

**Reef Fish Advisory Panel
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Meeting Summary
October 2, 2023**

The meeting of the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) was convened at 8:30 AM EDT on October 2, 2023. The agenda for this meeting, and the minutes from the October 11, 2022, meeting were approved as written. [Minutes and materials from past meetings can be reviewed here.](#)

Election of Chair and Vice Chair

Captain Dylan Hubbard was elected as Chair of the AP, and Captain Troy Frady was elected as Vice Chair.

Review of Reef Fish and IFQ Program Landings

Council Staff reviewed reef fish recreational (through wave 3), commercial, and individual fishing quota (IFQ) landings. An AP member asked when the wave 4 recreational landings would be available. Council staff clarified that the wave 4 recreational estimates should be available by mid- to late-October.

Update: MRIP-FES Pilot Study and Proposed Next Steps

Dr. Katherine Papacostas (NOAA Office of Science and Technology) provide results from a pilot study that examined question order for the Fishing Effort Survey (FES). The ordering of questions results in a lower estimate of recreational effort by as much as 40%. The next steps would be to use these adjusted FES estimates from the completed pilot, fully calibrate the historical time series for each managed species, and publish those results some time in 2026.

An AP member asked how the percent difference in effort estimates from the pilot study varied within the region and by state and Dr. Papacostas stated that information could be presented at some point in the future. Another AP member asked if anything could be inferred from the pilot study or if the Council would have to wait until 2026 to understand the full impacts of this adjustment. Dr. Papacostas answered that a better idea of the percentage difference in effort estimation as a result of survey question order could be available sooner, but until the fully calibrated time series is made available it would difficult to understand any adjustments in FES on landings estimates.

An AP member asked if there was funding available to generate landings estimates from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) each month rather than the current two-month waves. Dr. Papacostas replied that, while the FES portion of MRIP would not require a substantial

financial contribution, the catch data collected through the Access Point Angler Intercept Survey would likely require additional funds as this portion of the program is currently experiencing resource limitations. The AP member thought it important to secure the funding necessary to continue with monthly catch and effort estimates, as this increase in data resolution was critical to improving landings data collection in the Gulf.

The AP agreed that the adjustments resulting from the pilot study warranted further examination. Additionally, the AP discussed how these results likely affected the allocation determination between the commercial and recreational sector. Council staff stated that some novel management approaches incorporating private recreational fishing estimates collected by the state of Florida could be explored for some species (i.e., gag grouper, red grouper, and yellowtail snapper), while MRIP-FES is the only information available for others such as greater amberjack.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP requests that the Gulf Council delay any changes in allocation between the commercial and recreational sectors of any Gulf fishery resources that are subject to MRIP-FES until such time as the pilot study has been completed and deemed consistent with BSIA by the Gulf SSC, and the Council has empirical support for the actual level of recreational fishing effort in the Gulf.

Motion carried unanimously.

The AP agreed that a more comprehensive private recreational data collection program is needed for the private recreational sector. The AP agreed that having some type of mandatory reporting would help inform fishery management; but like all fishing regulations, enforcement would need to be simple, comprehensive, and effective. Several AP members stated they had observed interest from recreational fishers to report their catch, and thought substantial recreational sector support exists for some kind data collection through a mobile phone application.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP requests that the Council encourage the Gulf states begin development of a uniform, standardized, mandatory reporting requirement for Gulf recreational anglers.

Motion carried unanimously.

Summary: Gag Research Review from September 2023 Gulf SSC Meeting

Council staff reviewed presentations given to the SSC in September from several researchers on Gulf gag grouper. These presentations were intended to inform the SSC and assist it in providing recommendations to the Council in keeping with the Council's goals for the Gulf gag stock: to reduce fishing mortality on male gag; to constrain future harvests to the ACL; to increase the probability of rebuilding the stock; to avoid increasing discards; and, to reduce vulnerability of fishing mortality on gag during spawning in an effort to aid spawning success.

An AP member thought the Return 'Em Right program was properly positioned to help facilitate outreach for any mandatory reporting requirement for recreational anglers. Another AP member

recalled the difference between the terminal year of the science and the implementation of management, and asked what was being done to improve that. Council staff replied that the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) was working to automate the reading of video data using artificial intelligence, which they think will greatly expedite the annual availability of the count data from their video survey.

