

Yellowtail Snapper Fishery Performance Report

October 2024

At their October 2024 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for yellowtail 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 yellowtail snapper will be provided to the Council to be used to understand the fishery and to inform any future management measures if needed.

Advisory Panel Members:

James Paskiewicz, Chair
Chris Kimrey, Vice Chair
Vincent Bonura
Gettys Brannon III
Scott Buff
Chris Conklin
Tony Constant
Jack Cox, Jr.
Andrew Fish
Robert Freeman
Richard Gomez
Matt Mathews

Randy McKinley
Thomas Meeks*
Chris Militello*
David Moss
Paul Nelson*
Andy Piland*
John Polston
Stephen Ranney
Paul Rudershausen
Cameron Sebastian
Haley Stephens
Todd Kellison, Non-Voting Member*

*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the yellowtail snapper fishery in the South Atlantic region is available within the [Yellowtail Snapper Overview](#). The information was provided as background to elicit the discussion presented in this Fishery Performance Report.

Observations on Fishing Behavior and Catch Levels

- a. Have there been substantial changes in the yellowtail snapper fishery since 2017 (terminal year of SEDAR 64)? If so, describe the timing, location, and what you think caused the change?**

Fishermen noted that 2017 was a pivotal year in the yellowtail snapper fishery because of hurricane Irma and its large impact on infrastructure. As a result of this storm much of the infrastructure vital to this fishery was lost and was rebuilt as non-working waterfront. After this storm, fishermen noted that effort shifted from the commercial to recreational sector as a result of the diminished waterfront for commercial operations. The fishermen stressed that these declines in the commercial sector were not tied to any perceived changes in the population of yellowtail snapper.

AP members noted that the recreational sector is good at adhering to regulations and that this species is relatively simple to target and catch. Because most releases, specifically within the recreational sector, occur in relatively shallow water, fishermen observe the fish surviving release.

It was noted that since 2017, the Florida Keys (Keys) have seen notable changes. In the northern Keys fishermen often do not target yellowtail snapper unless they can catch a lot of them and the bite is on. Fishermen are also noting the appearance of yellowtail snapper further north such as in the Carolinas.

b. Have there been effort shifts to/from yellowtail snapper? If so, please describe, including the time frame for when these shifts occurred.

In Key West, fishermen who previously trolled for dolphin are shifting their effort to yellowtail snapper because of the perceived reduction in the abundance of dolphin.

c. Have there been considerable changes in fishing techniques and/or fishing gear used to target yellowtail snapper? If so, please describe, including the time frame for when these changes occurred.

Fishermen noted that fluorocarbon leaders have changed how yellowtail snapper and other “finicky” species are caught. Fluorocarbon is line made from polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) that's attached to the end of a fishing line to attach lures. This line is used because it has a lower refractive index, making it nearly invisible underwater. Fluorocarbon leaders are now a necessity in this fishery because the species has become line shy. Fishermen noted that the switch to fluorocarbon was around 2005.

Fishermen also noted that the use of trolling motors has allowed anglers to target this species without having to anchor. AP members acknowledged that responsible anchoring is more common with very experienced anglers and the switch to not anchoring is better for the environment.

d. Have you noticed an increase in shore-based landings of yellowtail snapper?

Fishermen in both the lower Keys and Palm Beach did not observe many shore-based landings and did not perceive that shore-based landings are increasing in these areas. AP members felt that bridges were the largest source of shore-based landings in the lower Keys and that shore-based anglers could catch more legal sized fish if they changed their technique from using heavy lead weights and fishing on the bottom to mid or top water fishing. AP members noted that in general fishing for yellowtail snapper from shore is harder when compared to offshore methods, as it typically involves chumming and topwater gear.

e. How much fishing for yellowtail snapper typically occurs during the day versus at night? Has this changed?

AP members noted that as you get into the higher Keys and into Palm Beach, yellowtail

snapper becomes more of a night fishery. In the lower Keys fishermen noted that while they are not actively targeting yellowtail snapper at night, they are often bycatch of species they are fishing for during these hours, which can occasionally be trips for sharks and swordfish but are most often gray and mutton snapper.

f. Do you actively avoid fishing for yellowtail snapper in certain areas to avoid catching undersized fish (12in minimum for both sectors) or highly regulated fish (e.g., red snapper) to lessen bait loss?

