

**Reef Fish Committee Report  
August 12, 2019  
Ms. Martha Guyas – Chair**

The agenda was adopted (Tab B, No. 1), and the minutes from the June 2019 Committee meeting (Tab B, No. 2) were approved.

***Review of Reef Fish Landings (Tab B, No. 4)***

Commercial harvest of gray triggerfish is below the commercial ACL and is not projected to close before the end of 2019. The commercial sector's harvest for greater amberjack closed on June 9, 2019. The recreational sector for gray triggerfish closed on May 11, 2019, with 105.9% of the ACL landed. Recreational landings of greater amberjack opened on August 1, 2018, and did not reopen May 2019. Some greater amberjack landings data are outstanding, and the recreational ACL for the 2018/19 season is expected to be caught. Recreational seasons for gag and red grouper are not projected to close in 2019. For-hire landings for red snapper are not yet available, and landings for the private angling component remain below the state-specific ACLs at this time. Landings for hogfish, lane snapper, mutton snapper, and vermilion snapper are all currently below their stock ACLs, with lane snapper projected to close in the fall of 2019.

Commercial landings for king mackerel are under the quota for the handline component (97.1%) and over for the gillnet component (107.7%) for the 2018/19 fishing season. The gillnet component will be subject to a payback of the overage in the 2019/20 fishing season. Recreational landings for king mackerel were approximately 3.6 million pounds below the recreational quota for the 2017/2018 fishing year, and landings seem to be on a similar track for the 2018/2019 fishing year. Landings for cobia and Spanish mackerel are both well below their stock ACLs.

***African Pompano Hot Sheet (Tab B, No. 5)***

Staff presented a hot sheet about African pompano to the Committee, which summarized available biological information and recent landings data in the Gulf. African pompano is more frequently caught in federal waters by the recreational sector with the majority of these landings in Alabama and Florida. Life history and reproduction data for this species are limited. Florida is the only Gulf state with fishing regulations for African pompano, with a 2-fish vessel limit and a minimum size limit of 24 inches fork length. These limits apply in federal waters adjacent to Florida for the recreational fishery only. The Committee inquired about the establishment of the regulations by the State of Florida, and were informed that a series of stakeholder meetings had been held for this data-limited species. Issues remain with species identification, as African pompano can be confused with permit when streamers (fin rays) have been broken off. A Committee member asked that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission consider adding a transit provision to Florida African pompano regulations to clarify that state commercial limits do not apply in federal waters. The Committee also recommended that Council staff share the published hot sheets for all available species on the Council website.

***SSC Summary Report (Tab B, No. 6) and Presentation (Tab B, No. 6a)***

The NOAA Office of Science and Technology (NOAA S&T) provided updated guidance to the SSC on National Standard 2 and the best scientific information available (BSIA), with guidance being given to the national fishery management regions on how to develop their respective frameworks for determining BSIA. These frameworks should be developed by each region within the next three years. NOAA S&T also discussed a policy directive for National Standard 1 as guidance for decision-making as it relates to reference points, carryover and phase-in of catch, and data-limited stocks. Guidance on these areas will be rolled out as it becomes available.

Dr. Barbieri then clarified how steepness is used within a stock assessment model. Generally, when steepness is fixed at 1.0, it means that the assessment assumes that stock size is not related to the recruitment of individuals into the stock, and that recruitment does not vary with time. Recruitment is known to vary, so this assumption is likely violated. When steepness is below 1.0, the model assumes an increasingly strong relationship between stock size and recruitment as the steepness decreases. The SEFSC sets steepness at 1.0 for some species; however, recruitment is not ignored. Rather, the SEFSC fixes recruitment at the mean of the previous three to five years of data, thereby using the most recent time series to inform this reference point within the model. The new version of Stock Synthesis will allow for even greater flexibility with respect to handling steepness and recruitment.

The SSC evaluated the current ABC Control Rule, discussed its shortcomings, and reviewed an alternative rule presented by the SEFSC. The SSC ultimately recommended reconvening the ABC Control Rule Working Group to work on improving the rule.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends, and I so move: to reconvene the ABC Control Rule Working Group to evaluate the existing rule and propose improvements.**

NOAA S&T reviewed efforts to develop calibration methods between MRIP and the state-conducted catch and effort surveys in the Gulf. There is a clear need to rectify the issue of differing “currencies” of data between these surveys. NMFS recently released a white paper on the topic, which will be reviewed by the South Atlantic Council’s SSC in August and the Gulf Council’s SSC in September 2019.

The ongoing SEDAR 62 assessment for gray triggerfish identified biases with aging efforts between otoliths and spines. The model was modified to a length-based approach, and only minimal delays in progress are anticipated.

