

Summary Report

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

Crowne Plaza
4831 Tanger Outlet Boulevard
North Charleston, SC

April 24-26, 2019

Members of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council)'s Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP), convened at the Crowne Plaza in North Charleston, SC to discuss topics supporting management of the snapper grouper fishery in the South Atlantic region. Below is a summary of the AP's discussions and recommendations. Please note that unless noted or in the form of a motion, the comments below are not necessarily consensus or majority statements.

The meeting started with public comment from a commercial spearfisherman informing and explaining the methods of deep-water commercial spearfishing and use of powerheads in the commercial spear fishery sector. The AP appreciated his information. Next, Executive Director Gregg Waugh addressed and advised the AP on providing input to the Council in an efficient manner.

Update on Snapper Grouper FMP Amendments

Council staff briefed the AP on the status of recently submitted and developing amendments and the expected timeframe for new regulations to become effective. Included in the update were the following amendments:

- Vision Blueprint Regulatory Amendment 26 (Recreational) – approved and sent to NMFS on 4/17/19
- Vision Blueprint Regulatory Amendment 27 (Commercial) – approved and sent to NMFS on 1/24/19
- Abbreviated Framework 2 (Vermilion Snapper and Black Sea Bass) – approved and regulations effective on 5/9/19
- Amendment 38 (Blueline Tilefish) – awaiting Council guidance
- Amendment 42 (Sea Turtle Release Gear and Framework Update) – approved and sent to NMFS on 4/24/19
- Amendment 46 (Recreational Permit and Reporting) – development paused
- Regulatory Amendment 30 (Red Grouper rebuilding) – being finalized
- Regulatory Amendment 32 (Yellowtail Snapper) – work stopped; amendment not submitted
- Regulatory Amendment 33 (Red Snapper Season Modifications) – under development
- Regulatory Amendment 34 (SMZs off NC and SC) – under development
- For-hire Electronic Reporting Amendment – approved by NMFS; awaiting publication of final rule

After the presentation by staff the AP was pleased to see the implementation of several amendments. The AP made the following motions:

MOTION #1: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER NOT ALLOWING HARVEST OF RED SNAPPER DURING THEIR PEAK SPAWNING SEASON (JULY AND AUGUST). CONSIDER COMMERCIAL HARVEST IN THE SPRING (MAY-JUNE) AND ANOTHER SEASON IN SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER.

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUS)

This was a unanimous decision. Every AP member was concerned and recommending that harvest of red snapper is not allowed during their peak spawning time.

MOTION #2: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER MODIFYING MINIMUM SIZE LIMITS AND BAG LIMITS FOR BLACK SEA BASS. RECOMMEND THAT THE MINIMUM SIZE LIMITS BE THE SAME FOR BOTH COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL SECTORS.

APPROVED BY AP (11 IN FAVOR/2 OPPOSED/1 ABSTENTION)

AP members have different concerns on the black sea bass minimum size limit depending on whether they are recreational/for-hire or commercial. Commercial fishermen are happy with the 11-inch size limit; they maintain there are very few discards and they can catch their limits. Recreational fishermen are split on whether to reduce the minimum size limit or leave it at 13 inches. Some would like it reduced. Other recreational and for-hire fishermen are concerned that if the minimum size limit were reduced, the recreational black sea bass fishery could close early. The AP had additional discussion under Other Business and made another motion.

Regulatory Amendment 29 (Best Fishing Practices)

The Council reviewed a draft public hearing document at their March 2019 meeting and selected preferred alternatives. As currently proposed, a descending device would be required to be *on board* vessels fishing for or possessing snapper grouper species. In addition, non-offset, non-stainless-steel circle hooks would be required to fish for snapper grouper species north of 28 degrees North Latitude; and non-stainless-steel hooks would be required to fish for snapper grouper species throughout the South Atlantic federal waters. The amendment also proposes allowing the use of powerheads to harvest snapper grouper species in federal waters off South Carolina. The Council approved Regulatory Amendment 29 for public hearings (held via webinar on April 30 and May 1, 2019). The Council requested that the AP provide input on the definition of a descending device and the requirement that a device be “rigged and ready”. The AP had the following comments:

- The amendment document should include examples (with photos or diagrams) of descending devices that have proven to be effective. Several homemade descending devices, such as window sash weights with inverted hook and poly line attached, were brought to the meeting by AP members as examples. The AP discussed developing an agency approval process of different descending devices with a practical common-sense design. Some commercially available descending devices may not be suitable for some species, such as large groupers, that require additional weight to return to a suitable depth.
- AP members questioned the 33-foot depth threshold for releasing a fish, as currently stated in the definition of descending device. This depth threshold seems insufficient for deep-water species such as snowy grouper. Consider instead stating that “a fish should ideally be released at the same depth that it was caught.”