Review: Gag Interim Analysis Health Check (no catch advice)

Council staff reviewed a presentation by the SEFSC on the 2023 Gulf gag grouper interim analysis (IA), using video data through 2021 and a recruitment index through 2022. These data were prepared to help inform the SSC about the condition of the Gulf gag grouper stock. SEDAR 72 estimated the stock to be overfished and undergoing overfishing as of 2019. The assessment currently utilizes the Panama City video survey (ages 0-3) and Pascagoula video survey (age 3+) making them appropriate for consideration and fishery-independent indices for this health check. This IA for Gulf gag grouper was provided as a “health check” of the stock, since the catch limits for gag grouper were modified via Reef Fish Amendment 56 in June of 2023, but have not yet been implemented. The management measure in place for 2023 are based on the interim rule measures. AP members agreed that the next IA should also review the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute’s trap camera video index data. Some AP members also thought that any future IA consider modifications to catch advice.

Discussion: Reef Fish Framework Action: Modifications to Gag and Black Grouper Recreational Retention Limits and Commercial Spawning Season Closure

Council staff provided an overview of a framework action considering several management measures for gag and black grouper. The document contains both species due to concerns about the ability of anglers to differentiate between gag and black groupers. Measures being considered include modifications to the commercial season, and recreational bag and vessel limits.

The AP discussed the various decision points highlighted from the presentation. The AP contended there was no issue with species identification between black and gag grouper and that any consideration for black grouper should be removed from the document.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends removing black grouper from further consideration in this framework action.

Motion carried unanimously.

Several AP members stated that a commercial spawning season closure would not be an effective management measure for rebuilding gag grouper. Nor did the AP think it would provide extra protection for male gag. Instead it would most likely lead to increases in regulatory discards. Overlapping catch of gag grouper does happen when commercial fishing for red grouper, particularly with bottom longline gear. By continuing to allow concurrent open seasons for commercial gag and red grouper harvest, gag grouper could still be harvested and biologically

sampled, rather than discarded. The AP thought this was the purpose of the IFQ program. They stated that commercial fishermen actively avoid areas of known gag grouper occurrence to avoid discarding fish and wasting fishing resources when they are unable to retain gag.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends to remove further consideration of a commercial spawning season closure from the document for the following reasons:

- **It would not meet many of the Council’s stated goals for the gag stock, including decreasing discards and mortality on males.**
- **The commercial fleet has demonstrated an ability and willingness to redirect fishing effort away from known gag habitat, during and outside the spawning season.**
- **A closure would limit the availability of fishery-dependent data on lengths and ages of gag during the spawning season.**

Motion carried unanimously.

An AP member questioned the merit of the recreational gag and red grouper spawning closure in February and March deeper than 20 fathoms, and if that measure is not effective in increasing spawning success, whether it should remain in place. Another AP member countered that the 20-fathom closure was intended to reduce discard mortality while allowing continued fishing for red grouper, not to positively affect red grouper spawning success. Next, the AP discussed possible modification to the recreational bag limit. The AP agreed with the analyses presented by staff that demonstrated decreasing the recreational bag limit would not result in substantially less harvest. The AP provided several reasons for maintaining the current bag limit of two fish per person.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends the Council remove consideration of the recreational bag limit reduction from the document, for the following reasons:

- **It is not expected to decrease discards.**
- **It is not expected to appreciably increase the recreational fishing season duration.**
- **It is not expected to result in additional protection for male gag.**

Motion carried unanimously.

Similarly, the AP determined that any consideration for the proposed vessel limit alternatives would not fulfill conservation objectives for gag grouper.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends the Council remove consideration of the recreational vessel limit from the document, for the following reasons:

- **It is not expected to decrease discards.**
- **It is not expected to result in additional protection for male gag.**
- **It would disproportionately negatively affect vessels that carry 6+ passengers.**

Motion carried unanimously.

Discussion: Draft Framework Action: Modifications to Recreational and Commercial Greater Amberjack Management Measures

Council staff reviewed a presentation considering modifications to recreational (fixed closed seasons) and commercial management measures (trip limits) for greater amberjack. These measures are being considered to facilitate access to the stock while the stock rebuilds. SEDAR 70 found that greater amberjack is overfished and undergoing overfishing as of 2018. Amendment 54 to the Reef Fish FMP reduced greater amberjack catch limits for both the recreational and commercial sectors by approximately 80%.

Action 1 provides options for a fixed closed season for the recreational sector. An AP member advocated for keeping an August 1 open, and thought that changing the fishing season would eliminate the recreational fishery off Louisiana. Another AP member preferred the Council's current preferred alternative of a September 1 to October 31 season, highlighting the disparity of fishing effort issues prevalent in other Gulf regions outside Louisiana.

Substitute Motion: The Reef Fish AP supports the Council's current preferred alternative of modifying the fixed closed season to have the recreational fishing season for greater amberjack open from September 1 through October 31.

Motion carried 10 – 4 with one abstention.