The scopes of work for gray snapper and west Florida hogfish were reviewed by the SSC, and the latter was approved and sent to the SEFSC. Gray snapper will be reviewed further with the SEFSC, with final SSC consideration in September 2019.

A presentation on the fishery biomass present on oil rigs and effects of explosive removal of rigs in the western Gulf was given to the SSC, and suggested large portions of stock biomass for several species may be present on these rigs. This was particularly the case with greater amberjack, raising questions by the SSC about the projected size of the greater amberjack stock in the Gulf.

Biological data on almaco jack were presented to the SSC, though many gaps in knowledge exist compared to other species managed by the Council. Staff will develop and publish a hot sheet for almaco jack in the near future.

Under Other Business, the SSC was presented with work evaluating fluctuations in yield projections following stock assessments. This work is of particular interest to the SSC and the SEFSC and will be discussed further at a future SSC meeting.

***Draft Amendment 36B: Modifications to Commercial IFQ Programs (Tab B, No. 7a) and Presentations (Tab B, Nos. 7b, c)***

Mr. Paul Parker of Catch Together gave a presentation on his work with quota banks around the U.S. Staff reviewed the Council motions used to develop the purpose statement and new program goals. Committee members discussed red snapper discards from the grouper fishing fleet as a significant problem in the fishery they intend to address through a quota set-aside. Staff reviewed Actions 2 and 3. Action 2 addresses the distribution of shares reclaimed through Amendment 36A. The Committee discussed the pros and cons of establishing a NOAA-run quota bank and expressed interest in alternates to a government-run quota bank.

**By a vote of 10 to 3, the Committee recommends and I so move: In Action 2, to modify Alternative 5 to read:**

**Alternative 5:** Distribute to a non-profit, third party-administered quota bank the reclaimed shares with oversight from NMFS, the Council, and other involved parties. The quota bank will retain the shares and distribute the allocation associated with the shares each year.

**With one opposed, the Committee recommends and I so move: To instruct staff to explore the feasibility to establish a non-NOAA quota bank using regional fishery associations (RFAs), as an example.**

The Committee discussed the alternatives in Action 2 that would distribute the reclaimed shares to existing shareholders and passed the following motions.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends and I so move: In Action 2, to modify Alternative 3 to read:**

Alternative 3: Distribute in inverse proportion the reclaimed shares held by NMFS among accounts with shareholdings of each share category within one month of the effective date of the final rule implementing this amendment.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends and I so move: In Action 2, to remove Alternative 2.**

**Alternative 2:** Equally distribute reclaimed shares held by NMFS among all accounts with

shares of each share category to shareholders within one month of the effective date for the final rule implementing this amendment.

The Committee discussed the current effects and long-term implications for the fishery of the participation in the IFQ programs by shareholders who do not possess a commercial reef fish permit. Committee members noted that a commercial reef fish permit is required to land IFQ allocation, and shareholders should have the ability to land the allocation associated with their shares. The Committee also noted that Actions 1.1 and 1.2 include a full range of alternatives and could move forward more quickly, while other actions in the document remain to be developed.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends and I so move: To begin a stand-alone document for Actions 1.1 and 1.2.**

Action 1.1 – Permit Requirements

Action 1.2 – Share Divestment

During full Council, the purpose of the action will be further discussed so that staff may draft a purpose and need for review at the next Council meeting.

The Committee inquired about the available data on discards in the longline grouper fleet in the eastern Gulf and discussed the amount of quota that would be needed to address red snapper discards through use of a quota set-aside.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends and I so move: to request that the Science Center provide estimates of discards in both weight and numbers of fish, as well as estimated release mortality for each gear type used to harvest commercial IFQ species for incorporation into Amendment 36B.**

***Draft Framework Action to Modify the Recreational For-Hire Red Snapper Annual Catch Target Buffer (Tab B, No. 8a)***

Staff reviewed the Council’s preferred alternative in the framework action (Alternative 2), which would apply the Council’s ACL/ACT Control Rule, using federal for-hire landings data from 2014 – 2017, to set the ACT buffer for the federal for-hire component 9% below the federal for-hire component ACL. Public comments (Tab B, No. 8b) supported decreasing the buffer. The codified text (Tab B, No. 8c) was reviewed, and NOAA General Counsel clarified that the codified text assumes that Reef Fish Amendment 50 will be implemented by the Secretary of Commerce.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends, and I so move: to approve the Framework Action to Modify the Recreational For-Hire Red Snapper Annual Catch Target Buffer 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.**

