

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Golden Tilefish Fishery Performance Report October 2018

At their October 2018 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for golden tilefish and developed this fishery performance report (FPR). 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 FPR for yellowtail snapper will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in the upcoming stock assessment update scheduled for completion in 2020 and to inform future management.

Advisory Panel Members:

David Moss (Chairman; Recreational/FL)
Jimmy Hull (Vice-Chairman;
Commercial/Dealer/Retail/FL)
Rusty Hudson (Commercial/FL)
Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)
James Freeman (Commercial/FL)
Greg Mercurio (Charter/FL)*
Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)
David Snyder (Consumer Rep/GA)*
Deidra Jeffcoat (Charter/GA)
Gary Manigault Sr. (Charter/SC)
Kerry Marhefka (Commercial/Dealer/SC)
Jim Moring (Recreational/SC)

Jim Atack (Recreational/NC)
Red Munden (Conservation/NC)
Robert Lorenz (Recreational/NC)
Dick Brame (NGO/Recreational/NC)*
Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)*
Andy Piland (Charter/NC)
Jack Cox (Commercial/Dealer/NC)*
Todd Kellison (At-large/NOAA)*
James Paskiewicz (Commercial/FL)
Randy McKinley (Commercial/ NC)
Randy Beardsley (Recreational/FL)
*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the golden tilefish fishery in the South Atlantic region is available at the following link: <http://data.safmc.net/FPRAll/>. The summary presents an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history of the species, stock status, and trends in landings and fishery economics for both the commercial and recreational (for-hire and private) sectors. The information was provided as background to elicit the discussion presented in this Fishery Performance Report. The commercial annual catch limit for golden tilefish is allocated by gear: 75% to longline and 25% to hook-and line. Further, the longline component has been managed under an endorsement program since 2013. Currently, there are 21 valid and one renewable golden tilefish longline gear endorsements in the South Atlantic.

Observations on Stock Abundance

A longline endorsement holder from Daytona, Florida stated that golden tilefish abundance has not changed over the past five years and neither have the fishing methods used to harvest them commercially. Other factors, such as weather, contribute to the success of fishing operations.

Asked whether there have been shifts in effort to or from the fishery, a commercial fisherman from Florida stated that there has been an increase in effort in the hook-and-line component. He claims this is reflected in the fact that the hook-and-line portion of the commercial annual catch limit has been harvested earlier and earlier over the past few years. He also talked of new entrants who have bought permits under the misconception that it is an easy fishery in which to participate. However, he claims that since the implementation of the gear endorsement program for the longline component, there has not been a time when all endorsement holders have participated in the fishery. The number of vessels fishing for golden tilefish using longline gear, according to the fisherman, has hovered rather around 17. Depending on the weather, longline fishing for golden tilefish may stretch into April or early May. However, closures have occurred as early as mid-February since the endorsement program was put in place. In general, fishermen expect the season to last until sometime in March.

A commercial dealer representative from South Carolina observed that her husband, a commercial snapper grouper fisherman and dealer, did not target golden tilefish with hook-and-line gear ten years ago. However, he has been fishing for them in recent years since a restaurant market now exists for smaller fish. She claims that, while more commercial fishermen are targeting golden tilefish with hook-and-line gear, it is not a very significant number.

In the Florida Keys, golden tilefish are available commercially year-round, according to a hook-and-line fisherman and dealer who operates in that area. Fishermen have access to different sized fish at different depths. He agreed with the stated observations about an increase in effort in the commercial hook-and-line component. He added that there has been occasional effort shifts in response to other south Florida fisheries closing -- such as yellowtail snapper, spiny lobster, and jacks -- and implementation of managed areas where fishing for snapper grouper species is prohibited.

A recreational fisherman from south Florida stated that he is not aware of many anglers targeting golden tilefish recreationally unless they are deep-dropping. Such trips usually land golden tilefish, blackbelly rosefish, deep-water snappers, and other deep-water snapper grouper species.

A charter captain from the Florida Keys agreed that the species is seldom targeted in his area.

Observations on Fish Size and Recruitment

Asked whether the size of fish has changed in the past five years, a longline endorsement-holder from Florida stated that it “depends on where you want to fish.” He recounted that a new market category for “peewees” was introduced a few years ago in response to a perceived lack of data on smaller fish. Subsequently, he said fishermen caught “the most small fish that we have ever caught.” He claims that by moving their gear, they can catch different sized fish; however, he has not observed a change in the size of fish that are available to the fishery.

Another commercial fisherman from the Daytona area observed that the implementation of the Oculina Bank Habitat Area of Particular Concern affected access to golden tilefish off Cape Canaveral relative to how far offshore and in what depths fishermen had to fish and, consequently, the size of harvested fish. He claims that this influenced the perception that recruitment was low.

