

OVERVIEW

Snapper Grouper Committee Meeting

June 11 & 12, 2008
Renaissance Orlando Hotel Airport
5445 Forbes Place
Orlando, FL

The Snapper Grouper Committee needs to: (A) review SEDAR results for three recently assessed species (red snapper, greater amberjack & mutton snapper); (B) receive comments from the AP and SSC on Snapper Grouper amendments and issues; (C) receive presentations on *Oculina* reports, pre-closure survey of proposed MPAs in Amendment 14, prohibiting spearfishing in Gray's Reef NMS, a Snapper Grouper catch characterization study, and snowy grouper conversion factor information; (D) for Amendment 15B, receive a presentation on the Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement (SDEIS), review final document with new analysis, modify as necessary, and approve for submission to the Secretary of Commerce; (E) for Amendment 16, review public hearing input and AP recommendations, modify document as necessary, approve all actions in the amendment, and approve for secretarial review (final review at September 2008 meeting if necessary); (F) for Amendment 17, provide direction to staff for options to be developed; and (G) for Amendment 18, review scoping comments and AP recommendations, consider emergency action/interim measures and provide direction to staff for options to be developed.

A. SEDAR Assessments (Attachments 1-3)

Red snapper, greater amberjack, and mutton snapper stocks have been assessed through SEDAR (**Attachments 1-3**). The assessments indicate that both greater amberjack and mutton snapper are not undergoing overfishing and are not overfished; however, red snapper is undergoing overfishing and is overfished. The SSC will review the assessments at their June meeting. Those management measures establishing MSY, OY, ACLs, and AMs for mutton snapper and greater amberjack will be in Amendment 17. Red snapper management measures will be in Amendment 18.

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Review assessment results.

B. *Oculina* Monitoring Report (Attachments 4 & 5)

Kim Iverson will provide an overview of recent outreach activities (**Attachment 4**) associated with scheduled research and monitoring cruises to the *Oculina* Bank HAPC. Outreach efforts include coordination with partners to provide web postings, media coverage, and VIP/Law Enforcement highlights for a mapping cruise scheduled aboard the NOAA vessel Gordon Gunter and web postings for the habitat enhancement recovery research cruise aboard the NASA vessel Freedom Star. Unfortunately, the mapping

cruise for the *Oculina* Bank HAPC was cancelled due to problems with the ship's radar, but plans are already underway for a similar research cruise in 2009. A Deepwater Coral Teacher's Workshop associated with the research efforts was held April 19, 2008. The workshop was sponsored by the Council in partnership with Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute, NOAA Undersea Research Center, and NOAA Fisheries. A brief overview of the Council's web site postings associated with the habitat restoration cruise will be given to the Committee along with a summary of the DWC Teacher Workshop, including evaluation results.

Myra Brouwer will provide an overview of an *Oculina* habitat restoration effort conducted in the *Oculina* area by Drs. Koenig, Brooke and Coleman and sponsored by NOAA's National Undersea Research Center (NURC) (**Attachment 5**). The intent of the effort was to determine whether or not human intervention (deployment of artificial substrates) could enhance recovery of impacted coral habitat and associated fish populations in the *Oculina* Bank. The first artificial substrates were deployed in 1996 and expanded with additional modules in 2000 and 2001.

The research cruise in April 2008 aimed at evaluating the efficacy of the recruitment modules. The cruise, aboard NASA's vessel *Freedom Star*, used trained technical divers to conduct detailed surveys of the artificial structures, on the premise that the human eye is a much better tool than a Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) or submersible-mounted camera, particularly around small targets and limited visibility.

Although the technical divers were excellent, dedicated, and professional, this was not the most appropriate method of surveying the artificial structures since divers are limited by bottom time and are at the mercy of the often very strong currents in this habitat (even with the assistance of scooters) and therefore had very limited search and survey capacity. The structures surveyed at Sebastian Pinnacles did not support enhanced coral or fish populations, but definitive conclusions cannot be drawn because of the small sample size and suboptimal location of those that were observed. Chapman's Reef, while still considered a 'live' habitat, appears to have been impacted (possibly by trawling); coral and reef fish populations were not as prolific as reported in 2001 and recruitment structures were completely destroyed. There was also a considerable amount of heavy fishing line observed in this area.

