

Reef Fish Committee Report April 5, 2022 Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) after adding two items to Other Business: discussion of the Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) motion regarding permit leasing; and discussion of the recent rule change for goliath grouper by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Council staff also noted the addition of a discussion of the rebuilding plan and timeline for gag grouper under Tab B, No. 8. The minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the January 2022 meeting were approved as written.

Review of Reef Fish and IFQ Landings (Tab B, No. 4a, b) and Review of 2022 Federal For-Hire Season Projection (Tab B, No. 4c)

Ms. Kelli O'Donnell (NMFS Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) reviewed preliminary 2021 commercial and recreational landings. Ms. O'Donnell stated that recreational landings updates are provided in June and October, based on when the data are finalized each year. Reporting for MRIP-FES does not occur until at least 45 days after the end of a two-month MRIP data collection wave, and those data are often not finalized until a year or more after the end of that calendar year. A Committee member still thought that having all landings data regularly reported to the Committee was essential and requested that the link to the SERO Annual Catch Limit monitoring webpage be provided in the briefing materials.

SERO staff is preparing the red snapper season projection for the for-hire component, and expects the season will be approximately 70 – 80 days in duration, with a start date of June 1.

Red Snapper Private Recreational Component 2021 Landings Summary and 2022 Season Projections (Tab B, No. 5)

Alabama: Alabama opened its 2021 season on May 28th, with the season open Friday – Monday for a total of 124 days. Reporting of red snapper, and now greater amberjack and gray triggerfish, is mandatory for private anglers through Alabama's Snapper Check system. Alabama requires a reef fish endorsement to harvest reef fish species. Alabama estimates that it landed approximately 939,000 pounds of its 1,122,662-pound ACL in 2021. For the 2022 fishing season, Alabama will open the fishing season on May 27th, on Friday through Monday, with a two-fish bag limit and a 16-inch total length (TL) minimum size limit. Because federal for-hire vessels will be required to report through the federal system, they will no longer be required to report through Snapper Check. Compliance with the mandatory reporting requirement is expected to increase through outreach and education, and enforcement. Alabama noted that catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) has decreased some over time. SERO recommended overlaying explanatory variables for interesting changes in trends in harvest, such as tropical weather events. Alabama added that observed average weights have fluctuated for private vessels, and decreased for for-hire vessels.

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Florida: Florida opened its 2021 season on June 4, with the season open for 55 days (July 28). Florida estimates that it landed approximately 113% of its 1,913,451-pound ACL in 2021, necessitating a payback in 2022. For the 2022 fishing season, Florida will have an ACL of 1,657,163 pounds, to account for the 2021 payback. The 2022 season has not yet been announced, but will be informed by past landings and effort, and with consideration of the interest in a potential fall season. Florida requires a (free) annual State Reef Fish Angler License to harvest reef fish.

Louisiana: Louisiana opened its 2021 season on May 28, with the season open Friday through Sunday, plus Monday holidays, for a total of 146 days. The fishing season was closed after Labor Day, but later reopened due to lower projected effort resulting from Hurricane Ida. Louisiana estimates that it had a harvest overage of 6,918 pounds in 2021, necessitating a payback in 2022. For the 2022 fishing season, Louisiana will account for the 2021 payback, and will maintain a two-fish bag limit and a 16-inch TL minimum size limit. The 2022 season has not yet been announced, but will start the Friday before Memorial Day, and will consider a weekends-only and continuous season option, and social and economic data. Louisiana requires a (free) Recreational Offshore Landing Permit for private anglers, and has observed an increase in the average weight of landed fish.

Mississippi: Mississippi opened its 2021 season on May 24, for a total of 119 days. Mississippi uses both continuous fishing and weekends-only fishing throughout its season, with a mid-season summer closure. The fishing season was affected by lower than projected effort due to Hurricane Ida. Mississippi estimates it harvested 143,042 pounds of its 151,550-pound ACL in 2021. For 2022, Mississippi will open fishing on May 27, maintain a two-fish bag limit and a 16-inch TL minimum size limit, and anticipates an August re-opening. The average weight of fish landed by private anglers has increased marginally year-over-year. Mississippi added that it observes a 95% compliance rate for its mandatory Tails 'n Scales reporting mobile application, which recently received an award from the American Fisheries Society.

