

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Fishery Performance Report for Red Snapper November 2020



On November 4, 2020, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for Red Snapper 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 Red Snapper will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in the standard assessment (SEDAR 73) scheduled for completion in spring 2021 and to inform future management.

Advisory Panel Members:

James Hull Jr., Chair (FL/commercial)
Robert Lorenz, Vice-Chair (NC/recreational)
Vincent Bonura (FL/commercial)
Richen “Dick” Brame (NC/NGO)
Randall Beardsley (FL/recreational)
Jack Cox Jr. (NC/commercial)
Chris Militello (FL/recreational)
Robert Freeman (NC/charter)
Richard Gomez (FL/charter)
Lawton Howard (GA/recreational)
Rusty Hudson (FL/commercial)
Deidra Jeffcoat (GA/charter)*
Harry Morales (SC/recreational)

Randy McKinley (NC/commercial)
Andrew Fish (FL/commercial)
Andrew Mahoney (SC/commercial)
Tony Constant (SC/recreational and charter)
David Moss (FL/recreational)
Fentress “Red” Munden (NC/conservation)
James Paskiewicz (FL/commercial)
Andy Piland (NC/charter)*
Cameron Sebastian (SC commercial/charter)*
David Snyder (GA/consumer rep)
Chris Kimrey (NC/charter)
Dr. Todd Kellison (SEFSC non-voting)*
*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the Red Snapper fishery in the South Atlantic region is presented in a fishery information application (<http://data.safmc.net/FPRAll/>) intended to provide an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history, stock status, management overview, 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 fishery information application presents data from 2000 through 2018.

Observations on Abundance and Distribution

AP members agreed that the abundance of Red Snapper in the South Atlantic has increased over the past ten 10 years, especially off the Carolinas through north Florida, and fishermen are encountering over a range of depths and habitats. Most AP members agreed that Red Snapper are so abundant in some areas that it is hard for fishermen to target other species.

A commercial fisherman from North Carolina who fishes off Cape Lookout, claims during the 1980s and 1990s Red Snapper could be found in deep water whereas he encounters them mainly in shallow water nowadays. He stated they can now be found in some areas in 100 to 125 feet of water.

Asked to characterize the abundance of Red Snapper in his area, a commercial representative who fishes out of Ponce Inlet, Florida, stated “you can’t hardly troll, because they’re eating your trolling baits.” He went on to recount that he has never seen more Red Snapper in the area where he fishes in his 40+ years of fishing. He calls the abundance of Red Snapper off northeast Florida “absolutely absurd.”

A commercial fishing representative from northeast Florida claims that the area from Port Canaveral to St. Augustine “was truly the heart of Red Snapper country” based on photographs taken in the area during the 1940s to the 1970s.

An AP member from Cape Canaveral, Florida, stated that fishermen actively avoid certain areas because they know they will “not be able to get through the Red Snapper.” He claims that fishermen have had to alter where and at which depths they fish for some species (e.g., King Mackerel) to avoid catching Red Snapper.

A recreational representative stated that he has never caught a Red Snapper in his twenty-five years of fishing off the West Palm Beach, Florida, area (“even in 300 to 400 feet of water”). However, he reported seeing plenty of Red Snapper further north, off Sebastian (“it’s covered up there”).

Off South Florida, a recreational angler stated that Red Snapper could be found in 200 to 220 feet of water. Inshore of that depth is where anglers typically would catch Mutton Snapper (from around 150 to 200 feet). However, he also offered that, around the Dry Tortugas, fishermen are seeing a lot more Red Snapper over “mutton grounds” nowadays and have to “weed through them.”

In the Florida Keys, Red Snapper are rarely targeted by the charter fleet because they are found in deep water (200 to 230 feet) where charter captains typically do not fish, especially for a species that must be released. Closer to shore, where charter vessels generally operate (from 30 to 100 feet), Red Snapper are not frequently encountered. Fishermen in that area interact with Red Snapper more often on wrecks. According to a charter captain who operates in the Lower Keys, Red Snapper have been more recently observed in “little cracks and little areas of rocky bottom in that 200 to 230 range.”

Similarly, a commercial representative claims that fishermen in the middle Keys are not actively avoiding Red Snapper in the area where they are fishing, mainly from 110 feet to the patch reefs. He claims to never having caught a Red Snapper while fishing for Yellowtail Snapper inside of 120 feet.

Off Key West, a commercial fisherman on the AP offered that Red Snapper are abundant beyond 200 to as deep as 500 feet; however, they are absent inside of 150 feet.

