

**Reef Fish Committee Report
June 22, 2022
Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**). The minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the April 2022 meeting were approved as written.

Review of Reef Fish and IFQ Landings (Tab B, No. 4a, b) and Status of Revised Recreational Red Snapper Calibration Ratios

Ms. Kelli O'Donnell (NMFS Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) reviewed preliminary 2021 and 2022 commercial and recreational reef fish landings. A Committee member noted the recent reduction in the commercial allocation of red grouper in Reef Fish Amendment 53 and that the recreational landings of red grouper in 2021 exceeded the recreational annual catch limit (ACL). The Committee member thought the Council and SERO needed to do more to constrain the recreational red grouper landings, since overages by that sector were also likely to negatively affect the commercial sector. SERO replied that the recreational ACL overage for red grouper was not anticipated; however, more attention is being paid to those landings in 2022, and an earlier closure for that sector is anticipated.

The Gulf states reviewed their private angler landings for the 2022 fishing season. Some state seasons opened on or about Memorial Day weekend, with the exception of Florida, which opened on June 17th. A subsequent landings update from the states will be provided at the August 2022 Council meeting.

Dr. Richard Cody briefed the Committee on the proceedings of the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Transition Team to calibrate state surveys to the MRIP data currency. He noted the availability of the report from the MRIP Transition Team's February 2022 workshop, and the development of an outline to address the plan for moving forward with the tasks required of the MRIP Transition Team.

Dr. Cody also briefed the Committee on the proposed calibration of Texas state private angler landings for red snapper that was presented at the SEDAR 74 Research Track Data Workshop. This proposed calibration used landings trends, and required other assumptions about the single year of data available, to generate a ratio to convert the Texas private vessel landings to MRIP-FES. The Committee asked about the possible changes to the red snapper calibrations that were submitted as part of the framework action transmitted to NMFS following its approval by the Council at its June 2021 meeting. Dr. Cody did not anticipate other changes to those calibration ratios in the near future, and said that any new information that might alter the calibrations would be accompanied by collaborative work with SERO, the Council, and the Gulf states prior to any formal recommendation. A Committee member asked why the approach proposed for Texas was so dissimilar to those for the other Gulf States. Dr. Cody noted the absence of MRIP in Texas since the inception of the Texas creel survey; thus, an identical approach was not possible as in the other states where both MRIP and the then-new state survey could be examined concurrently.

He added that Texas data were not provided or considered as part of the original calibration effort undertaken by the other Gulf states, or as part of the MRIP Transition Team's February 2022 workshop. Further, Dr. Cody reiterated the opportunity to revisit the state-specific calibration ratios in the future as more data become available.

Draft Amendment 54: Modifications to the Greater Amberjack Catch Limits and Sector Allocations, and other Rebuilding Plan Modifications (Tab B, No. 5a and b)

Council staff reviewed management alternatives considered in Draft Reef Fish Amendment 54 that considers modifications to sector allocations and catch limits in response to the results of the SEDAR 70 stock assessment. SEDAR 70 determined that greater amberjack was overfished and experiencing overfishing as of the end of the 2018 fishing year, and that reductions in harvest would be necessary to immediately end overfishing and rebuild the stock by 2027 as required by the current rebuilding plan. SEDAR 70 incorporated the calibrated MRIP-FES recreational catch and effort data. The Council received a notice from SERO that greater amberjack was overfished and experiencing overfishing in April 2021, and that the rebuilding plan would need to be modified and implemented by April 2023; the data necessary to address the depleted condition of the Gulf greater amberjack stock was not received from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) and reviewed by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) until November 2021.

The Committee recommended modifying the Need statement to better encapsulate the objectives addressed by all the proposed alternatives. Additionally, the Committee suggested omitting any reference to considering alternatives for the overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) as those values are determined by the SSC. The Committee also included language to reflect the sector allocation being considered in the document.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to modify the Need in the document to read as follows:

"The need is to end overfishing and rebuild the greater amberjack stock as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, update existing greater amberjack catch limits and allocations to be consistent with best scientific information available, FMP objectives, and contemporary data collection methods."

Motion carried with no opposition.

Council staff reviewed the six proposed alternatives. The changes in the recreational data collection survey have revealed that the stock biomass was likely larger than historically perceived and a Committee member contended that this new information has disproportionately affected the sectors, with the commercial sector being relatively more constrained.