Texas: Texas previously used simulation modeling to project its season durations. In 2021, quota monitoring was performed using its Marine Sport Harvest Monitoring Program and the voluntary iSnapper mobile application. Texas opened its 2021 season on January 1, with the season open continuously for 318 days until November 15th. The fishing season was closed earlier than anticipated due to a larger observed average weight of landed fish and favorable fishing weather in the summer. For the 2022 fishing season, Texas will maintain a two-fish bag limit and a 16-inch TL minimum size limit in federal waters, and a four-fish bag limit and 15-inch TL minimum size limit in state waters. The mean weight of landed fish was reported as 6.6 pounds, with a mean length of 22.4 inches TL. The 2022 season duration has not yet been announced, and there is no required offshore or reef fish permit for private anglers.

Draft Options Amendment 54: Modifications to the Greater Amberjack Catch Limits and Sector Allocations (Tab B, No. 6)

Council staff gave a presentation on a document to update catch levels and sector allocations for greater amberjack in response to SEDAR 70 (**Tab B, No 6 a and b**). The stock is overfished and

experiencing overfishing, and action is required to reduce catch levels necessary to end overfishing and rebuild the stock by 2027.

A Committee member asked for clarification on the status of the stock biomass relative to stock determination criteria to gain a better contextual understanding. Council staff replied that the stock biomass has been below the minimum stock size threshold (MSST) for a long period of time, regardless of the more recent change to the less conservative MSST criterion. Historically, the stock has not responded to previous management changes intended to end overfishing and rebuild the stock. A Committee member suggested that historical comparison of biomass to the stock determination criteria be made available for consideration at the June meeting.

The Committee discussed a possible implementation timeline for Amendment 54. Council staff stated that the Council is required to end overfishing by April 2023. To accomplish this, the Council would need to approve a public hearing draft at the August 2022 meeting and take final action at the October 2022 meeting. Council staff will provide an updated document for review at the June meeting. The Committee did not provide specific recommendations about management alternatives in the document, but additional discussion on the range of proposed alternatives and draft purpose and need is expected to occur during full Council.

Review of Revised Great Red Snapper Count Estimates and SSC Recommendations for Red Snapper Catch Advice (Tab B, No. 7)

Dr. Jim Nance (Chair, Scientific and Statistical Committee [SSC]) described the SSC's review of the revised estimate of absolute abundance of red snapper derived from the Great Red Snapper Count (GRSC) and the LGL Ecological Associates, Inc. study (LGL study). For the latter, the SSC reviewed the study design and response to peer-review comments on the LGL study, which demonstrated lower observations of abundance over natural and artificial reefs than the GRSC; abundance estimates over uncharacterized bottom (UCB) were similar. The SSC thought that the comparability of the studies remained difficult due to differences in sampling design. However, the SSC concluded that in general, the difference between the surveys highlights the uncertainty in both estimates, which is likely underestimated. Ultimately, the SSC thought that the empirically collected data in LGL study likely contributed to a better abundance estimate for that area compared to the GRSC, which included some imputed data from adjacent Texas waters.

The SSC also reviewed a post-stratification analysis of the estimates of red snapper absolute abundance on the west Florida shelf, which was performed to more accurately assign fish to the depths in which they are observed by other fishery-independent surveys. This analysis still estimated a large relative abundance of red snapper in the Big Bend region of Florida, with a larger number of fish in the 25 – 40 m depth stratum compared to the 10 – 25 m depth stratum. Dr. Nance stated that the SSC agreed that the post-stratification analysis for Florida is appropriate and should be included in the overall estimation of age 2+ red snapper, informed by the finalized GRSC data and random forest sampling design.

Dr. Nance reviewed the catch analysis, which used the GRSC and LGL study derived data and the post-stratification analysis for Florida to estimate an absolute abundance of age-2+ red

snapper of 85.6 million fish, with age and length composition information derived from SEDAR 52 (2016). An estimate of virgin spawning stock biomass (SSB) was derived from the fraction of SSB in 2019 divided by the projected SPR for 2019 from SEDAR 52. The catch analysis used a terminal year of 2019, with deterministic projections and Monte Carlo simulations carried forward from that point in time. The SSC agreed that the stock is larger, and exploitation lower, than estimated in SEDAR 52. The SSC also acknowledged that other aspects of population dynamics, like recruitment, reproduction, age and length compositions, and other information have not been updated with current information, as is customary from a stock assessment.

A Committee member noted the distances from shore in the northern Gulf in which the majority of the landings are estimated to occur in the Gardner analysis, adding that state data for Alabama indicate that those landings are occurring closer to shore. The Committee member said that the assumption about distance from shore can affect the assumptions about age and length composition for past and future harvests. Another Committee member thought that there was considerable uncertainty in the proportion of UCB being fished, and that uncertainty included in the catch projections was also considerable. As a consequence, a larger proportion of the UCB could have been considered by the SSC as exploited habitat.

