

**Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel**  
**Golden Tilefish and Blueline Tilefish Fishery Performance Report Updates**  
**Discussion Questions**  
**October 2023**

The Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) is being asked to provide information to update the fishery performance reports (FPR) for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish. 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 FPRs for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in the upcoming operational assessments of South Atlantic golden tilefish (SEDAR 89) and Atlantic blueline tilefish (SEDAR 92) and to inform future management of these stocks.

The questions listed below are intended to provoke thoughts about the current state and changes to the golden tilefish and blueline tilefish stocks 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 golden tilefish and blueline tilefish.

The current golden tilefish and blueline tilefish FPRs can be found on the Council's [FPR Application](#). The AP is asked to review these FPRs and provide any updates that should be made.

**Questions for Advisory Panel:**

The AP is asked to provide the following information about golden tilefish and blueline tilefish based on their expertise, as appropriate:

- 1) Have there been **substantial changes** in the golden tilefish fishery since 2018 or blueline tilefish fishery since 2015 (terminal years of the last assessments)? 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 golden tilefish or blueline tilefish? 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 golden tilefish or blueline tilefish? If so, please describe, including the time frame for when these changes occurred.
  - How much fishing for golden tilefish or blueline tilefish typically occurs during the day versus at night? Has this changed?
  - Do you actively avoid fishing for golden tilefish or blueline tilefish 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 golden tilefish or blueline tilefish discarded? What are the reasons they are discarded?
  - Do you encounter golden tilefish or blueline tilefish 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.
- **FROM THE ASSESSMENT ANALYSTS: How prominent is the use of discard mortality mitigation techniques, such as venting or descender device usage, when fishing for blueline tilefish or golden tilefish?**

#### Notes from Golden Tilefish 2018 FPR

- Increased effort in the commercial hook and line component, reflected through the ACL being caught earlier and earlier over recent years. Also, new entrants have acquired permits thinking this is an easy fishery in which to participate.
- Since longline endorsement was implemented, not all endorsement holders are active in the fishery; around 17 active vessels that longline.
- Depending on weather, longline fishing could occur from January through April or early May, but closures typically go into place in March (as early as February).
- 10 years ago, not targeted off SC with hook and line, but did start recently targeting due to the growth of the restaurant market for smaller golden tilefish. More hook and line targeting recently, but not significantly more.
- A new market was introduced for “peewees” in response to a lack of data on small fish. After this, fishermen caught “the most small fish that we have ever caught”. Smaller golden tilefish could be specifically targeted by fishing in certain areas/depths.
- Recreationally, few anglers from S Florida target golden tilefish.
- Little targeting by charter component in FL Keys.
- Few commercial discards other than shark depredation. Snowy grouper and blackbelly rosefish are sometimes caught incidentally. Snowy grouper may have to be discarded due to regulations, but there are markets for both of those species, so when legal, they can be sold.

#### Notes from Blueline Tilefish 2019 FPR

- Off Cape Hatteras, NC, abundance of blueline tilefish has remained the same for the last 20 years.
- In summer, when dolphin are not available, not uncommon for several charter boats to fish near each other and for everyone to catch their blueline tilefish limit.
- Blueline tilefish are also abundant off Virginia (around Norfolk Canyon), Maryland, and New Jersey, based on interactions with fishermen from those areas.

- Blueline tilefish have become more popular with the recreational charter component off Hatteras, NC.
- Off Morehead City, NC, blueline tilefish are primarily bycatch of the snowy grouper fishery.
  - Blueline tilefish are being caught more often in 30 fathoms off Ocracoke. Previously they were more typically caught in 40-50 fathoms.
  - While blueline tilefish are not targeted commercially in this area, there has been an increase in recreational fishing in deeper water, attributable to advances in boating electronics and fishing tackle.
- Off Atlantic Beach, NC, blueline tilefish seem to have remained abundant in the same areas, except for the “the one hump north of Big Rock”. That area was primarily a snowy grouper area 20-25 years ago, but now yields mostly 3-4 pound blueline tilefish.
  - In most areas off NC, lines with multiple hooks can catch blueline tilefish and snowy grouper on the same drop, indicating that these species both inhabit some of the same areas.
  - Typical target areas are about 40 fathoms over hard, rough bottom. These areas can also yield large vermilion snapper and some scamp.
- Off the east coast of FL, blueline tilefish availability is similar to historical levels. In this area, they are regularly caught with snowy grouper as bycatch. They are not a commercially targeted species in this area.
- Off the FL Keys, commercial effort has not increased much, but blueline tilefish have been and continue to be abundant.
- Recreational effort has increased from Palm Beach to Miami, FL, where blueline tilefish are available within 3 miles of shore, in Florida state waters.
- Discards are minimal for both the recreational and commercial sectors.

