

**Reef Fish Committee Report
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
March 31, 2015
Golden Nugget Casino Hotel
Biloxi, Mississippi**

Recreational Red Snapper Season Projections

Andy Strelcheck presented projections of the 2015 recreational red snapper season length under various assumptions of catch rates, average red snapper weights, and whether Amendment 40 (sector separation) is implemented (**Tab B, No. 4**). If the states implement non-compatible seasons, and if sector separation is implemented, the for-hire sector season is projected to be 40-46 days, and the private recreational angler season is projected to be 7-11 days. If sector separation is not implemented, the recreational season is projected to be 12-17 days.

If the states implement compatible seasons, and if sector separation is implemented, the for-hire sector season is projected to be 40-46 days, and the private recreational angler season is projected to be 9-16 days. If sector separation is not implemented, the recreational season is projected to be 15-21 days. A decision on Amendment 40 (sector separation) is expected by April 16. A proposed rule on the 2015 red snapper quota increase will be published on April 1, and a final rule will be published by May 1st. The final 2015 recreational red snapper season dates will be announced in May, prior to the start of the season.

Headboat Collaborative Report

Andy Strelcheck gave a presentation to review the data sampling methods and landings estimates for the headboat collaborative EFP in 2014. The red snapper and gag quotas were distributed to participating vessels by a headboat collaborative manager with an initial 5% holdback in case of overharvests. A tag system was used to verify catches. The quota allocations were transferrable between participating vessels. There were 3 transfers of gag allocations and 28 transfers of red snapper allocations. Vessel trips were made year-round, but were most frequent during the summer months. For red snapper, 98.9% of the EFP allocation was landed with most of the landings occurring by August. For gag, 50.3% of the EFP allocation was landed with peak landings in April and December.

The average red snapper weight was slightly lower than projected, while the average gag weight was about the same as projected.

Dr. Josh Abbott followed up with a presentation describing the distribution of trips, landings, and angler participation. Headboat vessel owners were surveyed regarding price and cost data, and expectations about their business strategy. Customers were also surveyed by the vessel crew.

An online survey is being developed as a follow-up for customers who provided an e-mail address.

Dr. Abbott noted that the number and overall seasonal distribution of trips did not change much in 2014, but landings (and trips) of red snapper and gag were much more evenly spread across the year. Discards per unit of angler effort on headboat collaborative vessels fell dramatically from 2013 levels.

Revised Draft – Amendment 39 – Regional Management of Recreational Red Snapper

Dr. Steve Branstetter reviewed NMFS' proposed timeline for the approval of conservation equivalency plans (**Tab B, No. 10a**). Committee members inquired about the flexibility in the steps of the timeline for approving CE plans.

Staff presented the new structure of actions and alternatives for regional management (**Tab B, No. 10b**). In Action 4, modifying the federal minimum size limit, Dr. Crabtree pointed out that the preferred alternative would lower the minimum size limit, but the recent quota increase was a result of the selectivity for larger fish by the recreational sector.

The new Action 5 includes alternatives to allow regions to establish closed areas on the EEZ. The law enforcement AP expressed concern that enforcement could be more complicated with spatial closures. Dr. Crabtree noted that he does not support this action.

In Action 6, Proposed Alternative 8 would apportion the recreational quota among the regions such that each region's allocation provides an equivalent amount of fishing days. Andy Strelcheck provided preliminary estimates for each state's resulting allocation as follows: Florida: 45-54%; Alabama: 34-41%; Mississippi: 1%; Louisiana: 6-8%; and Texas: 4-5%.

Also in Action 6, Myron Fischer proposed to add a new alternative that is a combination of Preferred Alternative 5 and Alternative 7. He explained that this allocation would incorporate both historical landings and biological abundance in the allocation.

By a voice vote, the Committee recommends and I so move to add an alternative to Action 6 to apportion the recreational quota among the regions selected in Action 3 (alt 2 & 3) based on 50% of the average historical landings formula used in Reef Fish Amendment 40 (50% from 1986-2013 and 50% from 2006-2013), and 50% based on the regional biogeographical differences in the stock used in the stock assessments.

The Committee addressed an action for for-hire vessels federal permit restrictions. Staff noted that the preferred alternative was unnecessary for regions with approved CE plans, but the provision would need to remain in the event a region did not have an approved CE plan, or was not participating in regional management.

By a voice vote, the Committee recommends and I so move to move the action for for-hire federal permit restrictions to considered but rejected.