Observations on Distribution and Fish Size

Asked whether fishermen are seeing a range of sizes of Red Snapper in their catch and where differently sized fish may be found, AP members agreed that fishermen are encountering a wide range of sizes.

A commercial representative from the Morehead City, North Carolina, area stated that he sees small fish and “plenty of big fish in the shallow water,” 25 to 30-pound fish. Some of the large Red Snapper are mixed in with juvenile Gag. However, when he targets Gag commercially, he does not encounter Red Snapper.

Another North Carolina commercial fisherman offered that he sees numerous one-inch Red Snapper mixed in with Black Sea Bass and up to 12-inch fish mixed in with Vermilion Snapper. He also indicated he is finding Red Snapper inshore, in 30 to 50 feet of water in the Onslow Bay area and particularly in the past three years. He attributes the abundance of juveniles to an increase in Red Snapper spawning activity off the Carolinas.

A charter captain who operates out of southern South Carolina claims that he catches large Red Snapper frequently while grouper fishing. Over the last five years, he estimates to have caught fish measuring over the South Carolina state record three times and 20- to 30-pound fish are not uncommon. He observed that Red Snapper are coming back strongly off Georgia and the Carolinas and the fish are bigger than further south. He claims that “south of Latitude 31, a seasoned charter is giddy over a fish that we see nothing special about north of that latitude.” He explained the smallest Red Snapper he catches in the area (from Charleston to Savannah) are from 15 inches (rare) to fish weighing 5 to 8 pounds. The larger fish are up to 35 pounds, with a couple approaching 40 pounds. He has also noticed Red Snapper schooling the middle of the water column.

A commercial fisherman from Daytona Beach, Florida, agreed that large Red Snapper (“sow snapper and pony snappers”) are very predatory and are found in the middle and upper water column whereas smaller, younger fish, tend to remain close to the bottom.

Other fishermen from northeast Florida contributed that there are “millions” of small Red Snapper in the areas where they fish and “just as many” larger fish. They are found on “every reef, every wreck, every small piece of live bottom”. Schools of Red Snapper have also been observed in the area over sand bottom.

Observations of the Use of Descending Devices

A requirement that descending devices be on board and ready to use on all vessels fishing for snapper grouper species in the South Atlantic was implemented in July 2020. AP members provided their observations regarding frequency of use in their area, preference over types of devices, etc. In general, AP members stated that the requirement was a positive one and fishermen are getting used to using the devices. Some fishermen had already been using the devices for some time while others have recently begun to use them.

Regarding the requirement to use circle hooks north of 28 degrees North Latitude while fishing for snapper grouper species with natural baits, AP members felt it is also a successful and beneficial management tool.

Regarding how often descending devices are used to release Red Snapper, AP members' statements differed depending on whether they fished commercially or recreationally.

While commercial fishermen operating off North Carolina are using descending devices, according to one AP member, they are not used very frequently on Red Snapper as the majority of fish caught in 100 feet of water or shallower are able to swim back to the bottom unaided.

A charter captain who fishes in southern South Carolina stated that descending devices were "fairly new" to him and his peers, adding that he has been using them over the past year or so. Because he catches Red Snapper in depths of 120 to 150 feet, he uses the type of descending device that can be adjusted for depth along with a three-pound weight to successfully release Red Snapper. He indicated he has not seen any shark depredation since starting to use the descending device and neither have other fishermen in his area using different types of devices. Further, he clarified that while Red Snapper caught in shallow water have little difficulty going back down, that is not the case when they are brought up from 110 to 220 feet of water. He has observed that large Red Snapper tend to have extended swim bladders when they are brought on board and cannot be released without assistance. Vermillion Snapper or "under sized" Red Snapper, on the other hand, do not appear to have that issue. "The bigger the fish, the greater the fight" and, when brought to the surface, getting a large fish back down is time sensitive for survival.

A commercial fisherman from northeast Florida offered that he uses a descending device comprised of an 8-pound sash weight with an inverted hook and a line and it works very well and descends the fish quickly in deep and shallow water. He indicated he continues to vent fish if they are small but uses a descending device on larger fish. He also noted that shark depredation while descending a fish is not an issue that he has observed.

One AP member offered that not many fishermen in his area (east central Florida) are using descending devices, preferring to vent the fish instead.

Observations on Effort Shifts and Discards

AP members agreed that Red Snapper discards are high during the closed season and it is problematic for fishermen (both commercial and recreational) to find a place to fish where they will not encounter Red Snapper.

Off North Carolina, commercial fishermen target shallow water groupers in May and June in 100 to 120 feet of water and cannot avoid catching Red Snapper. Later on in the summer, fishermen move further offshore to fish for Gray Triggerfish and Vermilion Snapper and discards of Red Snapper diminish.