### 3) Social and economic influences:

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

### **Notes from Golden Tilefish 2018 FPR**

- Commercial longline fishermen have a limited number of species that can be legally harvested using that gear. Given the limited number of species and how quickly the golden tilefish longline ACL is harvested, commercial golden tilefish longline fishermen need to harvest other species and use other fishing methods to stay in business.
- FL dealers rely on the longline fleet for golden tilefish. Due to the short effective season, golden tilefish are only available for a short time within the year.
- South of St. Lucie, FL, bottom longlines are prohibited, so the hook-and-line component has more area from which to harvest golden tilefish.
- Price and demand for golden tilefish are increasing. With the annual shallow water grouper closure, other “white meat” fish, such as golden tilefish, have become increasingly important. Golden tilefish are easily sold when available, especially when grouper are not available.

### **Notes from Blueline Tilefish 2019 FPR**

- Demand for blueline tilefish has increased for both sectors over the last 5 years.
- In Atlantic Beach, NC, blueline tilefish fishing has been requested by charter clients, some of whom have even brought their own deep water gear.
- In Hampstead, NC (north of Wilmington), blueline tilefish comprise a small portion of the commercial catch, but the price per pound has steadily remained at \$4.00 per pound (ex-vessel) for the past 15 years, even though blueline is not as desirable as golden tilefish.
- Customers have started to recognize tilefish, increasing demand. In St. Simons Island, GA, when tilefish is on the menu along with snapper and grouper, the tilefish sells just as well.
- Customers have similarly begun to recognize tilefish more in Charleston, SC. However, golden tilefish is more desirable, and blueline tilefish is not interchangeable with golden. Chefs prefer golden, so the price per pound for golden is about \$4.00 more than the \$3.00-\$3.50 per pound for blueline.
- Golden tilefish command a higher price than blueline in south Florida, as well.
- In the FL Keys, blueline price per pound is about \$1.50-\$2.00.
- Blueline tilefish are very important in the Outer Banks of NC for the recreational for-hire industry. If dolphin are unavailable, captains rely on blueline as a backup to satisfy customers and encourage them to come back.

#### **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?

### **Notes from Golden Tilefish 2018 FPR**

- Lowering the 4,000 lb commercial longline trip limit would not be effective in extending the season, but would hurt profits.
- The AP expressed mixed opinions on raising the commercial hook-and-line trip limit (500 lbs).
  - The hook-and-line component is harvesting its ACL, and a higher trip limit would reduce the need for back-to-back trips to occur (also save on the gas for multiple trips going out to deep water fishing grounds).
  - However, if this resulted in the ACL being reached and that component being closed earlier in the year, it would leave dealers and consumers without products they depend on for some time.
  - Faster harvests could also flood the market, reducing price per pound during golden tilefish open seasons.
  - Hook-and line fishermen often catch golden tilefish with other species, such as snowy grouper and blueline tilefish. If golden tilefish closed earlier due to a trip limit increase, discards could become problematic for trips targeting snowy grouper and blueline tilefish.
  - A trip limit increase may also incentivize new entrants into the golden tilefish fishery. With the ACL typically being harvested by the current fleet, this may crowd the fishery and reduce individual profits.
- Allowance of permit stacking could be considered to make trips more efficient while not specifically increasing the trip limit across the board.
- Buoy gear (vertical line with terminal end weighted with no more than 10 pounds and 10 hooks fishing vertically; more description in current FPR) is regularly used to fish for golden tilefish off the Florida Keys and the Carolinas.

### **Notes from Blueline Tilefish 2019 FPR**

- The ACL for blueline tilefish is currently too low. Blueline tilefish are plentiful. The AP did acknowledge that this needs to be reflected by the stock assessment before management action to increase the ACL can occur.

