

**Reef Fish Committee Report
August 23, 2022
Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair
Mr. Chris Schieble – Vice Chair**

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

Review of Reef Fish, CMP, and IFQ Landings, Federal For-Hire Red Snapper Landings, and Status of Revised Recreational Red Snapper Calibration Ratios (Tab B, Nos 4a-d)

Ms. Kelli O'Donnell (NMFS Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) reviewed preliminary 2021 and 2022 commercial and recreational reef fish and coastal migratory pelagics landings, and those for reef fish managed in individual fishing quota (IFQ) programs. A Committee member asked whether the landings data for greater amberjack would be available in time to reopen the recreational fishing season before the end of the calendar year. SERO replied that the recreational landings data through Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) wave 3 (May and June) are available; however, more critical to any reopening before the end of the year would be the data from wave 4 (July and August, not available until mid-October) and wave 5 (September and October, not available until mid-December). SERO also noted that it may be possible to explore reopening the recreational fishing season for red grouper once the data from wave 4 (July and August) are available.

A Committee member asked about for-hire landings of red snapper in the first 5 months of the year, when federally-permitted for-hire vessels are not allowed to harvest red snapper. SERO said that those for-hire vessels are state-permitted, not federally-permitted, headboats fishing in state waters.

Dr. Richard Cody from the NOAA Office of Science and Technology (OST) briefed the Committee on the proceedings of the MRIP Transition Team, and to calibrate state surveys to the MRIP data currency. Dr. Cody recalled the February 2022 workshop to address the various differences and necessary improvements to the state recreational surveys for red snapper, which provided timelines for deliverables from the states and NOAA OST. The intention was for red snapper (SEDAR 74) and the research needed to successfully complete an independent review of the final calibration methodology for the surveys to occur simultaneously, allowing the incorporation of the calibration ratio for the operational assessment which is scheduled to follow the research track and generate management advice. Dr. Cody remarked that a goal of the Transition Team is to reconcile differences between the surveys such that calibration options expand to include more sophisticated approaches that include composite estimation, which at present is not possible due to large differences between the state and federal survey estimates. Dr. Cody added that he expects the finalized plan from the Transition Team to be made publicly available soon.

A Committee member asked for clarification about the current status of the transition plan, which is essentially status quo with regard to the current calibration ratios for the state-specific red snapper annual catch limits (ACLs). Dr. Cody confirmed this, but noted that the Transition Team and states continue to collaborate to work to find improvements to the calibrations, and added that this work was ongoing and arduous. Another Committee member asked about the value added for the Council in receiving regular updates on the proceedings of the Transition Team. Dr. Cody replied that he thought it would be important to continue to communicate the progress being made back to the state directors and other interested parties, and that the resolution of any communication shortfalls should be a priority for the Transition Team. A Committee member asked about the progress made by the Transition Team to incorporate edits to the transition plan provided by the state cooperators. Dr. Cody replied that he thought the Transition Team did a decent job of incorporating those edits.

Gulf and South Atlantic SSC Review and Recommendations for Southeastern U.S. Yellowtail Snapper (Tab B, No. 5a-c)

Dr. Jim Nance (Chair, Scientific and Statistical Committee [SSC]), summarized the joint review of the SEDAR 64 interim analysis for southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper by the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs. The SSCs found yellowtail snapper to be healthy and not experiencing overfishing, made catch limit recommendations, and provided guidance on the next stock assessment for yellowtail snapper, which is not likely to start until 2027. The SSCs determined that the interim analysis satisfied the prescribed terms of reference. The SSCs recommended catch levels commensurate with a maximum sustainable yield proxy of the fishing mortality at a 30% spawning potential ratio ($F_{30\%SPR}$) for the overfishing limit (OFL), and a P^* of 0.375 for the acceptable biological catch (ABC), using annual yields as outlined in the table below:

Year	$F_{30\%SPR}$ (OFL)	$P^* = 0.375$ (ABC)	90% of $F_{30\%SPR}$	75% of $F_{30\%SPR}$
2023	3.922	3.887	3.733	3.432
2024	3.774	3.749	3.635	3.401
2025	3.684	3.665	3.576	3.385
2026	3.625	3.610	3.537	3.375
2027	3.584	3.572	3.510	3.367

A Committee member expressed disappointment in the narrow buffers between the OFL and ABC, and remarked that this characterization of scientific uncertainty was unreasonable given the data. They thought that the SSC should have further considered scientific uncertainty and debated a larger buffer as a result. The Committee member also thought that the constant catch scenarios should have been explored further. Dr. Nance replied that since the SSCs' review was of an interim analysis, which only updated fishery-dependent landings data, that it was most

appropriate to maintain the P* method that was used during the previous review of the SEDAR 64 stock assessment for determining the ABC from the OFL.

Council staff reminded the Committee that it had previously tabled Reef Fish Amendment 55, which is being developed concurrently with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council as Snapper Grouper Amendment 44, since the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils jointly manage yellowtail snapper. This joint amendment could be restarted, and consideration given therein to the SSCs' updated catch advice. Upon review of the motions report, staff identified that the document was not tabled as previously thought. Thus, a slight modification to the motion is suggested.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to **[resume work on] Reef Fish Amendment 55 and include consideration of updated catch advice as recommended by the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs.**

Motion carried without opposition.

Review of State-Specific Private Angling Red Snapper Landings and Reef Fish Directed Effort (Tab B, Nos. 6a-e)

Council representatives from the five Gulf States reviewed their 2022 private angling seasons for red snapper and compared them to their 2021 fishing seasons. The states also characterized the fishing effort in their states specific to reef fish or offshore angling effort as applicable, including available data on compliance with that state's licensing requirements. These enforcement data indicate better than 90% compliance at present with licensing regulations, and are expected to be included in future state-specific reports to the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) on state licensing data beginning in 2023.

A Committee member asked about the June private vessel landings in Florida, and the uncertainty in those estimates, particularly for 2021, which showed more uncertainty about the June landings estimate compared to other years. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) replied that FWC was working with MRIP on landings estimation, and acknowledged greater uncertainty about the June 2021 estimated private vessel landings from Florida. SERO asked whether FWC would adjust the remaining days of its 2022 fishing season based on the estimated landings from July 2022, when available. FWC replied that it would monitor those landings and make any adjustments to the 2022 season as appropriate. A Committee member asked about licensing for state- and federally-permitted for-hire vessels, and whether anglers had to have individual fishing licenses on those for-hire vessels. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department replied that individual anglers on for-hire vessels were required to be individually licensed.

A Committee member asked when it would be possible to generate Gulf-wide estimates of landings. The Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) replied that the states have varied survey programs for species like red snapper that are not currently directly comparable, and this is the impetus for the work between the states and the MRIP Transition Team and its calibration

efforts. The state representatives expressed a willingness to present the same standardized data outputs for private angling landings of red snapper at Council meetings in the future.

Public Hearing Draft Amendment 54: Modifications to the Greater Amberjack Catch Limits and Sector Allocations, and other Rebuilding Plan Modifications (Tab B, No. 7)

Council staff presented Public Hearing Draft Amendment 54 to the Reef Fish fishery management plan, which considers modifications to sector allocations and catch limits in response to the results of the SEDAR 70 stock assessment. Staff reviewed the components that may be included in an allocation review and identified their location in Amendment 54. A Committee member suggested that future amendments that consider reallocation should address the conversion from MRIP-CHTS units to MRIP-FES units separate from an action that addresses the sector allocation.

