assessment)? If so, describe the timing, location, and what you think caused the change?

2) **Fishing Behavior/Catch Levels:**
   - Have there been effort shifts to/from red grouper? If so, please describe, including the time frame for when these shifts occurred.
   - Have there been considerable changes in fishing techniques and/or gears used to target red grouper? If so, please describe, including the time frame for when these changes occurred.
   - How much fishing for red grouper typically occurs during the day versus at night? Has this changed?
   - Do you actively avoid fishing for red grouper in certain areas to avoid catching undersized fish or highly regulated fish (e.g., red snapper) to lessen bait loss?
   - What do you see in terms of discards in the commercial sector? In the recreational sector?
     - How often are red grouper discarded? What are the reasons they are discarded?
     - Do you encounter red grouper as bycatch when fishing for other species? If so, what species are being targeted on these trips?

- Do you think discard mortality is a significant factor for this species? Has this changed? If so, please describe, including the time frame when the change occurred.

Current FPR Notes

- Fishery primarily occurs off North Carolina
  - Red grouper are typically not the primary target of commercial trips.
  - Commonly caught on multispecies commercial trips when scamp is the primary target.
- South Carolina – Bycatch species for a long time. If caught, it is most often in the northern part of South Carolina.
- Georgia – Red grouper are incidentally caught and not common
- North Florida – Not a target species, but are available near the shelf edge. Fish size has been consistent.
- Florida – A small part of a multi-species commercial fishery; available in waters around Volusia County.
- (2017) More targeting of red grouper by spearfishermen off Florida due to the restrictions that were going into place on hogfish.
  - Some growth in popularity of red grouper has occurred among Florida spearfishermen because they are found in shallow waters and are easy to shoot. There has also been growth in spearfishing overall in Florida.
- Florida Keys
  - Some abundance on the shallow end of the reef in the Lower Keys. There does not seem to be an issue with abundance in this area.
  - Red grouper are more abundant during colder months when the seasonal closure is in effect. When the season opens, they are in deeper water and less accessible.
  - May be affected by increased spearfishing.

3) **Social and economic influences:**

- For the commercial sector, how has price and demand for red grouper changed?
  - Is there increased demand for a specific size of red grouper (e.g. plate sized)?
- How has demand for charter/headboat trips targeting red grouper changed?
- Among the species you target, how important are red grouper to your overall business (charter or commercial)?
- What communities are dependent on the red grouper fishery?
- Have changes in infrastructure (docks, marinas, fish houses) affected fishing opportunities for red grouper?
- How have fishermen and communities adapted to changes in the red grouper fishery?

Current FPR Notes

- Demand for grouper in southern South Carolina has decreased due to lack of access. Northern SC (e.g. Myrtle Beach) still has high demand for fresh grouper.
- East Florida – Red grouper is not a key commercial species. There is demand for grouper in general, but not much demand specifically for red grouper.
- Red grouper has smaller commercial yield compared to other groupers due to large head and relatively less meat, so there is little consumer or restaurant demand.

- Florida Keys – Gulf red grouper can be up to $6/lb, but Keys fishermen cannot take advantage of this price due to seasonal access issues. Mexico has a closure as well (February and March), so during the closed season, Florida Keys dealers can sell red grouper for up to $10.99/lb. Generally, when demand is high, the price ranges from $5-$10/lb.
- Some market prices provided during 2023 were $35-38/lb near Palm Beach, FL, and $32/lb in Wilmington, NC. Domestic grouper sold for about $7-9 ex-vessel.

4) **Management measures:**

- Are there new management measures that the Council should consider or are there existing management measures (such as size limit, trip limit, bag limit, season, etc.) that should be changed?
- Are the current ACL and allocations appropriate for each sector?

Current FPR Notes

- Minimum size limit may have limited benefit due to depth and release mortality.
- Red grouper seem just as likely to suffer barotrauma as any other bottom-dwelling species.
    - Florida Keys – barotrauma may have less impact due to shallower water.
- Use of Best Fishing Practices, like descending devices, is important for maximum release survival.
- Seasonal closure is important to keep.
- Current management measures do not significantly limit ability to catch and keep red grouper.
- To improve recruitment, protection of highly fecund, spawning females should be prioritized.