An AP member thought the disagreement on recreational fishing season start dates for greater amberjack was the perfect reason for considering regional management for the species, due to the different needs of anglers in different states. Council staff reminded the AP that the Council has already passed a motion for consideration of regional management for greater amberjack. Another AP member thought that is why sector separation should be considered for greater amberjack. An AP member suggested dividing the management of recreational greater amberjack such that each region, east and west, received 50% of the recreational ACL.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends the Council explore eastern Gulf versus western Gulf management for the recreational sector for greater amberjack.

Motion carried 8 to 4 with 3 abstentions and 2 absent.

Action 2 provides options for a commercial trip limit. An AP member asked whether an emergency rule could be used to more rapidly implement the commercial trip limit reductions. Council staff replied that any rule still requires time to implement (approximately 3 months), and for an emergency rule, there needs to be a clearly defined emergency that the rule addresses. Further, staff from NOAA's Southeast Regional Office (SERO) stated that the timing of such a Council request following the October 2023 Council meeting would be problematic. SERO Staff said that multiple staff across NOAA are likely to be on leave during December, and it was unlikely that even an emergency rule could be implemented before the commercial season for greater amberjack opens on January 1. Another AP member thought the commercial sector would catch its ACT rapidly in 2024, which could cancel out the following fishing year. Council staff agreed, and did not think the commercial sector would be likely to be open beyond January 2024.

There was overharvest in 2023 of about 45% that is expected to be applied as a payback to the 2024 commercial ACT. AP members thought that the rate of harvest was going to result in the entirety of the 2025 commercial fishing season being negated due to payback provisions from overharvest. The AP also thought that this probability of a commercial closure constituted a social and economic emergency, and that an emergency rule to implement the current preferred alternative of a 7 fish commercial trip limit was warranted. An AP member asked if the 7-fish commercial trip limit would result in high-grading. Council staff replied that they looked into this possibility, but did not think it was likely due to the limited number of fish available to land under the proposed trip limit. Another AP member replied that the reduction would cause commercial fishermen to switch from a directed effort for greater amberjack to more of an indirect harvest.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP requests that the Council request an emergency rule to reduce the commercial trip limit of Gulf greater amberjack to seven fish by January 2024.

- **This will reduce the likelihood of exceeding the ACT and extend the fishing season**
- **This will reduce regulatory discards**
- **This will increase the probability of having continual commercial fishing opportunity**
- **This will continue to allow for the availability of fishery-dependent sampling of commercial harvest**

Motion carried unanimously.

Review: Vermillion Snapper Interim Analysis

Council staff reviewed the results of an Interim Analysis (IA) for vermillion snapper which used the combined G-FISHER survey as a trend index. Data from the G-FISHER index was available through 2021 and variability in the index was relatively high beginning in 2016. This resulted in a 3-year average that was higher but a 5-year average that was lower than the reference period. The IA did not result in abundance estimates markedly different from projection results generated from SEDAR 67.

An AP member remarked that if the SSC recommendation had passed, then there would be a high likelihood that vermillion snapper would be closed due to a quota closure. Another AP member stated that observations of large vermillion (~5 lbs) indicated that the stock was healthy.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends no action on vermillion snapper at this time.

Motion carried unanimously.

An AP member indicated that separating out commercial and recreational sectors for vermillion snapper was desirable. He continued that increased effort from the for-hire sector for vermillion snapper had been observed. Council staff stated that the only recreational information for vermillion snapper is generated from MRIP and the FES portion of the survey is currently

undergoing further examination. Several AP members agreed those ongoing studies would need to be completed before undergoing sector separation for vermilion snapper. Another AP member expressed concern on the timing of this exploration and stated that addressing the motion timely would be ideal.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the Council consider sector allocations for vermilion snapper upon completion of the updated MRIP-FES recreational effort calibrations.

Motion carried 9 – 3, with 3 abstentions and 2 absent.

Review: Lane Snapper Catch Analysis

Council staff summarized a presentation to the SSC by the SEFSC on the 2023 Gulf lane snapper catch analysis, using data through 2022. These data were prepared to help inform the SSC about the general condition of the Gulf lane snapper stock, which is currently evaluated periodically using an index-based method from the NOAA Data Limited Toolkit (iTarget) and informed by the catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) index from the recreational headboat fleet. The SSC ultimately recommended increasing the OFL for lane snapper to 1.116 mp ww, and the ABC to 1.088 mp ww, in MRIP-FES units. AP members commented that they were seeing an ever increasing number of lane snapper, and that those fish were getting larger year over year.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the Council follow the SSC's recommendation for updating catch advice for lane snapper, and supports setting the ACL equal to the ABC.

Motion carried unanimously.