Staff provided comments from the law enforcement AP relative to regional management. Enforcement concerns would be expected to arise from establishing various closed areas in the EEZ, and could increase costs for offshore enforcement. Although no sector specific regulations are yet in place, the AP expressed concern that different regulations would complicate enforcement. Finally, the LEAP requested to review the document again before final action is taken.

Options Paper – Joint South Florida Management

Staff reviewed the Joint Generic Amendment on South Florida Management Issues. Staff noted that the document contained many actions and alternatives (133 options in total), and that the Committee may wish to consider streamlining the document where possible, especially with respect to those options which may be outside the scope of the document.

The Committee was presented with a flow chart which outlined the types of choices which could be made to modify management of yellowtail snapper, mutton snapper, and black grouper in the south Florida region, which is casually identified as the area off Florida south of 28^o North latitude. The Committee was also asked to consider those portions of the document which examine delegation of some aspects of fisheries management for the aforementioned species, while also examining specific management changes

Yellowtail Snapper

Staff reviewed those actions addressing yellowtail snapper, noting which alternatives and options could be selected in tandem with others. Yellowtail snapper regulations are the same for the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils. The main concern with this species has been the closure of the South Atlantic's jurisdictional waters when the Gulf's jurisdictional waters were still open to fishing. It was noted that a multi-jurisdictional ABC and ACL may address that concern. Some concern was expressed about the effects of actions in the document and their potential impact outside of the south Florida region.

Mutton Snapper

Mutton snapper are currently thought to be healthy; however, fishermen have expressed concern with what they consider to be excessively high bag limits, especially during the May-June spawning season. Concerns of overharvest seem to focus on the recreational fishery; the commercial fishery typically targets mutton only when the price is such that doing so is profitable, which results in more sporadic commercial effort. The Committee also thought that changing the bag limits for mutton during the year might create confusion for fishermen, and that there should not be a cap on the commercial trip limit.

The Committee unanimously recommends, and I so move, in Action 6, to add Options 5a: 2 fish/person/day and 5b: 5 fish/person/day, to Alternative 5.

Alternative 5: Specify a commercial trip limit for mutton snapper for the handline sector during the spawning season (May and June) in the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic.

Option 5a: 2 fish/person/day

Option 5b: 5 fish/person/day

Option 5c: 10 fish/person/day

Option 5d: Some other trip limit

Gulf commercial fishermen are thought to catch mutton near the Tortugas. Law Enforcement AP (LEAP) members have remarked that any modification to the commercial trip limit should be done in numbers of fish as opposed to pounds to ease enforceability.

Staff continued going through the actions in the document. When discussing accountability measures (AMs), the Committee queried whether it was necessary to have AMs for species which are not overfished or experiencing overfishing. NOAA General Counsel advised that the Magnuson Act requires the establishment of annual catch limits and AMs for all managed species, regardless of stock status. However, the Council does maintain flexibility in determining just what those AMs should be. The Committee heard the South Atlantic Council's desire to use language in Alternatives 3 and 4 of Action 9 which reflected language in the South Atlantic Council's Generic AM Amendment; however, the Council elected not to change the current language recommended by NMFS for ease of implementing necessary management measures.

The Committee unanimously recommends, and I so move, in Action 9, to add back in Options 5a and 5b in Alternative 5.

Alternative 5: If recreational landings reach or are projected to reach the recreational ACL, NMFS would close the recreational sector for the remainder of the fishing year, unless, using the best scientific information available, NMFS determines that a closure is unnecessary.

Option 5a: If the species is overfished

Sub-option 5a(1): For yellowtail snapper

Sub-option 5a(2): For mutton snapper

Sub-option 5a(3): For black grouper

Option 5b: Regardless of stock status

Sub-option 5b(1): For yellowtail snapper

Sub-option 5b(2): For mutton snapper

Sub-option 5b(3): For black grouper

Staff reviewed actions pertaining to black grouper. The Committee was concerned about the effects of some actions on those waters in both Councils' jurisdictions occurring outside of the "south Florida" area.

The Committee unanimously recommends, and I so move, in Action 10, to remove Alternative 2b to the Considered but Rejected Appendix.

Alternative 2: Remove the shallow-water grouper closure for all affected grouper species in the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic:

Option 2a: from the Dade/Monroe County line on the east coast of Florida to Shark Point on the west coast of Monroe County, Florida.

Option 2b: Throughout each Council's jurisdiction.

The Committee unanimously recommends, and I so move that in Action 10 to remove Alternative 5, *Establish identical regulations for the shallow-water grouper seasonal closures throughout the Gulf and South Atlantic*, to the considered but rejected appendix.