The Committee discussed possibilities for public hearings for Amendment 54. A Committee member suggested the use of more virtual meetings in the future; however, he recognized that this amendment would likely require some in-person hearings, because the catch levels

considered in Amendment 54 are substantially lower than current levels. Council staff provided a list of possible locations for public hearings based on landings data and previous greater amberjack hearings: Galveston, TX; Kenner/New Orleans, LA; Pensacola, FL/Orange Beach, AL ; Tampa/St. Petersburg, FL; and Marathon/Key West, FL. The Committee decided to select public hearing locations at full Council.

Draft Emergency Rule to Modify Recreational and Commercial Greater Amberjack Fishing Seasons (Tab B, No. 6a and b)

The Committee discussed the proposed closed seasons for the emergency rule. There is uncertainty associated with how a shift in effort may affect the predicted season length. A shorter season may cause an increase in directed effort for greater amberjack in the fall. The Committee inquired if a May 2023 season would be possible. SERO staff replied that a few alternatives were predicted to result in a May season. An emergency rule is to only be implemented for 180 days with a possible extension of 186 days (366 days total), if required. NMFS could monitor harvest in the fall, have preliminary landings by January 2023, and then reassess if an extension of the emergency rule was warranted. If NMFS does not extend the emergency rule, then the season would default to current regulations. A Committee member asked if data collected from the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Reporting (SEHFIER) program would be available to monitor greater amberjack landings in the fall. SERO staff stated that SEHFIER data have not yet been vetted for landings estimates. Additionally, the emergency rule only allows for modification to the seasonal closures to be monitored to the current ACL. The Council should consider making any recommendations to the agency at this meeting since the interim rule will need to be finalized as soon as possible.

Draft Options: Modification of Catch Limits for Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper (Tab B, No. 7)

Council staff reviewed options in the draft framework action to modify catch limits for red snapper, following the review of an updated catch analysis by the Council's SSC. These revised catch limits are based on the SSC's review of the updated estimates of absolute abundance of red snapper derived from the Great Red Snapper Count (Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas) and by LGL Ecological Associates, Inc. (Louisiana), which resulted in a combined estimate of 85.6 million age-2 and older red snapper. As shown in Alternative 2, the SSC's recommended catch limits would set the OFL at 18.91 million lbs whole weight [mp ww]) and ABC at 16.31 mp ww. The Council previously transmitted two related framework actions: one to revise red snapper catch limits and one to calibrate catch limits for Gulf state surveys' quota monitoring; as yet, these framework actions have not been implemented. If this draft framework action is ultimately implemented, its proposed catch limits would replace those previously submitted by the Council.

A Committee member asked to include the origin and data units respective to the previous OFL recommendation from the SSC of 25.6 mp ww in Table 1.2.1. A Committee member asked to include a table of the private recreational landings by state in the document to demonstrate the

differences in landings by state. The Committee member thought that the calibration ratios, which would affect the state-specific catch limits post-implementation, would likely require updating at some point in the future. A Committee member noted that although the abundance surveys support a larger estimate of absolute abundance than previous stock assessments estimated, there are also reports from fishermen about localized depletion and declining fish size. Another Committee member recognized the possibility of localized depletion, but added that the bulk of the larger, older fish are thought to occur over bottom subject to lower rates of exploitation. Another Committee member countered that while there may be areas subject to localized depletion, other regions are experiencing a healthy fishery.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in the Action, to make **Alternative 2** the preferred alternative.

Alternative 2: Modify the red snapper OFL, ABC, ACLs, and recreational ACTs for 2022 and subsequent years based on the OFL and ABC recommendation of the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) at the March 8 – 10, 2022, SSC meeting. These catch limits are based on data derived from the Great Red Snapper Count (GRSC), including a post-stratification analysis of the data for Florida, and on the LGL Ecological Associates, Inc. study (LGL study) of the absolute abundance of red snapper off Louisiana.