During the open season, recreational fishermen target large Red Snapper and many fish below 20 inches are released. During the rest of the year, fishermen try to avoid Red Snapper by moving further offshore to target Gray Triggerfish and Vermilion Snapper.

Off northeast Florida, where Red Snapper seem to be most abundant, discards are predictably very high. A commercial representative on the AP explained "if you drop a bait down anywhere for any length of time, you're going to start catching Red Snapper, and they're going to come right up under the boat, and, in fact, they will come up under the boat before

you even put a bait down, vast schools of them. You can go to a spot and get ready to fish and look in the water and there they are, by the hundreds.” When fishing offshore on the ledge in 160 to 220 feet, and even out to 600 feet (on the bases of the steeples), fishermen are catching Red Snapper. He recounted with frustration the impossibility of avoiding Red Snapper when targeting Vermilion in 140 feet of water adding “you can start out just below the boat, thirty or forty feet, and it’s just a matter of a little time and here comes the red ones, and they take over.” He added that that high grading does occur, but retail markets prefer smaller fish (5 to 8 pounds).

A representative of the charter industry operating in southeast South Carolina indicated that there are virtually no charter vessels that target Red Snapper in the area where he fishes.

A recreational angler from North Carolina offered that even though there has been an increase in private recreational effort this year (because of the pandemic), he thinks the majority of those trips are family trips and perhaps there has been fewer angler targeting Red Snapper this year than in previous years. Also, with the recreational season being open in the summer, when taking offshore trips is physically demanding and anglers must travel 25 miles out to catch Red Snapper, there are not as many.

A commercial representative from Florida pointed out that Red Snapper are always available when fishing for other species is not good; anglers always have the option of catching Red Snapper.

Observations on Community Dependence

Asked how dependent coastal communities may be on the Red Snapper resource, a charter captain from southern South Carolina recounted that “it (dependence) crested early on, back in 2010.” He recalls catering to a lot of tournament fishermen, especially when the recession hit in 2008 and 2009 and people were getting rid of “those go-fast boats.” He stated that word of the impending Red Snapper closure hurt the charter business in his area. It was the norm, he recalled, to run out and catch a handful of snapper and then move on and go catch something else. When that was eliminated, it was devastating to both the tackle shops and to the charter businesses. Nowadays, ten years later, Red Snapper are “not even mentioned, other than they’re in the way.” He indicated that charters can no longer count on catching Black Sea Bass anymore (they catch fifteen or twenty snappers instead) and customers -- who often come from out of state for events held at the base on Parris Island -- get frustrated, and that continues to affect the charter and tackle businesses.

A commercial fisherman from northeast Florida reiterated that the initial closure on the harvest of Red Snapper and subsequent short seasons have been devastating to the coastal communities that depend on reef fish. He recounted that Red Snapper once was “our bread-and-butter for our entire life, and then it was taken away, and so it’s been devastating, not only for the commercial side of it and the consumer access, but also your charter boats, your private recreational, industries that are associated with all of this.”

Observations on Management Measures

The AP acknowledged that uncertainty in the recreational data is a major impediment for effective management, not just for Red Snapper, but for other managed species in the South Atlantic. Members reiterated their support of a recreational stamp or a permit and implementing a reporting requirement for the private recreational and for-hire sector, some expressing

frustration that the latter has taken so long to be implemented since it was approved.

One AP member offered that the imposition of the twenty-inch size limit had positive effects and resulted in noticeable improvement of the stock.

A spawning season closure was offered as a potential management tool as fishermen generally do not agree that harvest during the peak of spawning is a good practice. There was acknowledgement that July offers the best potential for good fishing weather but harvesting Red Snapper during that time is detrimental to the population.

A bycatch allowance was also offered as a possible means to avoid discards and keep product on the market longer.

Environmental Observations

There was the perception among some AP members that Red Snapper are preying on, or otherwise competing, with Black Sea Bass and Red Porgy and possibly negatively affecting populations of those species.

Some AP members observed that the overabundance of Red Snapper has caused an imbalance in the ecosystem that may be having detrimental effects on other species and their habitats.

A commercial representative from the Merritt Island, Florida, area indicated that in his 20+ years of fishing the reefs in the area, he did not see large schools of Red Snapper in the depth he sees them now (240 to 260 feet) and claims this is a relatively recent occurrence.

Other Observations

AP members strongly recommended conducting fishery-independent hook-and-line sampling year-round across the region and engaging the industry to help conduct it.

A recreational fishing stamp and/or permit was also strongly recommended.