

Summary Report

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Meeting

October 19-21, 2021

The South Atlantic Council’s Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) convened via webinar on October 19-21, 2021.

The AP approved minutes from their meetings in September 2020 and April 2021.

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

1. Update on recent regulations and status of amendments

Council staff updated the AP on the status of recently approved and developing amendments. The AP provided the listed comments and recommendation related to the amendments.

a. Amendment 50 – Red Porgy

- i. The Council requested AP feedback on whether the red porgy recreational bag limit should be specified as “1 fish per person per day, or 1 fish per person per trip, whichever is more restrictive.”
 - One AP member suggested consideration of a constant total ACL for red porgy.
 - Possible 10-month closure would be a big change for the fishery.
 - One AP member suggested the recreational bag limit be 1 fish per person per day with an exception for for-hire vessels to be 1 fish per person per day or per trip, whichever is more restrictive
 - Some AP members suggested that “per trip” could be removed.
 - Would allow multiple days’ worth of limits for overnight trips for all recreational vessels.
 - Should possibly mirror limits for other snapper grouper species – multiple bag limits are allowed to be possessed for other snapper grouper species with documentation of multiple days of fishing.
 - Suggested maximum of 2 days’ worth of limits.

b. Amendment 49 – Greater Amberjack and Recreational Annual Catch Targets

c. Amendment 48 – Wreckfish ITQ Modernization

- **AP Recommendation: Allow any SG1 permit to lease wreckfish quota without already owning quota.**

2. Fishery Performance Report for Gray Triggerfish (<https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/FPRAll/>)

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 gray triggerfish will be developed. A research track assessment (SEDAR 82) will be underway for the gray triggerfish stock in the South Atlantic and is scheduled for completion by the end of 2023.

3. Amendment 51 – Snowy Grouper

The Council received the results of SEDAR 36 Update at their March 2021 meeting and directed staff to begin work on a plan amendment. During the September meeting the Council reviewed AP recommendations from their April meeting and an options paper. The Council provided direction to staff to present the options paper to the AP to gather further input on modifications to commercial and recreational management measures and recreational accountability measures. The Council will review this input at their December meeting where they will have the opportunity to approve the amendment for scoping. Staff presented the options paper as most recently developed. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

Commercial Trip Limit

- Keep fishery open as long as possible, modify trip limits to reduce effort.
 - Trip limit reduction may not make the trip to snowy fishing grounds worth it.
- Cryptic population on snowy wrecks needs to be examined.
- Trip limits need enforcement to be effective.
- More recreational effort noticed in certain areas.
- Prefer for the 200-pound trip limit.

Spawning Season Closure

- Long spawning period with lunar variation. Would be difficult to create a spawning season around lunar cycle.
- Willing to consider a spawning closure to retain the current 200-pound trip limit.
 - May need to consider geographical changes in spawning.
- Snowy grouper are a “top-off” species, keeping them open early in the year is crucial, if there is a spawning closure it would be better to have it later in the year.
- Modify recreational season so it does not coincide with peak spawning (May-August).
- April and May are important times for snowy grouper fishing when shallow water grouper are closed.

Recreational Management Measures

- **Stamp/permit needed for the private recreational fishery.**
 - Money from stamp could be funneled into aquaculture and/or artificial structures.
 - Recreational fisherman are very well informed – AP does not anticipate reluctance for a stamp/endorsement.
 - Cost up to \$100 not expected to have much resistance.

- Need to define the universe of anglers.
- Monies from stamp may end up in a general fund – would like to know where this money would go. Would like it to address the fishery.
- State water fishery off South Florida.
- Needs a census due to low MRIP intercepts.
- Recreational effort increasing as technology advances.
- Citizen science could help provide data on participation.
- Discard mortality is a concern for this species. Bag limit controls trip length.
 - Day saver species.
- Very accessible in Florida due to technology and shorter distance to fishing grounds.

Recreational Accountability Measures (AM)

- Keep the current triggers for the AM in place due to small recreational landings.
- Current AM – whichever sector exceeds pays the overage back in the following season.
 - Untying the overage to total ACL can help determine the appropriate AM.
- Possibly reallocate recreational underage to the commercial sector in the following year, looking for equity between the sectors.
- Additional recreational AM restrictions are not advised.
- Commercial also has reporting accountability tied to the permit. Both sectors should have functioning in-season closures.