Catch Limit Type	Current Catch Limits	Calculation
OFL	18,910,000	N/A
ABC	16,310,000	13.7% less than OFL
Total ACL	16,310,000	ACL = ABC
Commercial ACL	8,318,100	51% of ABC
Recreational ACL	7,991,900	49% of ABC
Federal For-Hire ACL	3,380,574	42.3% of Recreational ACL
Federal For-Hire ACT	3,076,322	9% less than For-Hire ACL
Private Angling ACL	4,611,326	57.7% of Recreational ACL
<i>Private Angling ACT</i>	<i>3,689,061</i>	<i>20% below Private Angling ACL</i>
Florida ACL	2,066,889	44.822% of Private Angling ACL
Alabama ACL	1,212,687	26.298% of Private Angling ACL
Mississippi ACL	163,702	3.55% of Private Angling ACL
Louisiana ACL	881,686	19.12% of Private Angling ACL
Texas ACL	286,363	6.21% of Private Angling ACL

Note: Values are in pounds whole weight. Units are in MRIP-CHTS. A private angling ACT is not currently used for management, but remains in place as part of the default federal regulations that would apply to a state in the event the state's delegation is no longer in effect. Changes in the respective Gulf states' ACLs are being considered in a June 2021 framework action to address issues related to calibration of recreational data among the various state data collection programs.

Motion carried 12-2, with 3 abstentions by roll call vote.

A Committee member asked whether the application of the calibration ratios would show that the private angling component of the recreational sector has been exceeding its ACL in recent years,

adding that they thought the lack of constraint in recent years of these landings was to the detriment of all fishery participants. The application of the calibration ratios would be expected to constrain landings in the future, but the Committee member said that didn't correct for the overages of past years due to the absence of a calibration in those years. Another Committee member contended that the proposed increase already accounted for scientific uncertainty, and would benefit all sectors. A Committee member recalled the impetus for the creation of the state survey programs, noting the assertion from the National Academies of Sciences study that MRIP was not appropriate for in-season quota monitoring. The Committee member expressed greater confidence in the state survey programs to accurately measure private angling catch and effort for red snapper, and thought the calibration ratios for the states would need to be revisited in the near future. Staff plans to bring a final framework action to Council at its August meeting.

Presentation and Discussion of Gulf of Mexico Gag Grouper Interim Rule (Tab B, No. 8a and b)

Council staff reviewed regional fishery dynamics with the Committee to demonstrate the differences in fishing practices and preferences throughout gag grouper's range. A Committee member asked about the difference between recreational and commercial fisheries with respect to the sex ratio between males and females. SERO staff with previous experience aging gag recounted the gradual decrease in males over time, anecdotally related to more aggressive feeding behavior by males. A Committee member asked about the special four-county spring season in the Big Bend. Another Committee member replied that FWC staff were recommending suspending the special spring season until the stock status improves.

SERO staff presented options for the proposed interim rule for gag grouper, which is intended to reduce fishing mortality ahead of the development of Amendment 56, which proposes a rebuilding plan for gag grouper. The Council was notified of the stock status of gag grouper on January 26, 2022, and must end overfishing and implement a rebuilding plan by the 2024 fishing year (January 1, 2024, for the commercial sector). In April 2022, the Council requested that SERO provide an analysis of data needed to develop an interim rule to reduce overfishing of gag grouper for the 2023 fishing year. The interim rule will include options for distributing quota to the recreational and commercial sectors in an equitable manner, and options to maximize the number of fishing days for the recreational sector based on various fishing season start dates in 2023. Action 1 addresses the new catch limits, contingent on allocation decisions, and of the red grouper individual fishing quota (IFQ) program multi-use provision. Action 2 addresses the recreational season start date, and the duration of the recreational fishing season based on that start date.

A Committee member asked whether, with respect to the catch limits, the decrease in the catch limit as the recreational allocation increases was related to discards. The SEFSC replied that it was, in part, attributable to the smaller length composition of the recreational catch compared to the commercial catch, and, in part, to the increased probability of discards. The SERO requested definitive feedback from the Council with respect to the proposed measures at this Council meeting to implement the interim rule prior to the start of the 2023 fishing season.

SERO staff noted that season duration predictions were made without consideration of possible effort shifting due to a change in the recreational fishing season start date, but considered historical landings. A Committee member asked to see the uncertainties associated with the recreational fishing season duration estimates. SERO staff replied that the inclusion of the earliest closure estimates was intended to serve that purpose; however, uncertainty estimates for season duration predictions were not available. The dates presented for each alternative in Action 2 were based on an analysis of historical landings, with the earliest closure date based on the year with the highest landings in the time series.

A Committee member thought it prudent to consider the timing of the recreational fishing season for greater amberjack alongside the fishing season start date for gag grouper due to potential effort shifts. They also thought it inappropriate to consider reallocation as part of an interim rule and some other Committee members concurred. Another Committee member thought it imprudent to shift allocation to the recreational sector, due in part to the uncertainty in the precision of those landings and discards.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in Action 1 of the proposed interim rule, to make Alternative 2 the preferred alternative.