Fishermen noted that they do actively avoid areas where there will be mostly small (12 to 14 in fish) yellowtail snapper. Commercial fishermen noted that smaller fish (12 to 14 in) can sometimes be harder to sell, and they prefer to avoid catching them because of the time spent unhooking fish and changing gear. Charter captains noted that there are known areas of ideal (14-16 in) or larger fish (~5 lbs or greater than 20 in) that they target, and they too avoid areas with smaller fish. AP members noted that they believe that private recreational anglers are the ones most often encountering small yellowtail snapper as they are easy and satisfying to catch.

AP members stated that they rarely encounter red snapper or very many other highly regulated species when fishing for or targeting yellowtail snapper. Highly regulated species they encounter include gag and black grouper and gray snapper.

g. What do you see in terms of discards in the commercial sector? In the recreational sector?

- **How often are yellowtail snapper discarded? What are the reasons they are discarded?**

Fishermen noted that yellowtail snapper are rarely discarded by commercial and charter/for-hire vessels as they target ideal (14-16 in) or larger fish (~5 lbs or greater than 20 in), and that undersized fish is the main reason for a discard.

AP members stated that most of the discards occur within the private recreational sector .

- **Do you encounter yellowtail snapper as bycatch when fishing for other species? If so, what species are being targeted on these trips?**

Fishermen stated that yellowtail snapper is not a species they are commonly discarding while targeting other snapper grouper species. The few incidents of bycatch they do see are when fishermen are reef trolling for barracuda and mackerel with a jig and a slice of ballyhoo used to catch yellowtail snapper. It was stated that this is more of an “intentional bycatch” while using this technique. Fishermen noted that they catch mutton snapper using this same jig while reef trolling.

- **Do you think discard mortality is a significant factor for this species? Has this changed? If so, please describe, including the time frame when the change occurred.**

AP members pointed out that most of the releases of yellowtail snapper are in relatively shallow water, ranging from 35 to 90 ft, however even when fishermen are targeting yellowtail snapper on wrecks (up to 165 ft) the fish are not on being caught off the bottom but more likely mid or top water. Therefore, they most often see them survive the release without barotrauma, noting that only around 1 in every 20 fish has issues upon release and this is more often the result of hook injury when the fish is hooked deeper than the lip and not barotrauma. The main cause of discard mortality that the fishermen are seeing is predation from sharks. Fishermen noted concerns over recreational anglers continuing to fish in areas where sharks are present, sector not moving locations when the shark presence increases, which could increase estimates of discard mortality.

Observations on Social and Economic Influences

- a. For the commercial sector, how has price and demand for yellowtail snapper changed?**
- **Is there increased demand for a specific size of yellowtail snapper (e.g. plate sized)?**

Commercial fishermen noted that since approximately 2017 there has been a consistent market for yellowtail snapper, whereas in years prior there was more commercial pressure, and the markets would flood with this species.

It was noted that every [legal] size has a market in the lower Keys. Fishermen stated that smaller fish (3/4 to 1 lbs fish, roughly 12 to 15 inches) are more affordable and typically sought after among low-income communities. These communities rely on plate size fish that are typically prepared whole in culturally significant dishes.

- b. Among the species you target, how important are yellowtail snapper to your overall business (charter or commercial)?**

Yellowtail snapper is very important to the commercial sector from the Keys through Miami, specifically as blue water fishing has seen a decrease in recent years. Fishermen noted that yellowtail snapper are easy to target and catch and, aside from struggles with infrastructure loss, are easily marketable.

- c. What communities are dependent on the yellowtail snapper fishery?**

It was mentioned that the communities with a high commercial reliance on yellowtail snapper range from Monroe County to Palm Beach. Commercial fishermen acknowledged that recreational effort is increasing but noted that the commercial sector is still a very important part of these communities, and this should be considered in future management decisions.

The lower Keys Cuban community relies on smaller, typically 3/4 to 1 lbs fish, roughly 12-to-15-inch yellowtail for culturally significant dishes that involve preparing the fish whole.

The recreational sector is reliant on the species as it is easily accessible and catchable, ensuring trip satisfaction.

d. Have changes in infrastructure (docks, marinas, fish houses) affected fishing opportunities for yellowtail snapper?

Commercial fishermen noted that the loss of fishing infrastructure has drastically changed the way fishermen make a living. This loss of infrastructure is more drastic in the Keys, however fishermen noted that that this loss has been seen throughout the range of yellowtail snapper into Palm Beach FL. They now must think of different ways to market and sell their catch as the number of seafood dealers is dwindling.

e. How have fishermen and communities adapted to changes in the yellowtail snapper fishery?

