

Public Hearing Summary
**Reef Fish Amendment 53: Red Grouper Allocations and Catch Limits
and Targets**

Madeira Beach, Florida
June 7, 2021

Council/Staff

Tom Frazer
Carrie Simmons
John Froeschke
Matt Freeman
Emily Muehlstein

80 Members of the public attended.

Mike Birren – Commercial Fisherman: Hernando Beach, FL

Mr. Birren owns three commercial boats and a fish house. He relies on grouper in the summer. He says quota is harder to find than usual and this year is a better year for grouper fishing than it has been in years past. The Council should consider options other than the preferred Action 1, Alternative 3. It will devastate him financially and he thinks the lesser of two evils are Action 1, Alternative 2 or 6. They're trying to earn a living, and they have already had to deal with storms and red tide. Alternative 3 is not desirable.

Jim Zurbrick – Commercial Fisherman: Steinhatchee Florida

It bothers him that the Council says it can't make choices because of the law. The Council just rejected red snapper changes for state data collection calibration on the same premise. This proves that the Council can fix the red grouper issue if it has the willpower to not follow the law, like it does for red snapper. To reward the recreational sector with more red grouper based on historical overfishing, especially when there has been a hard catch limit for commercial fishermen, is not fair. Action 1, Alternative 2 should be selected as preferred because it retains the current allocation. Calibration can happen, but that doesn't mean we have to reallocate.

Trenton Knepp – Commercial Fisherman

He says that 45.6% of the red grouper quota has been caught so far this year and they can't find quota anymore. If the catch limits are reduced, people will be out of work. Mr. Knepp supports Action 1, Alternative 2 or 6. Everything including his entire business is on the line and any reductions to the commercial ACL will make it impossible for him to find quota to fish.

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Ed Maccini – President of Southern Offshore Fishing Association

Recreational fishermen have been exceeding their quota since the beginning of time. This new data collection program calibration sugarcoats the issue under the guise of recalibration. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2 or 6. He prefers Alternative 2. The current preferred alternative creates a system of haves and have not's by supporting recreational fishermen over seafood consumers. The Young Fisherman Act is trying to create new commercial fishermen, but they can't be recruited to the industry if the commercial quota is reduced.

Aaron Mays – Commercial Fisherman: Crystal River, FL

Mr. Mays strongly discourages preferred Alternative 3 in Action 1. It will increase discards and take fish away from an accountable sector and give them to a sector that has never been held accountable. It's a bad precedent to set and will encourage mismanagement of others species down the line. Small operators can't access quota already and this will put them out of business. Action 1, Alternative 2, while not perfect, is the best alternative for moving forward. It is the only option that doesn't penalize the commercial sector. The recreational data collection program works off the premise that recreational fishermen tell the truth and overfishing seems to be helping them.

Meredith Pelton – Commercial Fisherman: Crystal River, FL

Ms. Pelton opposes Alternative 3 and urges the Council to select Alternative 2 in Action 1. Recalibration can occur without reallocation. Alternative 3 assumes that the new data collection is as good today as it was 35 years ago. Reallocation, because of recalibration, penalizes commercial fishermen and their livelihood. Even worse, this could be true for more species than just red grouper. Alternative 2 won't take red grouper from the commercial fishermen and reward the recreational sector that is not accountable for their harvest.

Charlie Renier - Commercial Fish House Owner

It will crush his business if 600,000 pounds of red grouper quota is taken away from the commercial sector. He supplies seafood to wholesalers, restaurants, grocery stores and supplies fish to all the people who eat seafood because they can't afford a boat. He supports Alternative 2 or 6 in Action 1 because either one helps the commercial sector.

Shan Roper – Commercial and Charter Operator: Steinhatchee, FL

As much as he wants more red grouper for charter fishing, he thinks that Action 1, Alternative 2 creates the greatest overall benefit to the United States. If we don't provide seafood to the U.S. consumers, then other countries will. Action 1, Alternative 6 would be his second choice.