4. Amendment 44 – Yellowtail Snapper

In June 2021, the Council reviewed the APs input on the fishery’s performance, a fishery overview, and a draft options paper including actions previously considered (in 2018). At the September 2021 meeting, the Council reviewed preliminary analyses on commercial and recreational season length under proposed catch levels and approved the amendment for scoping. In addition, the Council requested input from stakeholders on commercial management measures (commercial trip limits). This amendment is being developed jointly with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council. The Gulf Council and Reef Fish Advisory Panel will be providing feedback on proposed actions affecting their region this fall. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- Trip limits may not be necessary since landings are not hitting the ACL.
- A trip limit for part-time fishermen could make new entry to the fishery difficult.
- In Key West, not many fishermen go to the Gulf to target yellowtail snapper, but it does happen.
- Should not shift allocation toward the recreational sector. Recreational sector is not hitting its ACL currently.
- Need additional recreational accountability before allocating more in that direction.

MOTION 1: MOVE THAT THE PANEL ADVISES THE COUNCIL TO:

- RETAIN THE CURRENT JURISDICTIONAL ALLOCATION BETWEEN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC AND GULF OF MEXICO
- RETAIN THE CURRENT SECTOR ALLOCATIONS FOR THE SOUTH ATLANTIC

- ADOPT THE CONSTANT CATCH LEVEL OF THE LOWEST RECOMMENDED ABC FOR THE SOUTH ATLANTIC AS THE TOTAL ACL FOR THE SOUTH ATLANTIC.

MOTION APPROVED

5. Amendment 52 – Fishery Overview and Discussion of Management Changes for Golden Tilefish

To assist in the consideration and development of management actions and alternatives following completed stock assessments, Council staff have developed fishery overview applications for recently assessed species. These overviews compile the history of management and information from the most recent stock assessment. The SEDAR 66 assessment of golden tilefish in the South Atlantic was completed in 2021 determined the stock to not be overfished and not experiencing overfishing. In June 2021, the Council initiated a plan amendment to adjust catch levels for golden tilefish. Council staff presented a description of the assessment and fishery using the overview application for golden tilefish. Click [HERE](#) to access the data online. Council staff also described current management measures and changes that will be considered through Amendment 52. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- Fishery needs recreational census rather than estimate due to low number of intercepts and high variability in resulting estimates.
- Reporting mobile applications may be useful once a reporting method is established.
 - Widespread application use should be given the most attention, as there are many reporting applications available and ways to develop an application.
- Change season for the commercial hook-and-line to be different from longline;
 - Start in September or October, or after the longline season closes.
 - Establish a stamp/endorsement for hook-and-line.
- Consider measures to extend the longline season (possibly individual fishing quotas).
 - Not much interest in reducing trip limit.

MOTION 2: RECOMMEND THAT PRIVATE RECREATIONAL COMPONENT HAVE A CENSUS METHOD OF REPORTING DEEP WATER CATCH.

MOTION APPROVED

MOTION 3: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL:

- SET THE TOTAL ACL EQUAL TO THE UPDATED ABC
- RETAIN THE CURRENT SECTOR ALLOCATIONS FOR GOLDEN TILEFISH.

MOTION APPROVED

6. Amendment 53 – Fishery Overview and Discussion of Management Changes for Gag Grouper

The SEDAR 71 assessment of gag grouper in the South Atlantic was completed in 2021 and determined the stock to be overfished and experiencing overfishing. In June 2021, the

Council initiated a plan amendment to rebuild and adjust catch levels for gag grouper. Council staff presented a description of the assessment and fishery using the overview application for gag grouper. Click [HERE](#) to access the data online. Council staff also described current management measures and changes that will be considered through Amendment 53. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

Commercial Management Priorities

- Ensure there is some available harvest for both sectors (bycatch fishery). Continued catch is crucial to inform science with fishery-dependent methods.
 - Closing the fishery could increase mortality via discards.
 - Seasonally ensure there is summer harvest of grouper for the market.
- 70% probability of rebuilding should be used instead of 50%.