The Committee discussed the catch limit and sector allocation alternatives presented in Action 1. Some Committee members noted that the alternatives were based on a time series of historical landings for each sector and used to calculate percentages of landings harvested by each sector over representative time series. The Committee also discussed that the current allocation is based on a reference period from 1981 through 2004 that was established in 2008 and is presented as Alternative 3 in Action 1. Some Committee members advocated for a longer time series being used to inform sector allocations while others stated that a more recent time series was preferable given the changes to the fishery over time. NMFS staff reminded the Committee that retaining the current sector allocation percentages would result in a *de facto* reallocation to the commercial sector. NMFS staff further clarified that sector-specific information on size-selectivity and discard rates between sectors was incorporated in the catch advice and results in modest differences in the OFL and ABC among the alternatives in Action 1. With respect to fishing mortality and the rebuilding timeline, the alternatives are considered equivalent.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, in **Action 1**, to make **Alternative 3** the preferred.

Alternative 3: Revise the allocation between the recreational and commercial sectors using MRIP-FES adjusted average landings during the years 1981 through 2004. The allocations for greater amberjack are 84% recreational and 16% commercial. Revise the OFL and ABC as recommended by the SSC based on SEDAR 70 (2020). Set the total stock ACL equal to the ABC.

Year	OFL	ABC	Total ACL	Rec ACL	Com ACL	Allocation (Rec:Com)
2022	1,996,000	497,000	497,000	417,480	79,520	84:16
2023	2,130,000	621,000	621,000	521,640	99,360	84:16
2024	2,234,000	739,000	739,000	620,60	118,240	84:16
2025	2,305,000	842,000	842,000	707,280	134,720	84:16
2026	2,354,000	929,000	929,000	780,360	148,640	84:16
2027	2,387,000	999,000	999,000	839,160	159,840	84:16

Note: Values are in pounds whole weight. The recreational portion of the OFL, ABC, total ACL and ACL are based on MRIP-FES data.

Motion carried 9 – 4 with 4 abstentions.

The Committee discussed the alternatives in Action 2 which sets sector-specific annual catch targets (ACTs). The Committee agreed that setting conservative buffers to account for additional management uncertainty was warranted for greater amberjack.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in Action 2, to make Alternative 3 the preferred.

Alternative 3: Apply the ACL/ACT Control Rule (years 2016-2019) to revise the buffer between the ACL and ACT for each sector. The recreational buffer is 17%, and the commercial buffer is 7%.

Motion carried without opposition.

Council staff will take the document out to public hearings and will notice for final action at the next Council meeting in October 2022. A Committee member noted that the emergency rule is effective for 180 days and recommended revisiting current management measures that may be necessary to constrain landings to the future catch levels.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to direct staff to begin development of a framework action for greater amberjack to modify commercial and recreational management measures.

Motion carried without opposition.

FINAL ACTION: Modification of Catch Limits for Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper (Tab B, Nos. 8a-c)

Council staff reviewed the 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. The Council transmitted two previous framework actions: one to revise red snapper catch limits and one to calibrate catch limits for Gulf state survey quota monitoring; these framework actions are currently in the end of the public comment period prior to rulemaking. If this draft framework action is ultimately implemented, its proposed regulations would take the place of those previously submitted by the Council, but not yet implemented. Council staff also reviewed public comments received, and SERO staff reviewed the codified text of the proposed regulations. The Council's current preferred alternative would use the SSC's OFL and ABC recommendations of 18.91 million pounds whole weight (mp ww) and 16.31 mp ww, respectively, set the total stock ACL equal to the ABC, and retain all existing sector allocations and sector-specific ACL and ACT percentages:

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: the private angling ACT is not currently used, so long as RF Amendment 50 is in effect.

