

White Paper on Revising the Rebuilding Plan for Red Grouper

Introduction and background

In 2010, a Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) benchmark assessment (SEDAR 19) was completed for South Atlantic red grouper, with data through 2008. Based on the results of SEDAR 19, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) determined that red grouper was undergoing overfishing and was overfished. In response, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) developed and NMFS implemented management measures to end overfishing through Amendment 24 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region (FMP)(Amendment 24; SAFMC 2011). A 10-year rebuilding plan was established that began in 2011, with a projected end date of 2020. Amendment 24 also set the annual catch limit (ACL) equal to the acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommended by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). The rebuilding strategy selected (F_{oy} equal to $75\% F_{MSY}$) in the amendment provided an 81% probability of rebuilding to SSB_{MSY} within 10 years. Despite this relatively high probability of achieving the rebuilding target within the mandated 10-year timeframe, rebuilding has not progressed as projected.

In February 2017, a standard assessment (SEDAR 53) for red grouper was completed, with data through 2015. The results of the assessment showed that rebuilding would not be possible by 2020 even with no fishery present ($F=0$) and the stock would likely take until at least 2030 to rebuild at $F=0$. The Council's SSC reviewed SEDAR 53 at their June 2017 meeting and stated that the assessment is based on the best scientific information available.

On June 23, 2017, the Council requested that the Southeast Fishery Science Center (SEFSC) produce rebuilding projections for red grouper based on SEDAR 53. The Council's SSC reviewed four rebuilding projections produced by the SEFSC at their October 2017 meeting. The projections were based on fishing mortality rates of F_{MSY} and $F_{Rebuild}$, each with long-term expected recruitment and low recruitment scenarios. Due to poor recruitment trends for the stock in recent years, the SSC recommended the projections at F_{MSY} and the low recruitment scenario for the overfishing limit, and projections for $F_{Rebuild}$ under the low recruitment scenario for the ABC, for the short term (next 5 years). The SSC noted that recruitment could increase in the future and become consistent with levels that the stock is predicted to produce.

On September 27, 2017, the Council received a letter from NMFS stating that red grouper are overfished, undergoing overfishing, and not making adequate rebuilding progress. The letter stated that the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Management and Conservation Act requires the Council and NMFS to prepare and implement a plan amendment and regulations within two years of the notice to end overfishing immediately and rebuild the red grouper stock. In the letter, NMFS recommended that the Council revise the rebuilding plan for South Atlantic red grouper based on the results of SEDAR 53.

In response, at the December 2017 meeting, the Council followed the recommendations of their SSC by taking a conservative approach via Abbreviated Framework Amendment 1 to the

Snapper Grouper FMP which sets new ACLs for red grouper based on the ABC from the $F_{Rebuild}$ projection at low recruitment scenario to increase the likelihood of stock rebuilding. This amendment was submitted to NMFS for formal review on December 22, 2017. Once implemented, the abbreviated framework action will change ACLs beginning in 2018 to address overfishing.

Discussion

The Council has moved to end overfishing of red grouper through the revised ABC and ACL that will be implemented in Abbreviated Framework Amendment 1. However, the rebuilding plan and rebuilding schedule needs to be revised at some point to reflect the updated stock information provided in SEDAR 53 and address the NMFS advice that the stock is not making adequate progress under the current schedule and will not hit the rebuilding target within the previously set 10-year time period.

In addition to the uncertainty over recruitment in the red grouper stock, there are other confounding issues that are expected to arise in the near-term which may affect future projections for red grouper landings and the stock rebuilding evaluations. Revised estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), that will become available in July 2018, are expected to be significantly different from prior catch estimates and will likely affect how the recreational portion of the ACL is accounted for in the immediate near-term. These revised estimates will trigger assessment updates for multiple stocks to incorporate the calibrated data from the new effort survey and revisions to the catch survey. The precise timing of these “MRIP Revision” assessments is unknown, but the Council can request prioritizing stocks currently under a rebuilding plan. Also, there are restrictive measures being considered in Snapper Grouper Vision Blueprint Recreational Regulatory Amendment 26 and Commercial Regulatory Amendment 27 that may decrease fishing mortality for red grouper. Additional protection was provided by the recently implemented Snapper Grouper Amendment 36, which established spawning special management zones, one of which was located in an area to protect spawning red grouper.

Given that the most recent assessment indicated that the stock will not rebuild by the 2020 deadline due to low recruitment, NMFS has determined that adequate rebuilding progress is not being made and recommended revising the rebuilding plan. Considering the aforementioned relative uncertainty surrounding future red grouper projections, clarification is needed on how the Council should proceed. The choice is whether the Council will start work immediately on an amendment to change the rebuilding schedule using the current projections, or wait to include the revised MRIP estimates in a new rebuilding evaluation (with new projections) and then revise the schedule.

Potential timeline and options for moving forward

In order to have a revised rebuilding schedule in place by the deadline of September 27, 2019, the Council would need to take action soon and could do so at their March 2018 meeting. To meet the September 2019 implementation date, final approval of an amendment would need to

occur at the December 2018 meeting. The Council could direct staff to begin a framework amendment to revise the rebuilding schedule for red grouper. Potential timing is as follows:

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| March 2018 | Council directs staff to start a framework amendment to revise the rebuilding schedule for red grouper. Public scoping for the amendment could occur at the June 2018 meeting. |
| June 2018 | Public scoping for the draft framework amendment and revised rebuilding schedule for red grouper. Council reviews and provides guidance to staff on the draft framework amendment. |
| September 2018 | Council makes final changes to actions/alternative of framework amendment and approves for public hearings. |
| October 2018 | Public hearings via webinar. |
| December 2018 | Council takes final action on framework amendment. |
| December 2018 | Framework amendment sent for Secretarial review. |

COMMITTEE ACTION: Provide guidance to staff on when to start work on an amendment to revise the rebuilding plan for red grouper.

Options:

OPTION 1. DIRECT STAFF TO BEGIN WORK ON AN AMENDMENT TO REVISE THE REBUILDING PLAN FOR RED GROUPEr.

OPTION 2. DO NOT DIRECT STAFF TO BEGIN WORK ON AN AMENDMENT TO REVISE THE REBUILDING PLAN FOR RED GROUPEr.

OPTION 3. REVISIT REVISION OF THE REBUILDING PLAN FOR RED GROUPEr AFTER THE UPDATED STOCK ASSESSMENT WITH MRIP REVISIONS IS COMPLETE.

OPTION 4. OTHERS?