Presentation: Draft Snapper Grouper Amendment 44 / Reef Fish Amendment 55: Catch Level Adjustments and Allocations for Southeastern U.S. Yellowtail Snapper

Council staff presented the current joint draft amendment that adjusts catch levels and allocations for yellowtail snapper and reviewed the proposed management alternatives. In light of the results from the 2023 MRIP-FES pilot study and due to the amendment addressing the jurisdictional allocation, there have been some reservation on the Councils' part that have been vocalized at recent Council meetings. Specific to the Gulf Council, yellowtail snapper are being observed with increasing frequency off Sarasota and Tampa Bay, and the length composition of those catches is getting larger. AP members expressed concern about an increase in yellowtail snapper landings in the Gulf as a result of this observed northward stock range expansion, and were hesitant to support any jurisdictional reallocation at this time. Further, the South Atlantic Council is also concerned about their action pertaining to their recreational and commercial sector allocation. The South Atlantic Council recommended to have its SSC reconsider catch advice after a new stock assessment is completed using State Reef Fish Survey data, and requested the Gulf SSC do the same. Council staff noted that there is still some uncertainty about pausing work on this

amendment because the catch advice made by the SSCs using the SEDAR 64 Interim Analysis (IA, data through 2020) is lower than the current OFL and ABC. Current quota monitoring is also still in Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey data units, while the IA updates recreational catch estimates to MRIP-FES.

AP members discussed whether the Councils should move forward with the amendment or delay it until more information about the 2023 MRIP-FES pilot study is provided. An AP member suggested removing the jurisdictional allocation altogether. Council staff explained that removal of a jurisdictional allocation would require either the South Atlantic Council to eliminate their sector allocations or for the Gulf to create sector allocations. Another AP member inquired about the differences in recreational and commercial landings between the South Atlantic and Gulf. Historically, the majority of landings are caught in the South Atlantic; the AP member was concerned that combining stock management with the South Atlantic may lead to the Gulf fishing season closing early since the South Atlantic has recently nearly reached, or exceeded, its ACL.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the Council pause work on Reef Fish Amendment 55 until completion of the updated MRIP-FES recreational effort calibrations.

Motion carried unanimously.

Public Comment (Please listen to meeting recording for full public comment)

Eric Schmidt:

- Didn't come to the meeting to provide public comment on anything on the agenda because it has all been talked about already. Instead, he came to the meeting to say goodbye; he is done with the Council process because it has regulated him out of business.
- His area (Ft. Myers and the surrounding area) was devastated by a hurricane last year but even if there hadn't been a hurricane, there would still be nothing to catch. A charter business that has bills to pay 12 months a year can't sustain itself if it can only operate 5 months per year.

Other Business

Discussion about Annual Remaining Quota from the Federal For-hire Red Snapper ACT

An AP member recalled that in 2021, near the end of October, the remaining quota from federal for-hire red snapper ACL was reported and the season reopened in November 2021. The AP member thought the Council should support this process of reopening the federal for-hire component for red snapper whenever there is available quota left for that component to catch.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the Council request NMFS take immediate determinate action using 2023 data from waves 1 – 4 for the timely

reopening of the federal for-hire component for red snapper if there is enough of the for-hire ACT remaining to do so.

Motion carried unanimously.

Mid-water Snapper

An AP member supported removing wenchman from the mid-water snapper complex, since it is not caught with any of the other species in that complex. Council staff reminded the AP that the Council has already directed staff to begin work on this amendment, and will begin discussion of options at its January 2024 meeting.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP requests that the Council remove wenchman from the mid-water snapper complex.

Motion carried unanimously.

Pulley Ridge Fishing Effort

An AP member thought that there had been a strong recreational effort shift to mid-water snapper on Pulley Ridge. Long-time fishermen of that area have reported decreasing length compositions from the popular species in that region, which have been corroborated by NMFS field port sampler data in the last several years. AP members stated that some fishermen have recently supported lower bag limits for mid-water snapper as a result. The AP thought that effort shifting to deeper water species was not isolated to Pulley Ridge, and likely is occurring Gulf-wide.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP requests that the Council examine recreational deep-water grouper, tilefish, and mid-water snapper vessel landings.

Motion carried unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:10 pm eastern time on October 2, 2023.

Meeting Participants

Reef Fish AP Members

Dylan Hubbard, *Chair*
Troy Frady, *Vice Chair*
Brenda Ballard
Charles Bergmann
Jane Black-Lee
Douglass W. Boyd
Patrick Cagle
Ronald Chicola
Harold Dauterive
Jason DeLaCruz

Josh Ellender
Martin Fisher
Johnny Green
Keith “Buddy” Guindon
Gregory Mercurio
John Marquez, Jr
Mike Prasek, Jr

Council Representative

Ed Walker