Alternative 5: Establish identical regulations for the shallow-water grouper seasonal closures throughout the Gulf and South Atlantic:

Option 5a: Adopt the Gulf shallow-water grouper seasonal closures for the Gulf and South Atlantic.

Option 5b: Adopt the South Atlantic shallow-water grouper seasonal closures for the Gulf and South Atlantic.

Option 5c: Establish new and identical regulations for shallow-water grouper seasonal closures in the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic.

The Committee reviewed a motion by the South Atlantic Council to add an alternative to Action 11 which would modify the commercial seasonal closure for black grouper in the Gulf of Mexico and the South Atlantic; however, the Committee elected not to include such an alternative in the document.

The Committee noted that the main concern with groupers in the south Florida region concerned conflicting regulations for gag, red grouper, and black grouper. Attempting to add South Atlantic shallow-water grouper species to the Gulf's shallow-water grouper species composition was viewed as excessive work for species which have little to no landings in the Gulf. A Committee member reminded the Committee that the goal of this amendment is to simplify management for those stakeholders in south Florida, and the current effort seemed to be overcomplicating the issues. The Committee agreed that significant time was likely to be necessary to work on the amendment at the Joint Council meeting in June in Key West.

Staff continued reviewing proposed actions pertaining to black grouper. The Committee acknowledged that the South Atlantic shallow-water grouper closure was instituted primarily to protect spawning aggregations of gag. The following two motions were made because the Committee thought they were outside of the scope of the document.

The Committee unanimously recommends, and I so move, in Action 11 to remove Alternative 6 to the Considered but Rejected Appendix.

Alternative 6: Remove black grouper from recreational aggregate bag limits in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Committee unanimously recommends, and I so move, in Action 11, Alternative 8, to remove Sub-option 8c to the Considered but Rejected Appendix.

Alternative 8: Establish a recreational bag limit for black grouper.

Option 8a: One fish/person/day

Option 8b: Two fish/person/day

Option 8c: Three fish/person/day

Option 8d: Four fish/person/day

Option 8e: Apply this bag limit only to the following area(s):

Sub-option 8a: Off Monroe County

Sub-option 8b: In federal waters off Florida

Sub-option 8c: In federal waters of the Gulf and the South Atlantic

The Committee asked that staff modify alternatives in the document referring to Monroe County to adopt the delineated area proposed by the Joint South Florida Committee for other alternatives in the document, specifically: “from the Dade/Monroe County line on the east coast of Florida to Shark Point on the west coast of Monroe County, Florida.” Concurrently, the Committee heard feedback from the LEAP stating that creating separate grouper regulations for a county or other delineated area would cause enforcement problems. Committee members remarked that establishing county-specific regulations was not preferred and would further complicate management, as is currently being considered under Action 12. Additional LEAP comments indicated that education on when to use circle hooks and when to use other hook types may be more appropriate than establishing additional regulations.

Options Paper – Framework Action to Adjust Gag ACL and Season

Staff reviewed the actions and alternatives in an options paper for a framework action to increase the gag ACL and ACT, and modify the recreational gag fishing season. Action 1 contains alternatives to adjust the recreational ACL and ACT through 2017, and to adjust the commercial ACL and eliminate the commercial ACT. The Committee had no comments on the alternatives in Action 1.

Action 2 contains alternatives to eliminate the fixed December 3-31 recreational gag closed season, adjust the starting date of the recreational gag season, or adopt a split season. Mr. Atran

noted that the framework amendment could not be completed in time to change the opening date for 2015, but it might be possible to eliminate the December closed season in 2015 and change the starting date for 2016.

Under Action 2, Alternative 3, Committee members felt that there would be insufficient time to back-calculate a starting date that would allow the season to remain open through the end of the year. They suggested it would be better to set a fixed opening date, and if possible, a fixed closing date. For Action 2, Alternative 4 (split season), staff was looking for guidance on how to split the season. A suggestion was made to have the first season open in the spring (March/April), and the second season in the fall. The Committee had no comment on whether the first season length should be based on being open for a fixed number of day or for a fixed percentage of the quota. Mr. Atran related that staff would prepare a draft framework action for final action at the June Council meeting.

Final Action – Framework Action for Modifications to Greater Amberjack Allowable Harvest and Management

The committee reviewed the framework action considering changes to Greater Amberjack management measures. (**Tab B, No. 7a**). Three actions were considered and preferred alternatives were selected.

Action 1 considers modifications to Greater Amberjack ABC, ACL, and ACT values. The committee discussed that the stock is overfished and overfishing is occurring as of the most recent stock assessment.

The committee recommends and I so move that in Action 1, to have Alternative 3, option (a) be the preferred alternative.