5) **Environmental/ecological/habitat:**

- Do you perceive that the abundance of red grouper has changed over the past ten years? If so, how has it changed?
- When/where are the fish available, and has this changed? For instance, has there been any shift in catch (annually/seasonally) inshore/offshore or north/south? If so, please describe.
- Has the size of the fish that you typically encounter changed? If so, could you briefly describe the trend?
- Have you noticed any unique effects of environmental conditions on red grouper? If so, please describe.
- What are your observations on the timing and length of the red grouper spawning season in your area (time periods when fish are observed with large ovaries or eggs spilling out externally or while venting)?
- What do you see now in terms of recruitment? Where are the small fish? Are large and small fish found in the same locations?
- Have you observed changes in catch depth or apparent bottom type fished on?
- How have sea conditions (monthly/seasonally) affected fishable days?
- Have you noticed any change in the species caught with red grouper over the years or seasonally?

Current FPR Notes

- Sizes of fish have been consistent
- Depths: 80-100 ft or 140-180 ft
- North Carolina
    - Incidental catch while targeting scamp.
    - Can be mixed with triggerfish at the shelf edge (140-180 ft) off Morehead City, NC.
    - Previously observed by divers at depths as shallow as 80 ft, but notable decline in abundance since around 2008.
- South Carolina
    - Off Charleston, SC, found patchily distributed on low relief bottom ("porgy bottom").
    - Potential impacts on available habitat from past use of roller trawls.
- North Florida
    - Caught near the shelf edge at 140-180 ft
    - Sizes and availability have been consistent, with weights ranging 7-20 lbs
- Central Florida (Cape Canaveral) – More red grouper were observed by commercial divers in 2022, possibly affected by Hurricane Ian and other Gulf storms. Divers saw higher numbers of small red grouper and small lobster.
- South Florida (Palm Beach – Keys) – Red grouper are frequently observed shortly after hurricanes, then will seemingly progress northward up the Florida coast.
- Florida Keys
    - Some abundance on the shallow end of the reef, especially in the Lower Keys.
    - Big fish are sometimes caught on the outer reef. Smaller fish in shallow reef waters.
    - No observed issues with overall abundance. Typically more abundance when water is colder, but this also coincides with the seasonal closure.
    - Fewer small red grouper are being seen, potentially impacted by high red snapper abundance.
- Small red grouper (5-6 inches) sometimes caught in east Florida estuaries, and red grouper less than 20 inches can be found in patches in shallow waters.
- Potential cyclical abundance trend lasting about 7-9 years, with potential low period during the mid-2010s.
- (2017) Decline in abundance since the 4-month closure (closed January-April for GA/FL and closed January-May for NC/SC) went into place, potentially due to increased effort off North Carolina in anticipation of the closure (Jan-Apr closure went into place in 2010 throughout the region; was revised to current structure beginning in 2020).
- Increased abundances of lionfish and goliath grouper may be negatively affecting red grouper off Florida.
- Florida fishermen have not seen declines in abundance to a similar extent as what has been reported off North Carolina.
- Increasing coastal development and degradation of estuarine habitat can affect many South Atlantic species, including red grouper. This may have lasting effects on long-term population and sustainable catch levels (i.e. the population may never again be what it was historically).

6) Research Recommendations

- Life history studies, especially on inshore juveniles
    - Use Citizen Science applications to collect data on spawning fish
- Effects of MPAs on local abundances
- Impacts of lionfish on recruitment
- Impacts of potential increases in spearfishing (possibly local effects)
- Potential benefits of vegetative aquaculture to restore nearshore and estuarine juvenile habitats

7) **Other:**

- What else is important for the Council to know about red grouper?

<u>Stock Risk Rating</u>

Under the ABC Control Rule, the Council incorporates an evaluation of how much risk of overfishing it should be willing to accept based on biological, fishery (human interaction), and environmental factors affecting each stock. Input on these factors will be provided ahead of each assessment by the appropriate advisory panel and Scientific and Statistical Committee, and the Council will consider this input in determining the appropriate risk level (conveyed as a Stock Risk Rating of High, Medium, or Low) to apply in the ABC Control Rule. Risk Ratings will be used with relative biomass levels estimated through a stock assessment to determine the probability of overfishing that would be acceptable for that stock (P*).

Final Risk Scores (numeric) for all South Atlantic snapper grouper species and dolphin and wahoo are ranked and apportioned into thirds to determine the final Stock Risk Ratings.

AP Action:

- Review initial scores for each attribute. Comment whether any scores seem unreasonable, providing input on why and how scores should be adjusted.
- Comment on any special circumstances that should be considered in addition to the included information when evaluating attributes of the red grouper fishery.