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

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

#### **Notes from Golden Tilefish 2018 FPR**

- Off FL Keys, golden tilefish available year-round, and different size fish are found at different depths. Some shifts in effort have occurred, typically in response to closures of other S Florida species such as yellowtail snapper, spiny lobster, or jacks.
- If deep dropping off the FL Keys, may catch golden tilefish along with blackbelly rosefish, deepwater snappers, and other deepwater species.
- With the introduction of the “peewees” category, more small fish were caught recently. However, the size range of fish in the population was not noticed to have changed. The commercial sector changed their behavior to target the smaller fish.
- Implementation of the Oculina Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern affected golden tilefish access off Cape Canaveral. Due to size/depth segregation of the species, this measure also affected the size of harvest fish, as access to certain areas/depths was now restricted. This influenced perceptions that recruitment was low.
- Hurricanes haven’t seemed to have a strong impact on golden tilefish catches. There may be impacts from freshwater releases from Lake Okeechobee, with some observations of deep-water fish being less likely to bite “when the lobster open up” and fish bites being reduced in nearshore areas.

#### **Notes from Blueline Tilefish 2019 FPR**

- Blueline tilefish range from New York through the Keys, but there currently is not a regional or cross-regional survey that tracks their abundance. Data from existing surveys demonstrated that blueline tilefish occupy a range of habitats, from unstructured bottom to mixed or hard bottom habitats.
- Off Cape Hatteras, NC, small blueline tilefish co-exist with larger fish. However, the typical hook size used limits catches of small blueline tilefish. Small hooks more typically used for triggerfish can be effective in catching small blueline tilefish. These small fish are somewhat deeper water.
  - Biggest blueline are found ~110 fathoms depth
  - Between 80 and 100 fathoms, mixture of medium-sized and “babies”
- Spawning appears to occur throughout the fishing season (recreational – May-August).
- From St. Augustine to Ponce Inlet, FL, blueline tilefish from juveniles to adults are found, coexisting with small snowy grouper.
- Off South Carolina, blueline tilefish are caught with larger snowy grouper.

- Medium-size blueline tilefish are caught on the same hooks used for small to medium and large snowy grouper.
- Off FL Keys and South Florida, small blueline tilefish seem to be mixed with larger fish, but they are not often caught due fishing with larger hooks. When smaller hooks have been used to target porgy, small blueline tilefish have been caught as well.
- Off Morehead City, NC, days with rough seas have been observed more frequently than the 1980s. Also, with the snowy grouper commercial ACL increase of 2015 (Regulatory Amendment 20), commercial fishermen are interacting more with blueline tilefish because they are spending more time targeting snowy grouper
- Off east Florida, cold water events can impact fishing by forcing fishing further offshore to the western edge of the Gulf Stream, where the water is warmer.
- Concern was expressed about melting polar ice and its effects on ocean currents and traditional fishing areas, as well as observations of algae in rock shrimp nets in areas that did not previously have this issue.
- Expansion of the Oculina Bank “closed area” has restricted anchoring, so fishermen have adapted practices to catch blueline tilefish and snowy grouper in that region.
- Freshwater releases from Lake Okeechobee can affect fish bites in shallow water, driving fishermen further offshore.
- Both blueline and golden tilefish are subject to shark depredation, notably by hammerheads. Increasing shark populations may continue or expand this effect.

#### 6) Other:

- What else is important for the Council to know about golden tilefish or blueline tilefish?

#### **Notes from Golden Tilefish 2018 FPR**

- Fishermen welcome any type of cooperative research to assist in upcoming assessments.
- [Since this FPR, the South Atlantic Deepwater Longline Survey (SADLS) has been conducted, with pilot years from 2019-2021 and randomized sampling design starting in 2022]

#### **Notes from Blueline Tilefish 2019 FPR**

- A regional scale longline survey has been discussed for the South Atlantic region. A pilot survey was conducted in 2019. [Since this FPR, the South Atlantic Deepwater Longline Survey (SADLS) has been conducted, with pilot years from 2019-2021 and randomized sampling design starting in 2022]
- More information is needed on recruitment, and there are no fishery-independent studies currently investigating this. Commercial AP members expressed interest in cooperative research projects to fill data gaps.
- Vertical gear, rather than longline gear, would be most appropriate to sample juvenile

fish.

### **Stock Risk Rating**

With the recent Council-approved Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) Control Rule Amendment, the Council has decided to incorporate an evaluation of how much risk it should be willing to take 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 use in the new ABC Control Rule. The AP's role of reviewing the Stock Risk Rating will typically occur as part of the FPR development process. However, Council staff is currently revising the Shiny application used to provide an overview of the fishery for FPR development. Therefore, review of the Stock Risk Ratings for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish will occur at a future AP meeting, after the Shiny application has been updated to include all Stock Risk Rating information.