Commercial Management Measures

- Emergency action may be needed to reduce the commercial limit.
- Expand spawning season closure – extend through May.
 - Not much difference observed after spawning season closure enacted in 2009
 - Use to reduce effort
 - One member recommended that no spawning season closure be required south of 28 degrees North Latitude.
- 50- or 250-pound trip limit (anything but 0 pounds) could be accepted if specifically for gag
 - 250 pounds for all shallow water grouper would be detrimental

Recreational Management Priorities

- Ensure there is some available harvest for both sectors (bycatch fishery). Continued catch is crucial to inform science with fisheries dependent methods
 - Closing the fishery could increase mortality via release mortality.

Recreational Management Measures

- **The AP maintains its previous recommendation to establish a recreational permit/license.**
- Slot limit – protect spawning females.

Other Comments for Council Consideration

- Aquaculture of snapper/grouper species needed
 - Up to 1 pound in size, release into an estuary with 2 release seasons.
 - Consult Scott Baker with Sea Grant.
 - Need to consider what will be needed to remove individuals for aquaculture and potential water quality hazards.
- Artificial reefs needed for snapper grouper species.
 - Council partners with the state. Council can designate artificial reefs as SMZs.
- Gag grouper fishery has been declining in North Carolina, similar to red snapper 10 years ago.

- MPAs need to be in deeper water (near break, 60-80ft), where there are spawning aggregations.
- Continued education needed for best practices.
- Inshore habitat needs to be protected, fishing is occurring in nursery habitat.
- Red snapper populations are eating juvenile gag.
- Red tide, fish kill, and sewage issues in Florida.
- **Problems identifying between gag and black grouper, management may need to include the entire shallow water grouper aggregate.**
- Consider increasing the min size limit (both sectors).

7. Fishery Overview for Red Snapper

The SEDAR 73 assessment of red snapper in the South Atlantic was completed in 2021 and determined the stock to be overfished and experiencing overfishing. Council staff provided a description of the assessment and fishery using the overview application for red snapper and described the SSC’s catch level recommendations. Click [HERE](#) to access the data online.

8. Snapper Grouper Fishery Management

a. Discussion of the Commercial Snapper Grouper Permit

In 1998, Amendment 8 instituted the snapper grouper limited access permit requirement. This requirement set initial eligibility for commercial snapper grouper permits based on landings and created two commercial permits: a transferable unlimited permit (SG 1 permit) and a non-transferable permit limited to 225 pounds of snapper grouper species (SG 2 permit). In 2020, the Council responded to Executive Order (EO) 13921: Promoting American Seafood Competitiveness and Economic Growth, identifying the “2 for 1 provision” of the SG 1 permit as an item to be evaluated and to consider if changes would provide social or economic benefits to the fishery.

At their September 2021 meeting, the Council reviewed initial information describing background of the provision, an evaluation of trends in the commercial snapper grouper fishery, and recent input from the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP). The Council was interested in further discussing potential changes to commercial snapper grouper permit provisions and requested additional feedback from the AP on the topic. Staff presented preliminary data and questions from the Council to the AP. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- AP requested information on how many SG1 permits have been retired. AP also asked about how quickly commercial ACLs are being reached and how much faster they could potentially be reached with additional participants.
- Members commented that it is difficult for new entry into the fishery.
- Are stocks healthy enough to sustain additional pressure from new entry?
 - One member commented that in Morehead City, NC, maybe not.
 - No heavily blooming snapper grouper fishery, so now may not be the right time to increase commercial effort.
- Some younger participation in commercial fishery from Morehead City, NC area. In FL and other NC areas, fleet seems to be aging out.

- Possible limitation on how many permits people can own. Possibly consider exemption for a certain number of permits from the 2 for 1 policy.
- Concern about corporate loophole for SG2 permits.
- Recreational pressure makes sustainability difficult for additional commercial pressure.
- Lack and loss of working waterfront is point of concern.
- Andrew Mahoney previously distributed a Special Management Permit Plan and spoke on this plan in Other Business in April 2021.
- Further information on Andrew Mahoney’s proposed plan could be discussed at a future meeting.
- Increase fish stocking; find ways to increase populations and habitat. Also water quality improvement efforts; stop reduction of marshland estuary habitats.
- Consider Marine Protected Areas (MPA) to protect fish in stocking areas.
- Should look back towards previous efforts for SG management, including the strategic plan (Vision Blueprint).
- One AP member recommended for commercial sector movement towards harvesters being able to produce for coastal communities that don’t have local harvesters.
- **Overall, mixed opinions on removing 2 for 1 policy at this time. More information could aid future evaluations and discussions.**