In addition to creative ways to market and sell their catch, fishermen noted that they are diversifying their catch and targeting a wide range of species including lobster, golden crab, other snapper grouper species and species caught when using trolling techniques such as mackerel and barracuda. Fishermen are now more likely to be familiar with multiple fishing techniques.

Observations on Management Measures

a. Do you feel the current jurisdictional allocation (25% Gulf of Mexico/75% South Atlantic, based on average MRFSS landings from 1993-2008) is appropriate? If not, then what methods do you think would be most appropriate to allocate the stock ABC between the regions?

For the most part AP members felt that “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it” with regards to the jurisdictional allocation. They noted that the South Atlantic is harvesting more of their total ACL than the Gulf has in recent years.

b. Are there new management measures that the Council should consider or are there existing management measures (such as size limit, trip limit, bag limit, season, etc.) that should be changed?

AP members had mixed suggestions about the yellowtail snapper size limit. Some felt that an increase to 13 inches would be appropriate while others thought it was not necessary. For-hire fishermen noted that this increase in minimum size limit could negatively affect their businesses.

Commercial fishermen also noted that in the Keys, there are ethnic communities reliant on smaller fish, typically 3/4 to 1 lbs fish, roughly 12-to-15-inch, for culturally important dishes, that could also be negatively affected from a size limit increase.

c. Are the current ACL and allocations appropriate for each sector?

The AP felt that there is currently a good grasp on the management of yellowtail snapper and again stressed “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it”.

Observations on Environmental, Ecological, and Habitat Changes

- a. Do you perceive that the abundance of yellowtail snapper has changed over the past ten years? If so, how has it changed?**

Fishermen noted that they believe that the stock is expanding (versus shifting) its range and increasing in abundance. It was noted that fishermen in the Keys are not seeing less fish however there is also more fish being seen farther north into Florida and even into the Carolinas. Fishermen predicted that they may be an overall population boom as this species becomes successful in these new areas. The AP also felt that yellowtail snapper may be an example of a species that is benefiting from the changing climate.

Commercial fishermen felt that because of this range expansion, the commercial sector allocation should remain unchanged.

- b. When/where are the fish available, and has this changed? For instance, has there been any shift in catch (annually/seasonally) inshore/offshore or north/south? If so, please describe.**

AP members noted that there were no major changes to where the fish were being caught. However, as noted earlier, there has been some northward movement observed with some people catching yellowtail snapper in South Carolina.

- c. Has the size of the fish that you typically encounter changed? If so, could you briefly describe the trend?**

Fishermen felt that the size of the fish they have been encountering has been larger in recent years. They did mention a gap in sizes, observing a lot of very small (less than 12 in) and larger fish (~5 lbs or greater than 20 in) but slightly less in the 1 to 2 lbs range (~ 14 to 18 in).

- d. Have you noticed any unique effects of environmental conditions on yellowtail snapper? If so, please describe.**

Fishermen are noticing that smaller fish (12 to 14 in) in shallow water tend to become less active at the end of the summer. They noted that it takes a weather event such as a big storm for the fish to become more active again, and therefore more willing to bite.

- e. What are your observations on the timing and length of the yellowtail snapper spawning season in your area (time periods when fish are observed with large ovaries or eggs spilling out externally)?**

It was observed that yellowtail snapper spawning activity is seen year-round with peak

spawning observed from spring through late summer throughout their range.

f. What do you see now in terms of recruitment? Where are the small fish? Are large and small fish found in the same locations?

Fishermen maintain that there has been a recent increase in recruitment as they have been seeing a lot of juvenile fish (less than 12 in).

g. Have you observed changes in catch depth or apparent bottom type fished on?

AP members stated there are no major changes to the depths at which they are catching yellowtail snapper.

h. How have sea conditions (monthly/seasonally) affected fishable days?

Fishermen noted that in general, yellowtail snapper are a relatively safe species to target even when weather is not optimal because the species can be caught in shallower waters than other snapper grouper species. It was noted though, that as the “fleet grays”, it is harder for fishermen to fish on rough weather days, which seem to be becoming more frequent.

i. Have you noticed any change in the species caught with yellowtail snapper over the years or seasonally?

There were no major changes observed in the species caught with yellowtail snapper; however, fishermen noted that they have been encountering fewer gag and more Nassau grouper. Fishermen noted that they often see cero and king mackerel when trolling and using jigs to target yellowtail snapper in addition to mutton and gray snapper, when not trolling.