Committee members discussed differences in observations of red snapper abundance and catch-per-unit-effort off their respective states. A Committee member noted that the absolute abundance surveys recognized a larger biomass of red snapper throughout the Gulf, particularly on uncharacterized bottom (UCB). They asked about the sorts of measures that should be considered to account for reports of smaller length compositions of recent landings, and also noted concerns regarding localized depletion. The Committee member thought it prudent to consider metrics for evaluating red snapper and other fisheries moving forward to better understand the effects of management changes on these stocks. Another Committee member asked whether it was appropriate for the Council to identify such metrics, proffering the SSC as the body to identify the appropriate indicators to monitor; other Committee members agreed. A Committee member pointed to the conversion of the 85.6 million age-2 and older red snapper from the analysis reviewed by the SSC, which is equivalent to over 600 mp ww of red snapper based on recent estimates of average weights from the commercial and recreational fleets, relative to the Council's current preferred alternative that would set the total ACL at 16.31 mp ww (ACL = ABC). The SEFSC added that most of the red snapper stock exists over UCB, and that red snapper demonstrate strong site fidelity, meaning that the fish do not transit to distant reefs that may have been subject to heavy fishing pressure. A Committee member stated that the absolute abundance studies were snapshots in time, and that it would be important to understand how those estimates may change with time. They further posed questions about connectivity between nearshore and offshore areas, assumptions about stock productivity, and possible changes to stock status determination criteria based on the new data.

A Committee member noted that the Department of Commerce has not yet implemented the proposed calibration ratios, and asked whether it was appropriate to apply those within this

framework action. Council and SEFSC staff noted that the calibration ratios previously submitted to the Department of Commerce are already recognized as being consistent with the best scientific information available (BSIA), and as such, are necessary to include in this framework action with respect to their effects on the state-specific ACLs for private anglers. Not doing so would mean that the proposed catch limits in this framework action would not be consistent with BSIA. If new data result in future revisions to those calibration ratios, then the Council can initiate work on a new framework action to update those calibration ratios. A Committee member asked whether it would be prudent to delay action on this framework action to update the ACLs until the Secretary of Commerce decides on the previously submitted framework action on calibration ratios. SERO proposed modifying the language used in describing the effects of the calibration ratios to denote those calibrations as proposed and pending implementation. A Committee member asked about the timeline for implementation of proposed regulations. SERO noted the language in the calibrations framework action that recommends implementation of those calibrations to the catch limits on January 1, 2023, and adding that the calibration framework action would be submitted for implementation in time to meet that January 1, 2023, implementation date.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to recommend the Council approve the **Framework Action: Modification of Catch Limits for Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation, and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes in the document. The Council Chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate.**

Motion carried without opposition.

Presentation on Framework Action for Vermilion Snapper Recreational Bag Limit and Gray Triggerfish Commercial Trip Limit and Recreational Closed Seasons (Tab B, No. 9)

Council staff provided a presentation on potential management changes for vermilion snapper and gray triggerfish. Previously, the Council requested modifying the recreational bag limit for vermilion snapper, the recreational fixed closed season for gray triggerfish, and adjusting commercial gray triggerfish trip limits. Recently, the Council decided to increase the gray triggerfish ACLs, which was implemented in July 2021. The Council also modified the vermilion snapper ACLs, but selected a conservative ACL to provide more protection to the stock. The vermilion snapper ACL change has not yet been implemented by NMFS. Analyses provided by SERO staff indicated a large percentage of recreational anglers do not catch the current vermilion snapper bag limit, and based on projections from available data, the recreational gray triggerfish season would likely close in April or May if the fixed closed season is modified; however, there is substantial uncertainty in the season duration. Regarding the gray triggerfish commercial trip limit, a Committee member asked if vessels regularly catch the current trip limit and how often this occurs. Council staff indicated it was not part of the analysis, but could be investigated. A Committee member stated they wanted all the actions to

still be considered, but was willing to separate the action to increase the commercial gray triggerfish trip limit, since it was a higher priority.