- To address the “rigged and ready” requirement, the AP suggested including language such as “in close proximity to where fishing is occurring” or “easily accessible and available in the vessel’s deck area.”
- One AP member shared a practice he maintains on his boat when he encounters snowy grouper while targeting tilefish: he attaches the descending device to the snap swivel on the baited rig being used to fish for tilefish. That way, the grouper is released, and he can immediately go back to catching tilefish.
- Telemetry studies conducted on rockfish on the West Coast have documented high survival over extended periods of fish being reeled up from over 800 feet. In the South Atlantic, research being conducted off North Carolina on deep-water snapper grouper species has shown that survivorship with the use of descending devices is indeed high.

ABC Control Rule Amendment

In December 2016, the Council began work on a plan amendment that would modify the Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) Control Rule to address flexibility allowed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act and revise how uncertainty and risk tolerance are addressed in setting ABCs. The amendment includes actions to 1) revise how the Scientific and Statistical Committee evaluates assessment uncertainty; 2) revise how the risk of overfishing tolerance is specified; and 3) allow phase-in and carry-over of ABCs. The AP received a [Story Map presentation](#) containing background information on the setting of ABCs, the attributes used in scoring the risk of overfishing for each stock, and draft risk scores for snapper grouper species based on three scoring approaches (the SSC provided input on the risk of overfishing rating approach and initial risk ratings at its April 9-11, 2019 meeting). The AP was asked to review these ratings and provide input on scoring attributes, as appropriate. Overall the AP learned a lot from John Carmichael’s presentation addressing the ABC control rule and the uncertainty buffers and the flexibility the Council has as well as possible avenues approaches to carry-over unharvested catch.

The AP was asked to comment on the annual commercial value attribute. This attribute refers to the annual commercial value of a species relative to the revenue for the entire fishery (annual value) or the average value of a species on a single trip (trip value). The AP was asked whether the annual value or the trip value would be more appropriate for scoring this attribute. AP members agreed that the annual value and trip value are equally important. Both can vary by area and may change seasonally and relative to other species’ availability. Fishermen are just as concerned about their overall income at the end of the year as the income that they obtain during certain portions of the year.

Regarding the preliminary risk scoring, AP members had the following comments:

- The AP hoped this would be a simpler process and had concerns with moderate risk scores for species with unknown attributes (e.g., gag). The AP felt that gag should be considered high risk. Fishermen are seeing smaller fish than before and recreational pressure is high, particularly in recent years with advances in electronics that allow fishermen to target them more effectively.
- Blueline tilefish – should perhaps be ranked as moderate risk. Infrequent MRIP intercepts and poor confidence in recreational landings estimates directly contribute to frequent inability to regulate the fishery. Also, the species matures early, spawns year-round, and is long-lived. Because they are in deep-water, they are not targeted as

frequently as other more accessible species; however, recreational pressure in the Florida Keys is very high.

- Scamp – should be moderate or high along with red grouper and gag. All three species appear to be undergoing low recruitment, but ex-vessel value is high and landings have been below the ACLs for many years consecutively.
- AP members questioned whether invasive species should be considered in the risk rating for snapper grouper species.

Comprehensive Recreational Accountability Measures Amendment (Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 31)

To lessen the impact of uncertain recreational data on stakeholders the Council is considering changes accountability measures to allow more flexibility, bring about consistency, and increase fishing season predictability for the recreational sector. While the Council has reviewed preliminary actions/alternatives to amend the snapper grouper and dolphin wahoo fishery management plans, the amendment requires further development before the AP can provide their feedback. Hence, this amendment will be presented to the AP at their fall 2019 meeting when it is anticipated that preliminary analyses will be available.

AP members commented that if a permit were to be implemented for the recreational sector, data timeliness issues would diminish resulting in better recreational landings estimates and improved accountability. AP members continue to have concerns with the accuracy of MRIP estimates and discussed increasing the number of staff to improve intercepts. AP also discussed having no in season closures except when a species is listed as overfished.