Dr. Nance reviewed the SSC's deliberations related to catch advice for red snapper based on the aforementioned data and analyses. The SSC found that the catch analysis developed by the SEFSC and informed by age-2+ red snapper abundance from the GRSC for Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, and the post-stratified abundance data for Florida, and from the LGL study for Louisiana, constitutes the best scientific information available for abundance information and is useful for development of overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations. The SSC established an OFL of 18.91 million lbs ww, based on the 5-year average catch level projection, and an ABC of 16.31 mp ww based on the same and a P* value of 0.3 (this represents a risk of overfishing of 30%).

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to direct staff to begin work on a framework action to revise the red snapper catch limits based on the SSC's March 2022 catch limit recommendations.

Motion carried without opposition.

The Committee asked about the status of the pending framework action from June 2021 to increase red snapper catch limits, and whether the proposed framework action would be affected, or affect, that transmitted document. NOAA General Counsel replied that the proposed rule is being developed for the transmitted framework action, which is not expected to be affected by the development of the proposed framework action.

Presentation and Discussion of Gulf of Mexico Gag Grouper Interim Rule, SRFs Calibration, and Interim Analysis (Tab B, No. 8)

Mr. Andy Strelcheck (SERO Regional Administrator) presented the decision points and timeline for a potential interim rule for gag grouper to reduce fishing mortality based on the results of

SEDAR 72 and the SSC's recommendations for catch levels following that assessment. An interim rule could be implemented for 180 days, may be extended by 186 days one time (366 days total), and would be intended to reduce fishing mortality while the Council develops a rebuilding plan. The Council was notified by SERO that gag grouper was overfished and experiencing overfishing on January 26, 2022, meaning the Council has until January 26, 2024 to submit and have implemented a rebuilding plan for gag grouper.

Mr. Strelcheck discussed decision points to consider for the interim rule, including changes to recreational management measures and the commercial individual fishing quota (IFQ) program. The proposed catch limits from the rebuilding scenarios examined for gag grouper are expected to result in substantial landings reductions from the status quo. Mr. Strelcheck noted the current sector allocation was 61% recreational and 39% commercial, and that the Council had the option of considering sector allocations in the interim rule. The SEFSC noted that alternative sector allocation scenarios would necessitate re-running catch projections.

Mr. Strelcheck reviewed recent recreational landings and discussed options for moving the opening date for the fishing season to later in the fall, which was anticipated to result in longer season durations compared to the current June 1 opening. Since most anglers harvest 1 gag or less per angler, reducing the bag limit from 2 fish to 1 fish per person is unlikely to immediately affect fishing mortality. Additionally, setting the commercial red grouper multi-use allocation at zero would be expected to decrease the commercial gag grouper harvest.

Council staff encouraged the Committee to be forward thinking on any measures recommended for the interim rule, as multiple management changes in a short time period can create additional uncertainty in the fishery-dependent data used for stock assessments. The Committee discussed changing the sector allocation, with a Committee member commenting that they thought it best to refrain from such action outside of a formal plan amendment. Council staff asked when the Council would see the interim rule proposal again. SERO replied that the goal was to define the parameters of the interim rule as soon as possible, to allow for it to be in effect by January 1, 2023. If the Council makes recommendations at this April 2022 meeting, additional information could be provided by the June meeting to finalize the Council's interim rule request. SERO encouraged the Council to be expeditious about the necessary decisions to ensure the timely implementation of the interim rule. Additionally, the Council has requested that SRFS be used to supplant MRIP-FES in an additional model run using the SEDAR 72 base model; this request may be important to consider with respect to any decision about sector allocations.

A Committee member thought it would be informative to receive an analysis from SERO at the June 2022 meeting that considers catch limit reductions and allocations in a way that provides an equitable reduction for each sector. These reductions would be respective of the catch limit reductions necessary to begin the rebuilding plan in 2023. SERO replied that a proportional reduction could be considered based on the proportion of the recent landings by each sector, since neither sector has landed its ACL recently. Another Committee member added that the request for the analysis on the change in the season start date be completed considerate of effort shifting resulting from any proposed changes in the sector allocation. SERO added that to continue the multi-use shares in the commercial IFQ program, the commercial quota would need to be less than the commercial sector ACL by the amount of the allowance for the multi-use

shares. SERO also noted that the recreational fishing season would need to be projected, due to the short season duration and the reporting resolution of MRIP-FES. Staff requested the Council consider a motion during full Council to clearly identify what it would like to see at the June 2022 meeting in the Interim Rule Analysis from SERO.