b. Discussion of Management Strategies and Priorities

In September 2021, the Council received results from SEDAR 73 indicating that the South Atlantic red snapper stock is overfished and experiencing overfishing. The assessment indicated that the majority of red snapper fishing mortality occurs as discard mortality rather than through landings. Due to the multi-species nature of the snapper grouper fishery, the Council recognized that addressing the issue of discard mortality requires holistic changes to management for the entire fishery. The Council discussed a plan to address snapper grouper discards through short-term and long-term amendments and directed staff to begin work on both immediately. Discussion questions have been developed based on previous AP recommendations to inform actions to be considered in the short-term amendment, which is aimed at reducing discards through currently available information and actions that can be taken relatively quickly through a framework amendment.

Gear Modifications

- Different species are caught using different gear; difficult to set single regulation for entire snapper grouper fishery. Wide variety of species; different hook sizes, different leaders.
- Prohibition of natural (alive at one time) bait may not be effective.
- Hook size: During closed season, gauge of hook size should be considered (i.e., skinnier hook).
- More effort should be spent in descending device use and best practices education rather than gear regulations.
- Gear/technique regulations are not enforceable and better suited to guidance as best practices.

- **Overall, due to the wide variety of gear, fishing techniques, and species in the snapper grouper fishery, the AP feels that gear modifications for the snapper grouper fishery would be best pursued as best practices rather than regulations.**

Spatial/Timed Seasonal Openings

- Too much diversity to have blanket management of all snapper grouper species. Not all snapper grouper species are discarded at high levels or in all areas.
- Seasons could create more concentrated effort for recreational fishing (for species in addition to red snapper).
- Would need to have cooperative state management with any changes.
- Mostly discard grouper June or earlier (recreational).
- Yellowtail snapper size-separate and sub-legal size can be actively avoided (Florida Keys).
- ACL closures are effective for the commercial sector already; preference for no set season.
- Commercial aggregate limit is not preferred.
- Some wreck locations could be useful for MPA consideration.
- Offshore MPAs are difficult to enforce. There could be benefits to shallow water MPAs to improve red snapper and gag.
- Effects of MPAs are not widely known; need more information to evaluate performance.
- Consideration of MPAs could come with sunset provision; but need evaluation of performance.
- Some interactions with red snapper while amberjack fishing; try to avoid red snapper when fishing in deeper water for amberjack by fishing higher in the water column.
- Could reduce some discards if red snapper were opened with red grouper on May 1; current season timing is in peak of spawning season.
- SC/GA, fall fishing season may be better for red snapper.
- Offshore fishing for recreational fishermen can be cost-prohibitive (not price-efficient).
- Could the private recreational component support a closure by season/space to reduce dead discards?
 - Complete moratorium on bottom fishing would not be supported.
 - More recreational support for increasing populations rather than reducing effort.
 - **Recreational permit/tag/stamp/some form of accountability preferred to bottom closure.**
- Regional differences complicate management measures; more consideration of regional differences could help.
- Recreational license/accountability has not been taken up by the Council/NMFS despite years of requests by AP.
- **Need recreational accountability (license, permit, etc.).**
- **Efforts are also needed to increase habitat & increase fish populations through artificial reef production at federal level (MPAs could be considered to protect active habitat increase efforts).**

Red Snapper Slot Limit

- Is the amount of discards during the mini-season enough to have slot limit make a difference? Slot limit does not address discards outside of the mini-season.
- Slot limit or maximum size limit creates discards of fish outside of the slot. Efforts should be geared toward reducing discards.
- The Council could consider a slot limit based on weight or a max weight trip limit (for recreational).
- Size limit can create additional handling (can affect release survival).

Recreational License

- **The AP continues to recommend a recreational snapper grouper license and reporting.**
- Would the Council consider polling recreational anglers to see acceptance of license and registration?
 - State saltwater licenses could be a start for a universe of people to poll.
 - Identify angler interest in catch and release fishery (for applicable species).
- Need better recreational enforcement to make any licensing matter.
- Commercial fishery already has a reduced number of participants.
- Recreational license would have greater repercussion for law violations than currently in place. Recreational fishermen would have “something to lose” for violations.
- Effort is an issue, but curbing effort may not be the solution; need better stewardship and more responsible use of resource.
- Limiting effort in recreational fishery would better be done by season, bag, or size limits rather than reducing the number of participants.
- Education/public outreach may have greater compliance effect than increased enforcement for recreational sector.
 - Fish handling, how to vent, how to descend, net use, etc.