Observations on Discards

A commercial longline fisherman from Florida offered that “the only discards are just the ones the sharks eat.” He claims hammerhead and sandbar sharks frequently prey on the fishermen’s catch. According to fishermen, the golden tilefish commercial fishery operates at depths from 585 to 1,100 feet and it is a very clean fishery in terms of discards. If fishing close to a wreck or some form of structure, fishermen sometimes catch snowy grouper. Blackbelly rosefish are sometimes caught incidentally and there is a market for them.

Observations on Price and Demand

A dealer from Ormond Beach, Florida, stated that he relies on the longline fleet for his supply of golden tilefish. As such, the fish are only available to consumers in that area for a short while. He added that both price and demand for golden tilefish are increasing.

A commercial fisherman from the Daytona area added that, since the annual closure of Shallow Water Groupers was implemented in 2009, golden tilefish and other “white meat” fish (i.e., snowy grouper, yellowedge grouper) have become very important. A commercial dealer representative from South Carolina agreed that golden tilefish is easily sold when available and the price is increasing. Restaurants rely on it when grouper are not available at the beginning of the year and so do commercial fishermen.

A Florida hook-and-line fisherman offered that in Broward and Palm Beach counties, the restaurants that he supplies are “very, very happy with the product” and many more would like to have golden tilefish on their menu year-round.

Observations on Community Dependence and Working Waterfronts

Asked how fishermen and communities have adapted to changes in the golden tilefish fishery, a commercial fisherman and dealer from Ormond Beach, Florida, observed that “it’s pretty tough to adapt when you only have a couple of choices with that particular gear type”, referring to longline vessels. He added that it has “been very tough on longline golden tile fishermen to survive.” If those fishermen do not find other avenues to fish, he predicts they will disappear. As far as communities – including restaurants and markets -- that depend on golden tilefish, he maintains, they need to “have other choices available to make up for the shortcomings of a closed tilefish fishery.”

A Daytona fisherman added that the hook-and-line sector has comparably more bottom available to fish for golden tilefish since use of bottom longlines south of the St. Lucie inlet is prohibited.

Environmental Observations

Asked how recent hurricanes have impacted the golden tilefish fishery, a longline fisherman stated that he hasn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary in connection with hurricanes. However, he suggested research into possible impacts of freshwater releases from Lake Okeechobee since he has observed that deep-water fish stop biting around that same timeframe (“when the lobster open up”). A recreational fisherman from south Florida indicated that freshwater releases do impact the fish bite nearshore.

Observations on Management Measures

Asked whether existing management measures are appropriate and, if not, how they should be changed, a longline fisherman stated that lowering the trip limit (currently 4,000 pounds) would not work to extend the season, which is already very short, but would instead hurt the fishermen's profit.

A hook-and-line commercial fisherman from south Florida asked whether the trip limit (currently 500 pounds) could be increased to 1,000 pounds (he reasoned that the hook-and-line component is allocated $\frac{1}{4}$ of the commercial annual catch limit so the hook-and-line trip limit should be $\frac{1}{4}$ that of the longline component). He stated the hook-and-line fishery has averaged about 10,000 pounds of golden tilefish per month over the past three to four years. A higher trip limit, in his opinion, would optimize harvest by allowing fishermen to remain at sea longer instead of making trips back-to-back. He recounted that "on the big boat, we were doing about two trips, because that's all we could do in a week. On the little boats, we were running out between four to eight days in a row and then going up the road."

A commercial dealer representative from South Carolina stated that if the hook-and-line trip limit were to be increased and it resulted in commercial hook-and-line harvest closing earlier in the year, that would leave dealers and consumers without product for some time. It is also important, she stated, for golden tilefish to be available for most of the year to avoid flooding the market at times when other species are available resulting in decreased price. In addition, a trip limit increase for the hook-and-line component may not benefit fishermen who target multiple species per trip. In some areas off the Carolinas, hook-and-line commercial fishermen also catch snowy and blueline tilefish along with golden tilefish. If harvest for golden tilefish were to close early due to a trip limit increase, discarding could become a problem.

A commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys suggested permit stacking as a solution and others agreed that it would be helpful. He also cautioned that an increase in the hook-and-line trip limit might entice many others to enter the fishery.

Asked about the prevalence of buoy gear in the commercial hook-and-line golden tilefish fishery, a fisherman from south Florida indicated he uses it exclusively and knows of two or three other vessels in the Florida Keys that also use it. Several AP members agreed that the gear is also being used to fish for golden tilefish in the Carolinas.

It was explained that buoy gear is a vertical drop line with a terminal end weighted with no more than ten pounds and ten hooks fished vertically with two feet of line per one foot of water. Fishermen track their gear visually or with AIS buoys or trackers on the buoys. Fishermen deploy the gear with about 15 buoys and proceed to haul the gear back. The gear is thus tended constantly. To fish for golden tilefish, the gear is deployed between 500 to 1,000 feet of water with the hooks clipped to the mainline, however far apart the fisherman wants, up to thirty feet from the terminal end of the gear.

Other Observations

Fishermen welcome any type of cooperative research to assist in upcoming assessments.