Motion carried with no opposition.

A Committee member talked about the recreational season start date, noting that the FWC agreed to remove the special spring season in the four-county area in the Big Bend if the Council selected the longest fishing season possible for the interim rule. Another Committee member identified that the landings as reported by MRIP would not be available until after the recreational season is predicted to be closed for any of the alternatives in Action 2. The Committee member thought that the probability for a substantial recreational quota overage existed, and that such an overage would ultimately also penalize the commercial fishermen. Committee members expressed some concern about a compressed recreational fishing season and creating a derby fishery akin to past red snapper recreational fishing seasons.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in Action 2 of the proposed interim rule, to make Alternative 2 the preferred alternative, with a season closure date of November 10th.

Motion carried with one opposed.

In the event the FWC does not suspend the special spring season, it is possible that the available recreational ACL based on Alternative 2 in Action 1 would be landed prior to the federal season opening of September 1; in that event, there would be no federal season. A Committee member asked whether FWC could implement a tag system for gag grouper similar to the goliath grouper harvest program. FWC replied that they thought it unlikely that such a program was possible to implement for gag grouper in the short term.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to request that NOAA Fisheries implement interim measures to reduce overfishing of gag grouper that include

actions related to catch limits and seasons: Alternative 2 of Action 1, and to open the recreational fishing season on September 1 and close it on November 10th.

Motion carried with no opposition.

IFQ Focus Group Update

Staff informed the Committee that the IFQ Focus Group will meet August 2-3, 2022, at the Council office in Tampa.

Review of SEFSC Analysis of Historical Red Grouper Stock Assessments using Alternative Marine Recreational Information Program Landings Data (Tab B, No. 10a and b)

Dr. Jim Nance (SSC Chair) presented an overview of the SEFSC analysis of historical red grouper stock assessments using alternative recreational landings data, as well as the SSC's discussion of that analysis (Tab B, No. 10a).

Discussion of Goliath Grouper Closure and Federal Catch Limits (Tab B, No. 10a and b)

Dr. Nance reviewed the SSC's May 2022 discussion of the goliath grouper federal closure and federal catch limits, as was requested of the SSC by the Council in April 2022. The SSC also reviewed the proposed limited harvest program recently approved in state waters by the Florida FWC. SERO indicated that the FWC state waters limited harvest of goliath grouper is outside of the federal management purview. Only 200 harvest tags for goliath grouper between 24 inches and 36 inches total length will be distributed via lottery, with tags attached to each harvested fish. The SSC discussed exploring what modeling approaches may be feasible for goliath grouper, as it may be informative not only for goliath grouper management, but also for other species which have been closed to harvest for extended time periods. The SSC requested that the Council consider adding representatives from the Gulf Council's SSC to the South Atlantic Council's SSC workgroup in an effort to develop a cooperative workgroup focused on establishing a method for evaluating catch limits for federally managed species currently closed to harvest, including goliath grouper.

A Committee member asked about the timeline of the efforts for such a workgroup. Dr. Nance replied that the South Atlantic Council's SSC has already convened such a workgroup, and that the SSC's request is to collaboratively join those efforts. At this time, the timeline of anticipated deliverables for this workgroup is unknown. The Committee asked about the number of participants; Dr. Judd Curtis (South Atlantic Council Staff) replied that there are currently five members of the South Atlantic Council SSC on the workgroup, and that the Gulf Council might consider supporting a similar number of its own SSC members. A Committee member discussed

their support for this workgroup in its work on goliath grouper, but may feel differently if the same were applied to red drum.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to add up to five representatives from the Gulf SSC to the South Atlantic Council SSC workgroup in an effort to develop a cooperative workgroup focused on establishing a method for evaluating catch limits for federally managed species currently closed to harvest, including southeastern U.S. goliath grouper.

Motion carried with two opposed.

Return ‘Em Right (Tab B, No. 12)

Mr. Nick Haddad with Florida Sea Grant reviewed the development and rollout of the Return ‘Em Right program, which aims to increase survival of reef fish that are caught and released in the Gulf. Project partners include Florida Sea Grant, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, NMFS, and a coalition of anglers, industry groups, state agencies, universities, and non-government organizations. The project provides training and gear to Gulf anglers to improve the survival of reef fish and benefit the health of the fisheries. The Committee requested that Mr. Haddad return in January 2023 to inform the Council about the continued progress of Return ‘Em Right.

Other Business

No other business was brought before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.