Fishery Performance Report: Blueline Tilefish

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 are provided to the SSC, the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP), and the Council to assist in their discussions. Using an online application <http://data.safmc.net/FPRAll/> staff provided a brief overview of landings trends, life history information, and economic data. Discussion questions provided by staff were used to guide the discussion. The blueline tilefish FPR will be available on the Council's website once finalized. AP members provided substantial input, especially those who target this species in North Carolina and the Florida Keys.

Results of Recreational Workshops

In September 2018, the American Sportfishing Association (ASA) sponsored a workshop with the Council to discuss new ideas for managing the private recreational sector of the snapper grouper fishery. Subsequently, ASA conducted a series of regional meetings to obtain input from local recreational representatives on angler preferences, harvest rate management, harvest tags for deep-water species, registration and reporting, and barotrauma reduction. Results of the workshops and recommendations were presented to the Council at their March 2019 meeting. Kellie Ralston, ASA's Southeast Fisheries Policy Director, delivered the presentation to the AP. The Council requested that the AP provide recommendations/perspective on the practicability of the suggested approaches for management of the recreational snapper grouper fishery. In general, AP members supported the ASA's recommendations and urged the Council to continue work on

Regulatory Amendment 29 and Amendment 46. AP Members had the following additional comments:

- Recreational tags could be considered for deep-water species but would not be appropriate for red snapper.
- Recommend pilot project to explore the use of tags and determine economic feasibility of such a program.
- When considering tags, the Council should look at existing programs such as that for Highly Migratory Species.
- Regional regulations should remain on the table; however, such an approach is feasible when there is a foundation of cooperative management already in place, such as interstate fishery management plans between the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and the states. This mechanism is currently not available in the South Atlantic.
- Accountability is critical. The Council should continue to move forward to implement a permit for the private recreational sector.
- It is important for the Council to establish connections with partners that can engage the private recreational community.
- The Council should continue to work to obtain and promote better data.
- State/federal cooperation is required on many levels, including enforcement. North Carolina should establish a Joint Enforcement Agreement with the NMFS Office of Law Enforcement as the other South Atlantic states have.

NMFS Southeast Regional Office Permits Presentation

The AP discussed issues related to permits during their meetings in 2018. The Council provided further guidance at their December 2018 meeting and a request was sent to NMFS for a presentation to be given during the spring 2019 Council and AP meetings. Kevin McIntosh, Acting Permits Branch Chief, delivered the presentation to the Council at their recent meeting and presented again to the AP. Many questions/concerns were addressed during the ensuing discussion. This presentation was very informative and appreciated by the AP.

Spearfishing in the Snapper Grouper Fishery

The Snapper Grouper AP discussed spearfishing at their spring 2018 meeting and approved two motions to encourage the Council to characterize use of this gear in the commercial and recreational sectors of the snapper grouper fishery. At their October 2018 meeting, the AP approved another motion to recommend a gear endorsement for the commercial sector. The Council then instructed staff to prepare a white paper to discuss the topic in March 2019 and subsequently requested that the white paper and presentation be delivered to the Snapper Grouper AP at their Spring 2019 meeting. AP members had the following input:

- Recreational diving is growing in popularity in North Carolina. AP members report that vessels from Florida are fishing in North Carolina more frequently than before.
- Recreational diving is having an impact on ledge areas in North Carolina.
- There has been an increase in free-diving in North Carolina in shallow areas off the shoals.
- AP members who dive in North Carolina expressed concern that male hogfish are smaller now.
- A gear endorsement would allow for better characterization of the user group.

- Off South Carolina, AP members report that diving activity has diminished since 2008 and there appears to be no growth in this sector.
- Some AP members disagreed with the percent of commercial landings attributed to spearfishing gear. They maintain there has been an increase in commercial diving and younger people are entering that portion of the fishery.
- The AP discussed that most of the concerns were from North Carolina and the Florida Keys.

The AP approved the following motion:

MOTION #3: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER A SPEARFISHING ENDORSEMENT WITH REPORTING REQUIREMENT FOR BOTH COMMERCIAL AND RECREATIONAL DIVERS.