Brian Lewis – Commercial Fisherman: Clearwater, FL

80% of his catch is red grouper. He is a member of the Shareholders Alliance and the Gulf Fisherman's Association. It doesn't make sense that the Council is selecting Alternative 3 in Action 1. This would transfer 600,000 pounds of fish to an unaccountable fishery. Let's not forget the commercial sector and the American consumer lost redfish already. The trip tickets are not manipulated and accurately

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describe the commercial landings. However, the recreational sector does not have accurate landings. When economists analyze fish for the commercial sector, they have an accurate description of harvest and who is receiving the fish. The only way to enforce quotas in the recreational fishery is to have accountability in both sectors. The Council has a judiciary duty to uphold the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA). Action 1, Alternative 3 undermines the IFQ program, new entrants, and young fishermen. It also increases discards from the recreational sector. He prefers Action 1 Alternative 2 and Action 2, Alternative 3.

Paul Reeves – Commercial fisherman: Steinhatchee, FL

Mr. Reeves primarily catches red grouper. He asserts that the Council is essentially asking him to take a 20% pay cut and 20% reduction to his business with the preferred Alternative 3 in Action 1. Reallocation from recalibration hurts commercial fishermen. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2.

Dylan Hubbard – Hubbards Marina, Charter Fisherman: John's Pass, FL

Everyone can agree that there are data concerns. The fishery is expanding and the red grouper stock is coming back. The fishery's cyclical nature and the Interim Analysis process needs to be automated to smooth over those effects on the fishery. The charter sector, a limited access, highly regulated fishery has been striving to be more accountable. It's a shame that they're being lumped in with the private sector. Most of the time the charter and commercial sectors work together, but this amendment pits them against one other. The stakeholder groups prosecute the fishery differently. Recreational fishermen don't care about their percent allocation or their pounds of ACL, they care about seasons. It's disappointing that the science isn't catching up with what's on the water. Charter fishermen don't know if catch levels can go up and it's hard to make a decision without knowing. Red grouper is a staple in the region. Red grouper has always been a staple to the for-hire industry while other species have short seasons. It's a shame that the Council's bandwidth is being consumed by red snapper, leading to ignoring other important species. These allocation decisions are going to occur with every new stock assessment and if management and stakeholders are going to continue to fight against each other, they're going to continue to be in meeting rooms like this. Sectors should unite to pressure management for our historical access. If sectors are willing to meet in the middle, like they attempted at the Reef Fish AP meeting, it's possible to promote compromise. Everyone's access is shrinking and there is an opportunity to work together. Without that, he supports Action 1, Alternative 3. The Charter Fishing Association also supports this action.

Sean Heverin – Fish House Owner: Madeira Beach, FL

It's seems silly to have the Young Fisherman's Act and take away access at the same time. The data are not credible and should be more accountable. The commercial sector is being backed into a corner to make a decision on these alternatives that they didn't come up with. If he is asked to support any alternative, it would be Action 1, Alternative 2. He cautions that this is going to keep coming up and we need to find a better solution so they don't have the same conversation over and over. The

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recreational sector will continue to grow along with the pressure to take fish away from the commercial sector.

Eric Brazier – Shareholders Alliance

He thanked the Council and staff for holding these meetings in person because this issue is controversial. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2, which allows for recalibration without reallocation. It's very rare to see the Southeastern Fishing Association, Fish For America, SOFA, the Shareholders Alliance and OFF all on the same page. It's unfair that these business men and women are being penalized as a result of reallocation; it literally takes money out of their pockets. Taking commercial quota and giving it to the recreational side is a false promise; it will not provide a longer season because the recreational season is open access. The Council is considering taking 20% of the red grouper quota away from the commercial sector. You can recalibrate without reallocating. The Council can improve the recreational catch estimates and address the data collection needs without harming the commercial sector. Alternative 2 in Action 1 is the only alternative that is legally viable and good for the stock. Also, the for-hire fleet is trying to do the right thing and is fundamentally different from the recreational sector. Convene the Reef Fish AP and find a way to help the for-hire sector get the season they want.

Steve Maisel – Commercial Fisherman

He supports the Shareholders Alliance position. Reallocation is not fair or equitable to commercial fishermen and only punishes them for staying within their quotas. The Council needs to focus on water quality and reduce the effects of future red tides. Don't reallocate red grouper based on recalibration. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2.