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Take action as necessary.

C. Pre-Closure Survey of Proposed MPAs in Amendment 14 (Attachment 6)

Dr. Andy David and Stacey Harter of NOAA Fisheries (Panama City Laboratory) will present the results of a pre-closure survey of proposed MPAs in Amendment 14 (**Attachment 6**).

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Discuss the study and take action as necessary.

D. Gray's Reef Draft Environmental Assessment Concerning Spearfishing Activities (Attachment 7)

Dr. George Sedberry of Gray's Reef National Marine Sanctuary (GRNMS) will discuss the pending Draft Environmental Assessment on spearfishing in the sanctuary (**Attachment 7**). The Council should review the regulations. The Council has the opportunity to prepare draft regulations in GRNMS on fishing-related items, such as spearfishing, as outlined in the National Marine Sanctuaries Act Section 304(a)(5) the MOU between the Council and NOAA Fisheries.

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Review draft regulations to prohibit spearfishing in the sanctuary and decide whether or not to prepare regulations.

E. Catch Characterization and Discards within the Snapper Grouper Vertical Hook-and-Line Fishery

Dr. Mike Jepson of Gulf and South Atlantic Fisheries Foundation and Dr. Scott Raborn of LGL Ecological Research Associates, Inc. will present the results of a snapper grouper catch characterization and discards study. The purpose of this research is to characterize the catch and discards within the snapper grouper vertical hook-and-line fishery of the South Atlantic through the implementation of a pilot observer program. Observers were placed onboard vessels to collect a variety of data quantifying the participation, gear, effort, catch, and discards within the fishery. A total of 147 sea days were logged with 1,702 sets on board 24 different vessels from North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida's east coast. The data collected during this research was not to form a standalone dataset, but to augment currently available datasets. As such, the data analysis is descriptive and includes, but is not limited to: number of trips sampled, number of vessels sampled, average number of sets per station, species specific CPUE, species specific length-frequency distribution, mean depth per trip and station, the ratio of retained vs. discarded catch, and distribution of effort.

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Discuss the update and take action as necessary.

F. Conversion of Recreational Landings in Weight To Numbers for Snowy Grouper (Attachment 8)

Recreational landings of snowy grouper in 2006 increased significantly from historical levels. A review of the data revealed that there were no snowy grouper weighed that year, and this may explain the peak in landings. Amendment 15B contains an action that would specify the percent commercial and recreational allocation for snowy grouper and the commercial quotas and recreational allocations in pounds. The Snapper Grouper Committee, at their last meeting, determined that the recreational allocation for snowy grouper should be converted from weights to numbers due to the uncertainty in the

weight estimates as a function of the low sample size. In response, the Southeast Regional Science Center has developed a report outlining weight conversion factors (**Attachment 8**). The report outlines two conversion factors based on upon two types of selectivity pattern assumptions. The Council is requesting the SSC to provide their preference of selectivity pattern assumptions.

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Review the report and the SSC's recommendations for the weight conversion and take action as necessary.

G. Amendment 15B (Attachments 9-12)

Amendment 15B (**Attachment 9**) will update select management reference points for the golden tilefish (*Lopholatilus chamaeleonticeps*) stock; define interim allocations for snowy grouper (*Epinephelus niveatus*) and red porgy (*Pagrus pagrus*); modify sales restrictions by prohibiting the sale of snapper grouper species caught under bag limits; establish a method to monitor and assess bycatch in the snapper grouper fishery; implement measures to minimize the impact of incidental take on sea turtles and smalltooth sawfish; and modify permit renewal and transferability requirements.

Additional economic and social effects analyses of the action to modify sales provision were completed and are contained in a Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement (SDEIS) (**Attachment 10**). The SDEIS was filed with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on 4/18/08; the comment period on the SDEIS is from 4/25/08 to 6/9/08. There will also be a comment session at 4:15 PM on Thursday, June 12th during the South Atlantic Council Meeting. The comments to date are contained in **Attachments 11, 11B, and 11C**.