Alternative 3-Set a constant ABC at the level recommended the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) for 2015

Option a: Apply ACL/ACT Control Rule:

Commercial Buffer = 15%

Recreational Buffer = 13%

Next, the committee considered changes to the recreational minimum size limit. There is concern that the current minimum size limit allows harvest of immature females and increasing the size limit would allow more individuals to reach reproductive maturity before entering the fishery.

The committee recommends and I so move that in Action 2.1, that Alternative 3 be the preferred alternative.

Action 2.1: Modify the Recreational Minimum Size Limit for Greater Amberjack

Alternative 3: Modify the minimum size limit for greater amberjack to 34 inches FL.

The committee also considered changing the current recreational closed season for Greater Amberjack. The current June 1 to July 31 closed season was enacted in Reef Fish Amendment 35 to extend the season. However, this prevented harvest during summer, the period of historically peak effort and it could be preferable to close from March through May coinciding with the spawning season.

The committee recommends and I so move that in Action 2.2, that Alternative 3 be the preferred alternative.

**Action 2.2: Modify the Recreational Closed Seasons for Greater Amberjack
Alternative 3: Modify the recreational seasonal closure to March 1 - May 31.**

Finally, the committee considered commercial management measures. A 1,923 pound gutted weight trip limit was established in Reef Fish Amendment 35 to reduce the rate of commercial harvest for this species and extend the commercial season. The committee discussed that overages have historically occurred for this fishery but the current trip limit is working well for the industry and no large overages have occurred as a result.

The committee recommends and I so move that In Action 3, to select Alternative 1 as the preferred alternative

Alternative 1: No Action – Maintain the 1,923-lb gutted weight trip limit (2,000-lb whole weight trip limit) for greater amberjack. Note: The current regulation is specified in pounds whole weight.

Scoping Summaries – Amendment 36 –Red Snapper IFQ Modifications

Staff reviewed the scoping document (Tab B, No. 8a) and provided a summary of the comments received for each of the items for potential modification. Due to time constraints, the Committee deferred further discussion on the list of items under consideration and document timeline until full Council.

Revised Draft – Amendment 28 – Red Snapper Allocation

Staff presented the management alternatives and discussed methods used to compute the recreational and commercial allocations for each alternative. Committee members discussed the effects of the MRIP recalibration of catch estimates and selectivity changes in the recreational sector. The Committee approved the following motion:

By a vote of 5 to 3, the Committee recommends, and I so move to make Alternative 9 the preferred alternative.

Alternative 9: The increase in allowable harvest (due to changes in recreational data) from the update assessment will be allocated to the recreational sector. The percentage increase in the recreational sector should be that amount attributable to recalibration of MRIP catch estimates and the change in size selectivity. Based on red snapper quotas between 2015

and 2017, resulting allocations to the commercial and recreational sectors are:

| Alternative | Year | Total ACL | Commercial | | Recreational | |
|---|------|-----------|------------|---------|--------------|---------|
| | | | ACL | Percent | ACL | Percent |
| Alternative 9: Allocate increases due to the recalibration of MRIP catch estimates and to the change in size selectivity to rec sector | 2015 | 14.300 | 6.105 | 42.7% | 8.195 | 57.3% |
| | 2016 | 13.960 | 5.911 | 42.3% | 8.049 | 57.7% |
| | 2017 | 13.740 | 5.829 | 42.4% | 7.911 | 57.6% |

Committee members noted that Amendment 28 could be implemented in early 2016. The Committee indicated that, because of the IFQ program, the authority to hold back a portion of the commercial quota was necessary to make allocation adjustments after January 1. The Committee approved the following motion:

By a vote of 7 to 1, the Committee recommends, and I so move to direct staff to develop a framework action to allow NMFS to hold back a portion of the commercial quota in anticipation of future regulatory changes.

Charge to the Reef Fish Headboat AP

Staff reviewed a draft charge to the Reef Fish Headboat AP. After reviewing the charge, the Committee passed the following motion.

By a vote of 8 to 0, the Committee recommends and I so move, that the Council accept the charge of the RF Headboat AP as written.

Other Reef Fish SSC Summary

Dr. Will Patterson noted that the hogfish and mutton snapper ABC will be set at the next SSC meeting. He also noted that the SSC accepted the update assessment on mutton snapper as the best available science and suitable for the development of management advice, but could not vote on the ABC due to a lack of a quorum.

The SSC reviewed an options paper prepared by Council staff and an IPT for an amendment to adjust the minimum stock size threshold for selected low-natural mortality stocks. A detailed summary of the SSC’s comments is provided in the full Reef Fish Committee Report.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my report.