SSC Recommendations from the July 2022 SSC Meeting (Tab B, No. 5a)

Dr. Nance summarized SSC discussions of wenchman landings and catch limits. Wenchman is commonly caught as bycatch in the Northern Gulf butterfly trawl fishery, and is a marketable bycatch species. However, catch limits for wenchman are part of the mid-water snapper complex (which includes blackfin snapper, queen snapper, and silk snapper), and based on historical landings which may be incomplete due to differences in reported common names for the species (e.g., silver snapper). Further, wenchman is more pelagic and does not appear to occupy habitats similar to the other three species in the complex, all of which are more closely reef-associated. Substantial wenchman landings in the butterfly trawl fishery has been identified as an issue for fishermen, who must decide whether to stop trawling for butterfly or discard substantial landings of wenchman when the mid-water snapper complex ACL is met. Discard mortality from these trawls is expected to be near 100%. Based on a review of catches and historical records, the SSC recommended wenchman be removed from the mid-water snapper complex. The SSC also recommended that the Council ask the GSMFC to work with the 5 Gulf states to compile historical landings for butterfly, wenchman, scad, and other associated species from the mid-water trawl fishery for the Gulf SSC to evaluate.

A Committee member asked about the data evaluated for wenchman that led to the SSC's recommendation. Dr. Nance replied that the fishermen were targeting butterfly, and that differentiating between the species at depth was not possible. Further, historical landings of wenchman indicate landings under other common names, and GSMFC may be uniquely poised to investigate these historical data to better understand past wenchman landings.

Dr. Nance next reviewed the discards data presented by the SEFSC for gag grouper, red grouper, greater amberjack, and red snapper, which were determined from the most recent stock assessments for each species. The SSC acknowledged several caveats when interpreting the presented information including differing sampling units, difference in fishery-dependent survey designs, and species-specific discard mortality estimates. The SSC contended that novel management approaches to incentivize release techniques that increase the probability of survival would be required for a meaningful reduction in discard mortality.

Draft Options for Amendment 56: Modifications to the Gag Grouper Catch Limits, Sector Allocations, Fishing Seasons, and other Rebuilding Plan Measures (Tab B, Nos. 11a-c)

In June 2022, SERO staff presented options to the Council for a proposed interim rule for gag grouper, which is intended to reduce fishing mortality ahead of the development of Amendment 56, which will be a rebuilding plan for gag grouper. SERO staff provided a brief update on the development of this interim rule. Dr. Nance reviewed the alternative run using the SEDAR 72 base model, but supplanting the MRIP-FES recreational landings data with the same from the State of Florida's State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS Run). The SEDAR 72 assessment was

originally presented at the SSC's September 2021 meeting, and used updated recreational landings data from MRIP-FES, and an ecosystem-informed model for incorporating episodic mortality from red tide. The SRFS run found gag grouper to be overfished and undergoing overfishing, and was determined by the SSC to be consistent with BSIA at its July 2022 meeting.

The SEFSC also reported a correction to the headboat landings data for an area of landings along the Florida and Alabama state lines that had mistakenly not been included in the original SEDAR 72 run. As such, the SEFSC also re-ran the original SEDAR 72 base model using MRIP-FES, in addition to the SRFS run, to discern any effects of this correction. This resulted in no substantial change to the rebuilding timeline for the SRFS model; however, the MRIP model projected that the stock would rebuild in 10 years (T_{Min} , $F=0$) at a fishing mortality rate at maximum sustainable yield (F_{MSY}) proxy using a 30% spawning potential ratio ($F_{30\%SPR}$), and a medium severity estimate for red tide mortality in 2021. Generally, the SRFS model estimates similar trends in landings as the MRIP model. Diagnostics demonstrated stable models using either SRFS or MRIP. Generally, the SRFS run scales down the stock's population size by about 50%, but does not change the stock's trajectory or the ratio of SSB to virgin SSB in the terminal year.

