

# Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Gag Fishery Performance Report Discussion Questions April 2025

The Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) is being asked to provide information to update the fishery performance report (FPR) for gag ([September 2020](#)). 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 gag will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) and used to inform future management.

The questions listed below are intended to provoke thoughts about the current state and changes to the gag 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 gag.

Notes from the current gag 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 gag based on their expertise, as appropriate:

- 1) Have there been **substantial changes** in the gag fishery since 2019 (terminal year of the last assessment, SEDAR 71)? If so, describe the timing, location, and what you think caused the change?

## 2) Fishing Behavior and Catch Levels

### September 2020 Summary of feedback on Fishing Behavior and Catch Levels:

- AP members noted that in general, based on their observations, gag have decreased or remained constant in their abundance.
- NC AP members noted that changes in technology have drastically changed fishery, making productive bottom fishing grounds more accessible and leading to more recreational fishing pressure.
- Fishermen noted that gag are being caught to deeper waters than previously observed.
- AP members noted concerns over spearfishing (both commercial and recreational) and how this method may be negatively affecting the stock.
- It was noted that catching grouper has become harder as red snapper levels increase, and shark predation increases, specifically in FL.

### Update Questions:

- When/where are the fish available? Has this changed?
- Has the size of fish you are catching changed? If so, please describe the trend.

- Have there been effort shifts to/from gag? 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 gag? If so, please describe, including the time frame for when these changes occurred.
- How much fishing for gag typically occurs during the day versus at night? Has this changed?
- Do you actively avoid fishing for gag in certain areas to avoid catching undersized fish or highly regulated fish (e.g., red snapper) to lessen bait loss and how feasible is it to avoid gag?
- What do you see in terms of discards in the commercial sector? In the recreational sector?
  - How often are gag discarded? What are the reasons they are discarded?
  - Do you encounter gag 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.

### 3) Social and Economic Influences

#### September 2020 Summary of Feedback on Social and Economic Influences:

- AP members noted that the price for gag the past 3 years (2017-2020) was roughly \$7.00 per pound but demand had been increasing.
- Fishermen noted that gag are very important for the commercial fishery, especially in NC and SC and even more so if vermilion snapper or gray triggerfish close in-season.
- For-hire fishermen noted that the opportunity for customers to catch gag provided a lot of value for their trips.
- AP stressed that economic information on profit margins is lacking and data to track product from the dock needs to be analyzed.
- AP members noted gag is still extremely important for all sectors, however it was shifting to more of a bycatch fishery.
- Fishermen stressed that the loss of working waterfront is a major concern and that it was much easier for recreational vessels to find dock space versus commercial and for-hire vessels.

#### Update Questions:

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

## 4) Management measures

### September 2020 Summary of Feedback on Management Measures:

- AP members supported the spawning season closure, however some thought it could be longer, including May, December, or both.
- The AP discussed if increasing the minimum size limit would be beneficial. Some fishermen noted that the size limit should be 25-26 inches because 50% of fish are female at 25 inches.
- There was a suggestion to create protected areas specifically for shallow water groupers.
- AP members stressed the need to quantify recreational effort.
- Fishermen suggested the commercial trip limit should be reduced to 500 lbs with a 100-150 lbs bycatch limit from January through February
  - Note: the commercial trip limit was reduced to 300 lbs through AM 55 in 2024.

### Update Questions:

- 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?

## 5) Environmental, Ecological, and Habitat Concerns

### September 2020 Summary of Feedback on Environmental, Ecological, and Habitat Concerns:

- AP members noted concerns over the following:
  - Hurricanes and the increased prevalence of storms and/or non-fishable days. Fishermen noted that hurricane disrupt ledges and have prolonged effect on gag fishing.
  - Warming waters and species moving northward.
  - Coastal development and inshore habitat loss, specifically seagrass beds.
  - Overly abundant red snapper
  - Invasive lionfish and their possible effect on the gag population.

### Update Questions:

- Do you perceive that the abundance of gag 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 gag? If so, please describe.
- What are your observations on the timing and length of the gag 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 gag over the years or seasonally?

## 6) Other

### September 2020 Summary of Other Concerns:

- Fishermen stressed how important fishery-independent monitoring is for this fishery but also suggested incorporating a cooperative hook and line survey to supplement data collection.
- AP members shared concerns over lack of enforcement.

### Update Question:

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

### Stock Risk Rating

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. Based on current scores, stocks are considered High Risk if their Final Risk Score is less than 2.03, Medium Risk if their Final Risk Score is between 2.03 and 2.35, and Low Risk if their Final Risk Score is greater than 2.35.

### 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 gag snapper fishery.