The SEFSC discussed the SRFS transition process and integration in the SEDAR 72 base model, noting that the process needed to be completed by May 28 in order to provide the completed materials to the July 7 – 8, 2022, SSC meeting for review. The SEFSC noted that the Committee should not expect a different stock status as a result of using SRFS, as the trends between SRFS and MRIP-FES were similar. The SEFSC also discussed the feasibility of an interim analysis for gag grouper, which would require established catch limits to which the representative index of relative abundance would be compared. The SEFSC is considering the SEAMAP video survey data for use in an interim analysis, once revised catch limits are established.

Council staff reviewed the timeline for completing the rebuilding plan for gag grouper. To develop the rebuilding plan in time to meet the statutory requirements, the re-run of the projections in SRFS is needed for the July 7-8, 2022, SSC meeting, which leaves little time for delays or other factors to be addressed. Council staff asked the Committee to consider the potential effects from the decision on the data that will be used in the rebuilding plan. If MRIP-FES is used for the projections on which the alternatives are based, and then SRFS is determined to be the best scientific information available for gag grouper, then the rebuilding plan timeline would be delayed while the SEFSC provides new projections. Such delays could endanger the timely implementation of the rebuilding plan by January 26, 2024.

Commercial IFQ Programs (Tab B, No. 9)

Staff provided an updated timeline for convening the initial meeting of the IFQ Focus Group (**Tab B, No. 9**), and noted that the Council's selection of members for the focus group will be announced on Thursday during full Council. Dr. Nance summarized the SSC's discussion of the National Academies of Sciences study on "The Use of Limited Access Privilege Programs in Mixed-Use Fisheries" (**Tab B, No. 7a**). The SSC noted the lack of data available for evaluating the impacts of LAPPs in existing commercial programs. Dr. Nance also provided the SSC's recommendation to the Council, which was a statement of agreement with the report's recommendations. A Committee member expressed interest in the SSC providing more specific feedback that could help the Council. The Committee member also noted the report's conclusions about a lack of data to complete mandated analyses and felt the priority should be the collection of human dimensions data.

The Committee recommends and I so move, that the SEFSC and SSC prioritize increased human dimensions data collection and analysis, consistent with the recommendations from the report, "The Use of LAPPs in Mixed-Use Fisheries."

Motion carried with no opposition.

Review of Gulf Red Grouper Interim Analysis Health Status and SSC Recommendations (Tab B, No. 10)

Dr. Nance briefly reviewed the most recent interim analysis for red grouper, which indicated that the stock size appears to be increasing in recent years. This interim analysis was viewed as a health check, since the last interim analysis resulted in revised catch advice that is still going through rulemaking. A Committee member asked when the Council could expect the interim analysis process to become more automated. The SEFSC said work was continuing towards this goal, with some species able to be analyzed with an interim analysis quite rapidly. How rapidly this revised catch advice can be acted upon will be another hurdle to navigate in the future.

Other Business

Reef Fish AP Motion Regarding Permit Leasing

A Committee member recalled a motion by the Reef Fish AP at its January 2022 meeting to request that the Council consider allowing the leasing of federal commercial fishing permits to individuals other than the permit holder. The chair of the Reef Fish AP recalled that some commercial fishermen have several commercial permits, and a more formal process for leasing those permits to other commercial fishermen could streamline efforts to use those permits. A Committee member proffered a motion with a request for the SERO to provide a presentation with this information, but it did not pass.

FWC Goliath Grouper Limited Harvest Rule Change

Ms. McCawley summarized a rule change for the harvest of goliath grouper in Florida state waters, which will allow for the take of 200 fish via lottery. A slot limit, season and area closures will be used to regulate harvest. The last stock assessment (SEDAR 47) did not pass peer-review due to concerns about the data and the model. The Committee thought it important to have the SSC consider the current OFL and ABC for goliath grouper, which has been closed to harvest in federal waters and for which fishery-dependent data have been largely unavailable since 1990. Florida indicated that the data collected from the 200-fish harvested would allow for the collection of new data points for juvenile fish. The FWC will explore what additional data are available to provide to the SSC to inform any revised catch advice recommendation.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to request that the SSC reconsider the **OFL and ABC for goliath grouper**.

Motion carried without opposition.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.