A Committee member asked about the difference between the SRFS data and the MRIP data with regard to the estimated total biomass of the gag grouper stock. Dr. Nance replied that the surveys estimate catch similarly, but differ in how they estimate effort, which results in a difference in the estimated historical landings. Another Committee member asked why SRFS was suitable for gag grouper in this case, but other surveys had not been deemed so for other species. Council and SEFSC staff explained that the SRFS data were calibrated back in time over the same time period as the MRIP data, and that SRFS covers more than 95% of all private vessel landings of gag grouper, making it appropriate for both assessment and catch limit monitoring purposes. Further, SRFS underwent and passed peer-review for its use for gag grouper, which has not yet been done for the state surveys for other species like red snapper.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, that the Council concur with the SSC's motion regarding the SEDAR 72 Gulf of Mexico gag grouper operational assessment base run configuration, MSY proxy, red tide scenario, and stock status determination to use SRFS data and its consideration as BSIA.

Motion carried without opposition.

Council staff then presented options to consider prior to developing an options draft for the October 2022 Council meeting, noting that changing the proxy for F_{MSY} can be done by stating the new proxy if no other options are being considered (Reef Fish Amendment 48). There are currently three proposed actions, addressing sector allocation, catch limits, and fishing seasons. A Committee member asked why it was possible to keep the current sector allocation. Council staff explained that the current sector allocation, monitored under SRFS, would result in a slight *de facto* reallocation to the commercial sector due to the higher estimation of recreational landings from the calibrated historical SRFS landings data. The Committee discussed inclusion of more recent time series for consideration for sector allocation, considerate of factors like the initiation of the IFQ program in 2010. A Committee member also suggested looking at the percent utilization of the stock by the sectors that is being explored by the South Atlantic Fishery

Management Council for gag grouper. A Committee member asked about justification for the proposed commercial closure in February and March in waters deeper than 20 fathoms (120 feet). Council staff recalled that almost all male gag, and almost all spawning activity, occurs in waters deeper than 20 fathoms, and that given the small fraction of the population that is thought to be male and the depressed recruitment that has been estimated for the last decade, protecting the males, especially while spawning, should be considered by the Council.

IFQ Focus Group (Tab B, Nos. 12a-d)

Staff presented a draft meeting summary for the August 2-3, 2022, meeting of the IFQ Focus Group in Tampa, FL. One of the meeting's facilitators was available virtually to answer questions from the Committee. The Committee noted the contentious issues addressed by the IFQ Focus Group members and discussed the expectations for the IFQ Focus Group, should it be convened for a second meeting. A Committee member inquired about NMFS' efforts to address the recommendations from the National Academies of Sciences' (NAS) study on the Gulf IFQ programs, and the Committee requested that Dr. Powers and Dr. Anderson, co-authors of the study and members of the Council's SSC, work with the SSC to identify those NAS recommendations that could be prioritized or operationalized. Recognizing the complexity of the IFQ programs, Committee members noted the need for more time during Council meetings to work on changes to the IFQ programs.

The Committee recommends and I so **move, to reassemble the IFQ Focus Group for a second two-day meeting.**

Motion carried with one in opposition.

Other Business

The Committee discussed the state-specific surveys of private recreational red snapper catch and effort, acknowledging the considerable investments and effort on behalf of the states to make these surveys functional and valuable. A Committee member also noted the differences in estimation methods between the surveys, and the work being conducted by the MRIP Transition Team with the states to work toward a common data currency. Another Committee member asked about the intent of a Committee motion to accept the state surveys by the Council as best available science. A Committee member stated that this motion would clarify the Council's perspective for the public. A Committee member noted that the Council is a management body, not a scientific one; as such, the Council doesn't have the authority to deem any survey or body of research as the best scientific information available. The Committee recognized that the SSC is typically the body that makes recommendations about what is consistent with BSIA, and would likely be tasked, at least in part, with any evaluation to that end. It was noted that it is the resultant completed analyses, which include consideration of the available indices, surveys, and studies, which are considered for evaluation as BSIA, not, the individual surveys themselves.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.