Other Comments for Council Consideration

- Some AP members supported requiring retention of red snapper (i.e., no discarding allowed until after limit for that species is caught).
 - Required retention for recreational could be difficult to enforce, but gear modifications would be just as difficult to enforce. Would need other complementary management changes, such as longer open periods.
 - One member recommended a large hook fishery with a set time and no discarding for the commercial fishery.
- Especially for larger species, use bigger hook to exclude smaller animals. Possibly consider weight limits for both sectors to discourage discarding.
- In general, to target big fish, would use live bait and long leader. Does not seem to matter as much for red snapper size. Large or small red snapper will bite on a variety of hook sizes.
- Closure of red snapper is affecting other species/fisheries.
- Sharks continue to be an issue affecting survival after release.
- Consider taking some portion of ACL and designate for use as out-of-season bycatch of deep water species or those with low release survival rates.

- Consider recreational poundage limit for red snapper, rather than a number of fish, to reduce discards.
- The AP expressed mixed opinions on how to address the issue of discard mortality, particularly in the recreational fishery.
 - Some AP members stated that reduced discards will require reduced effort.
 - Other members stated that recreational effort reduction is not realistic; need more recreational accountability.
 - **Big step towards recreational accountability is knowing who is involved (re-iterating previous AP recommendations for a recreational permit/license).**
- Council/NMFS should consider using assessment data to manage fishermen more and reduce focus on establishing ACLs.
 - Find ways to reduce fishing when fish are particularly vulnerable to discarding.
 - Simpler explanations of how assessments are done (including data collection methods) are needed to improve outreach, compliance, and data collection. Assessments don't hold much credibility with recreational fishermen observing abundance of red snapper.
- Continued education of best practices and focus on getting fish back in the water alive; also moving from areas/depths where red snapper or other closed species have just been released.
- Need best practices to become “normal”. Assessment information is not an adequate motivator; considered inaccurate from fishermen’s perspective.

9. Vermilion Snapper Commercial Trip Limit

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. In April 2021, the AP provided input on whether more permanent action should be taken to change the commercial trip limit through an amendment. In September 2021, the Council reviewed this input, but also received assessment and management information for other snapper grouper species that may have implications for the rest of the fishery. The Council requested that the AP review their previous recommendations and determine if they want to maintain or change these in light of the most recent information. Staff presented introductory information concerning the emergency rule and the AP’s previous recommendations. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- The AP prefers a stepdown regardless of the commercial trip limit. There is not widespread support for a 1,500 pound trip limit.
- The vermilion snapper commercial fishery is important, but changing the trip limit is not the highest priority.
- Price per pound went up during the COVID-19 pandemic.

10. Other Updates:

a. SEDAR

Staff updated the AP on the status of ongoing and upcoming SEDAR stock assessments.

b. Citizen Science

Staff provided an update on the Council's Citizen Science Program, highlighting activities that have occurred since the Spring 2021 Snapper Grouper AP meeting. The presentation included the latest information on the SAFMC Release project's transition to the new SciFish mobile app and expansion to all shallow water grouper species, as well as information on ways AP members can get involved in the project.

c. Climate Change Scenario Planning

Staff updated the AP on the East Coast Climate Change Scenario Planning initiative.

11. Other Business

- The AP asked about any progress toward a barrellfish white paper or management of this species.
 - Council has not directed staff to consider addition of species to the FMP (including barrellfish).
 - In Broward County, FL, there has been a reduction in catch of barrellfish in recent years.
 - White meat fish; more recreational targeting in Florida.
 - Barrellfish are becoming more popular in restaurants; more available from wholesalers in the last 2-3 years.
 - Wreckfish and barrellfish are bycatch of each other; could be useful to have bycatch allowance or leased ITQ.
- Sand tilefish is more inshore and should not be grouped with blueline tilefish.
- Spearfishing & diving as gear and impacts on snapper grouper species.
 - Past white paper due to concerns off NC.
- Invite the Waddell Mariculture Center to provide a presentation at the next AP meeting.