***Public Hearing Draft Amendment 51: Establish Gray Snapper Status Determination Criteria,***

***Reference Points, and Modify Annual Catch Limits (Tab B, No 9)***

The Committee reviewed Amendment 51 that would establish status determination criteria and modify annual catch limits for gray snapper. The Committee discussed the preferred alternatives for each action and noted that the modified Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan objectives have been included in this document.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends, and I so move: to approve the Amendment 51: Establish Gray Snapper Status Determination Criteria, Reference Points, and Modify Annual Catch Limits 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.**

***Draft Framework Action to Modify Greater Amberjack Recreational Management Measures (Tab B, No. 10)***

Staff presented a draft framework action to modify recreational bag limits, fishing year, and season for Gulf greater amberjack. The purpose of the framework action is to maximize recreational fishing opportunities while constraining harvest to the management target and rebuild the stock.

**By a motion of 8 to 5, the Committee recommends, and I so move: In Action 3, to add an Alternative 5:**

**Alternative 5:** Modify the recreational seasonal closure to be Oct 1 – April 30 and May 21 – June 30 (Open May 1 – May 20 and July 1- September 30).

The Committee also requested that NOAA SERO present greater amberjack recreational landings data by month and state at the October Council meeting.

***Presentation: Decision Points for Implementing Full-retention Bottom Longline Reef Fish Fishery: Viability, Monitoring, and Costs (Tab B, No. 11)***

Southeast Regional Office staff gave a presentation on key decision points for implementing a red snapper full-retention eastern Gulf bottom longline (BLL) fishery. Concerned fishermen have expressed interest in a full-retention fishery, which would eliminate red snapper dead discards to the greatest extent practical. For red snapper, additional allocation would come from SEFSC estimates of dead discards from the BLL fleet, and would constitute a new IFQ category. This would result in a mortality-neutral allocation. In order to ensure mortality-neutrality, all fishing with bottom longline gear would need to cease when red snapper shares or allocation are unavailable. The Council would need to determine whether shares or allocation for discards would be assigned to the vessel or the permit holder, how the allocation or shares are distributed (e.g. proportionally or equally), whether the program would be mandatory or voluntary for eastern Gulf BLL fishermen, and whether a minimum amount of allocation would be necessary to fish.

The main target species for the eastern Gulf BLL fleet is red grouper, but they also encounter red snapper. Discard rates vary between fishermen and may be dependent on various elements such as allocation available, encounter rate, number of trips, etc. Observer coverage for BLL trips vary by year. However, observer coverage is generally low, and discard estimates are highly uncertain.

Electronic monitoring will be necessary to ensure full retention is effectively implemented. This would require equipment installation and maintenance, vessel monitoring system plans, data transfer and storage, video processing and review, data quality control and archiving, analysis, and reporting. Based on a NOAA Fisheries Policy Directive, some of these costs would be borne by the BLL industry and some by NMFS; however, NMFS will not proceed with developing the program unless there is funding to do so. Some cost recovery can be collected for administrative and sampling requirements, but this program will likely generate very little additional cost recovery. Annual costs to run the program can be up to \$2 million, and who pays the costs would be determined during an amendment process based on the policy directive.

Mote Marine Laboratory in Florida has been pilot testing some of the equipment and methodologies necessary to facilitate electronic monitoring. With 16 participants across the Gulf, Mote has collected data from over 160 trips over the last three years, totaling over 800 sea days. Costs for this research thus far are approximately \$800,000. With a primary target species of red grouper, vessels have been discarding approximately 21% of the red snapper they catch. The Committee requested that the SSC review and evaluate the data collected thus far by Mote.

***Draft Amendment 52: Reallocation of Red Snapper (Tab B, No. 12)***

The SSC recommended a modification to Reef Fish FMP Objective #2 during its March meeting. The Committee initially discussed this recommendation at its April Council meeting and decided to revisit this when Amendment 52 was next brought back at a Council meeting.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends and I so move: to rephrase Objective # 2 of the Reef Fish FMP Objectives.**

- **Rephrase Objective #2 (To achieve robust fishery reporting and data collection systems across all sectors for monitoring the reef fish fishery which minimizes management uncertainty.) to “minimizes scientific, management, and risk uncertainty”.**

Staff presented the revised Purpose and Need from the April Council meeting. Staff then requested direction from the Committee on further development of Amendment 52. The Committee noted that a GAO report on allocation is anticipated by the end of 2019 and that the MRIP data recalibration is also needed for further development of Amendment 52. Dr. Crabtree stated that the MRIP data recalibration should be completed in 2020. The Committee requested a presentation of the GAO report, once available, at an upcoming Council meeting.

**Without opposition, the Committee recommends and I so move: to delay consideration of Amendment 52: Red Snapper Allocation until the January 2020 Council meeting.**

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.