APPROVED BY AP (8 IN FAVOR/6 OPPOSED/1 ABSTENTION)

Citizen Science Update

Staff gave update on progress of the Council's Citizen Science Program and on the Program's pilot project that focuses on collecting data on scamp grouper discards using a mobile application, *SAFMC Release*. AP members were asked to help promote use of the application and disseminate information. AP discussed this being expanded or included with existing platforms like MyFishCount. AP members offered to assist and provide contacts. The AP provided other input on strategies to recruit volunteers and the best way to communicate with volunteers about data collection, use of the data, and project results. AP members also provided suggestions to move the FISHstory project forwards. AP members were unaware of the Zooniverse platform for crowdsourcing. AP discussed that, if successful, the FISHstory project could better inform baseline data on stocks before additional data collection programs are implemented.

Additionally, the Citizen Science Program will be updating its research priorities later this year which will help guide which projects to pursue over the next two years. Program staff provided an overview of the process that will be used to update the research priorities document and requested volunteers to serve on the Programs Advisory Team.

Effects of Recreational Management Actions on Select Snapper Grouper Species

Allie Iberle, a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, presented her findings on the effects of recreational management measures for black sea bass, gag, and red snapper. Her work provides one of the first reviews on changes in recreational landings and fishing mortality in the South Atlantic region due to management actions. The presentation was well received, and AP members had constructive input and suggestions. For instance, they thought it might be informative to compare the effectiveness of management measures on black sea bass north and south of Cape Hatteras. AP members generally agreed that the results of the study reflect their personal observations for the three species examined. They suggested similar analysis be conducted on scamp and red grouper.

Review of Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan Objectives

The 2016-2020 Vision Blueprint for the Snapper Grouper Fishery was approved in December 2015 and includes prioritized short-term objectives around broad goals addressing science, management, communication, and governance. At their March 2019 meeting, the Council

requested that the AP provide feedback on the current objectives in the Snapper Grouper FMP. The AP last provided input on objectives in 2013-2014 as part of the visioning project. Staff reviewed the short- and long-term objectives in the Vision Blueprint. AP members had the following comments:

- Port meetings held as part of the Visioning Project were very effective in engaging stakeholders. AP members recommended that the Council consider holding more of such meetings.
- Enforcement should figure more prominently in the management process. Consider requesting that an enforcement representative attend AP meetings.
- Port samplers help create and maintain communication and could assist with outreach.

The AP approved the following motion:

MOTION #4: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL ADOPT THE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES IN THE VISION BLUEPRINT FOR THE SNAPPER GROUPE FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUS)

Election of Chair and Vice-Chair

Jimmy Hull was elected AP chair and Robert Lorenz was elected as vice-chair.

Other Business

Sharks

The AP discussed a draft letter to Director of the NMFS Office of Sustainable Fisheries pertaining to increasing negative interactions with several species of sharks in the South Atlantic region. These concerns largely center around negative impacts to the long-term sustainability and conservation of Council-managed species due to increasing shark predation. The AP offered suggestions to improve the letter and voiced their support for this communication.

Scamp Research Track Assessment

Volunteer observers for the upcoming RT assessment for scamp were confirmed.

Ecosystem Reports

The NMFS Southeast Fisheries Science Center is preparing an ecosystem report for the South Atlantic region that will be ready for review/comment in late 2019 or early 2020.

Gray Triggerfish

AP members voiced concern over the recent (4/17/19) closure of commercial gray triggerfish. Fishermen maintain this will result in high discards of vermilion snapper since the two species are caught together and commercial harvest of vermilion snapper is still open. The AP approved the following motion:

MOTION #5: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER A GRAY TRIGGERFISH COMMERCIAL TRIP LIMIT REDUCTION TO EXTEND THE SEASON TO BE MORE IN LINE WITH THE VERMILION FISHERY

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUS)

Other

The AP requested that the Council consider having the AP discuss acceptable gear use in the commercial and recreational sectors and other potential issues. In addition, the AP approved the following motions:

MOTION #6: RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL MAKE NO CHANGES TO THE BLACK SEA BASS MINIMUM SIZE LIMITS UNTIL AFTER THE NEXT STOCK ASSESSMENT IS COMPLETED

APPROVED BY AP (10 IN FAVOR/2 ABSTENTIONS/1 OPPOSED)

MOTION #7: REQUEST THAT THE COUNCIL CONSIDER IMPLEMENTING AN OPEN ACCESS FEDERAL PRIVATE RECREATIONAL FISHING PERMIT FOR THE SNAPPER GROUPER SPECIES

APPROVED BY AP (UNANIMOUS)