Based on the updated analyses, the following sections have been modified since the version that went before the Committee at the March meeting: Sections 2.2.3, 2.2.4, 4.4, 5.2, 5.5.4, 5.7, 5.8, 6.2, 6.7, and 6.8.

Amendment 15B contains an action that would specify the percent commercial and recreational allocation for snowy grouper and the commercial quotas and recreational allocations that would result. The Snapper Grouper Committee, at their last meeting, determined that the recreational allocation for snowy grouper should be converted from weights to numbers due to the uncertainty in the weight estimates as a function of the low sample size. The alternatives for the action specifying the snowy grouper allocation have been modified to reflect that numbers be used to track the recreational allocation and that the best available science at the time be used. The Committee should review the revised wording in Amendment 15B in Section 2.1.1 (**Attachment 9**) and modify as necessary and approve.

The draft proposed rule is included as **Attachment 12**. This version is identical to the version that went before the Council in March. The committee should review, modify as necessary, and approve.

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION:

- (1) Review, modify as necessary, and approve the revised wording of the action to specify the snowy grouper allocation.
- (2) Review final document with new analysis and modify as necessary.
- (3) Review, modify, and approve the proposed rule.
- (4) Approve Amendment 15B, and proposed rule, for Secretarial Review.

H. Amendment 16 (Attachments 13-17)

SEDAR assessments have indicated that the South Atlantic gag grouper and vermilion snapper stocks are undergoing overfishing. The gag stock is not overfished as of 2005; however, the stock assessment model projections show the stock is below the biomass required to produce the maximum sustainable yield (B_{MSY}). It is unknown whether the vermilion stock is overfished due to the uncertainty in recruitment and spawning stock biomass estimates. The Council must prepare a plan amendment and proposed regulations to end overfishing within one year of notification of an overfishing status; notification provided in June 2007.

Amendment 16 and the public hearing presentation are included as **Attachments 13 and 14**, respectively. A comment period was held on the amendment and DEIS; input from the comment period is contained in **Attachments 15-17**. Staff will summarize the comments received .

The amendment schedule is as follows:

March 2008 – Committee/Council review and approve for public hearings

May 2008 – Public hearings held

June 2008 – SSC and AP review; Committee/Council review public, SSC & AP input and approve final alternatives. If no significant changes are made to the document, the Council will approve for formal review at the June meeting.

September 2008 – if necessary, Committee/Council approve final document for formal review

Note: The 1-year timeline ends June 2008.

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Modify document as necessary, approve all actions in the amendment and approve for secretarial review (final review at September 2008 meeting if necessary).

I. Amendment 17 (Attachments 18-19)

Amendment 17 will: (1) establish management reference points for greater amberjack and mutton snapper; (2) specify Annual Catch Limits (ACL), Annual Catch Targets (ACT), and Accountability Measures (AM) for species undergoing overfishing and greater amberjack and mutton snapper; (3) extend the range of the snapper grouper

fishery management plan north through the Mid-Atlantic Council's area of authority (black sea bass, scup, and golden tilefish will continue with the current boundaries); and (4) implement regulations for deepwater species.

The current alternatives for the four actions listed above are outlined in the options paper (**Attachments 18**). The Council should review and refine the range of alternatives. The schedule (outlined below) calls for the team to analyze the effects of the alternatives between June and September and for the Council to approve the amendment for public hearings at the September meeting. *The decisions required by the Council are outlined in the options paper.*

Staff has drafted a discussion paper on ACLs, ACTs, and AMs (**Attachments 19**). *Note: The Discussion Paper outlines the proposed methodology for designating these measures and the ACL, ACT, and AM alternatives. The Options Paper contains all the alternatives in the amendment.* The overall goal of the actions to specify ACL/ACT/AM is to instill a management program for the snapper grouper fishery that ensures that overfishing of the species in the FMU does not occur. Such a program would include the identification of fishing level recommendations from the SSC and management controls that would trigger certain actions once thresholds are reached.

The SSC will provide Overfishing Level (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) recommendations in terms of pounds of fish during their June 2008 meeting. The Council, using these recommendations as an upper-bound, will develop ACL and ACT alternatives. The ACL is the annual fishing mortality limit expressed in pounds of fish and the ACT is the target specified in pounds of fish. Staff has drafted AM alternatives for the Council's consideration for the commercial and recreational fisheries. The AM alternatives are designed to provoke an action once either the ACL and/or ACT are reached during the course of a fishing season. Such AMs include prohibited retention of species once the sector ACT is met, shortening the length of the subsequent fishing season to account for overages of the ACL, and reducing the ACT in the subsequent fishing season to account for overages of the ACL.

The schedule for the amendment is as follows:

- Scoping through February 22, 2008.
- Council reviews scoping comments and Options Paper & provides direction to Staff/Team – March 3-7, 2008 meeting in Jekyll Island, GA.
- Scientific & Statistical Committee reviews Options Paper– June 8-10, 2008 meeting in Orlando, FL.
- Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel and Committee, and Council reviews Options Paper & provides direction to Staff/Team – June 9-13, 2008 meeting in Orlando, FL.
- Staff/Team revise document and have ready by August 15, 2008
- Council approves Amendment/Environmental Impact Statement for public hearings – September 15-19, 2008 meeting in Charleston, SC.
- Public hearings – October 27-30, 2008.

- SSC and Council - Review informal & public hearing comments and DEIS comments and approve all actions – November 30-December 5, 2008 meeting in Wilmington, NC.
- Review complete document and approve for formal review by the Secretary of Commerce – March 2-6, 2009 meeting in Savannah, GA.
- Estimated effective date of January 1, 2010 (required by Reauthorized MSA).

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Review the options paper and discussion document and provide direction to staff for options to be developed. Special attention should be applied to the section outlining the Council’s required decisions in the options paper.

J. Amendment 18 (Attachments 20-24; 27)

The red snapper stock in the South Atlantic has recently been assessed. The assessment concludes that red snapper is undergoing overfishing and is overfished. The SSC will review the information and determine if the stock assessment was performed utilizing the best available data and whether the outcome of the assessment is suitable for management purposes. The Council will make a decision about using emergency/interim rule to address the severely overfished stock status at the June 2008 meeting. Amendment 18 will implement management measures to reduce fishing mortality of red snapper in order to end overfishing and rebuild the stock (**Attachments 20 and 21**). The plan will also implement a rebuilding plan and ACLs, and specify the allocation between sectors. Scoping comments are in **Attachments 22-24**. Management measures are contained in **Attachment 27**.

The schedule for the amendment is as follows:

- Scoping through May 16, 2008 at 5 P.M.
- Scientific & Statistical Committee (SSC) reviews SEDAR Red Snapper Assessment – June 8-10, 2008 meeting in Orlando, FL.
- Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel reviews the scoping document and provides recommendations – June 11, 2008
- Council reviews SSC comments on assessment, scoping comments, AP recommendations, and alternatives included in the public hearing presentation & provides direction to Staff/Team – June 8-13, 2008 meeting in Orlando, FL.
- Council decision about need for emergency/interim measures – June 8-13, 2008 meeting in Orlando, FL.
- Council reviews Options Paper/Amendment & provides direction to Staff/Team – September 15-19, 2008 meeting in Charleston, SC and December 1-5, 2008 meeting in Wilmington, NC.
- Council approves Amendment 18/Draft Environmental Impact Statement for public hearings – March 2-6, 2009 meeting in Jekyll Island, GA.
- Public hearings – May 2009.
- Scientific & Statistical Committee reviews Amendment 18/Draft Environmental Impact Statement – June 7-9, 2009 meeting in northern Florida.

- Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel reviews Amendment 18/DEIS – June 2009
- Council reviews SSC comments, AP comments, informal & public hearing comments, and DEIS comments and approves all actions – June 8-12, 2009 meeting in northern Florida.
- If necessary, review complete Amendment 18/Final Environmental Impacts Statement document and approve for formal review by the Secretary of Commerce – September 14-18, 2009 meeting in Atlantic Beach, NC. Send document for formal review by 9/21/09.
- Estimated effective date of January 1, 2010 (required by Reauthorized MSA).

REQUIRED COMMITTEE ACTION: Review public scoping input and provide guidance in terms of actions and alternatives to be included in the amendment.