Jason DeLaCruz – Commercial Fisherman and Fish House Owner: John's Pass, FL
During the SSC meeting they talked about the fact that the scientists were very uncomfortable with reallocation discussions using MRIP-FES. They like FES and the methodology, but were not comfortable with reallocation based on it. The only option is Action 1, Alternative 2 because at least this keeps the commercial fishermen where they currently are. He really has trouble with the fact that fisheries managers can't run the Interim Assessment with the alternatives presented in Action 1. Especially since the people the Council trusts to do this on the SSC had lots of challenges with using FES to discuss reallocation.

Scott Childress – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Childress became a fulltime commercial fisherman when the IFQ program went into place because he knew it would allow for a sustainable business. The recreational data is not up to par. Despite that, it's amazing how close you can get with the information. Right now, stakeholders are being asked to make this decision based on the new science, which isn't perfect, but may be the best available. This fishery is just recovering and fisheries managers shouldn't give more fish to the unaccountable sector. The science needs to get better before the Council reallocates. Red grouper is not his target species. As a spearfisherman he lands about 5,000 pounds a year, but since 2015, he's had bad years where he only shot 500 pounds. The 2014 red tide event wiped out red

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grouper. They're just now coming back. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2. Alternative 6 sets a bad precedent. If this is happening with red grouper now, what happens with gag? Fisheries managers need more data from the recreational sector before they get the commercial fish.

Gary Bell – Fish House Owner

He supports Action 1, Alternate 2.

Pat Neukam – Charter Fisherman

Action 1, Alternative 2 is not a good option for charter captains. He has a year-round business for red grouper and Alternative 2 would bring him down from a 12 month season to a 7 month season. This will damage the for-hire sector. His son rushed through college so he could take over the charter business and this will destroy the industry which includes captains and mates. This is their lively hood and will damage many people's lives. There has to be another alternative that keeps the commercial and charter sectors afloat so they can be profitable. There are a lot of for-hire permit holders that live on red grouper. Please look for another way to do this so the charter sector doesn't take a hit.

Casey Streeter – Fish House and Commercial Boat Owner

He does not have enough red grouper allocation to last the year and can't find more. The American public loses out from this. It's already a battle to be a fisherman even without these proposed cuts. He has four captains under the age of 30 and they're going to get out of the fishery if they can't make a living.

Brad Gorst – Charter and Commercial Captain

Action 1, Alternative 2 can recalibrate without reallocating. Preferred Alternative 3 is not fair because it penalizes the commercial fishery. This local fishery is primarily grouper fisherman, and red snapper is basically a bycatch fishery. On the charter side, they'll lose too. He is against closing the season and loves the IFQ program. A PFQ system would work in the for-hire industry and tags would work in the private fishery. He also supports Action 2, Alternative 1. The Council should also consider slightly reducing the 5% for the gag multiuse shares but, since it was built into the IFQ, it shouldn't be removed completely.

Lisa Schmidt- Commercial Fisherman

She doesn't support reallocating and rewarding an unaccountable sector which would hurt people who want to make a living.

Fort Myers, Florida

June 8, 2021

Council/Staff

Tom Frazer

John Froeschke

Matt Freeman

Carly Somerset

60 Members of the public attended.

Tim Dillingham – Commercial Fisherman: Naples, FL

Mr. Dillingham owns a commercial boat and is a dealer. He says that the commercial fishermen are fighting for their lives and just went through issues with red snapper management and that they can't afford to do that anymore. Smaller operators can't even get quota, and if even they can find it, it's too expensive. There is not a red grouper population issue in the area. His main concerns are the accountability of the recreational sector and the numbers. Commercial fishermen are doing everything they can to be accountable and are not going over their catch limits. He's also concerned about the recreational data. The CCA is embedded in the Council and will vote for private anglers. He stated that the commercial sector needs to contact their governors and have more Council members representing the commercial sector. The Gulf Council is very lopsided right now. He asked about what folks would do when commercial fishermen can't provide fish for those who can't fish for themselves. He prefers Action 1, Alternative 2.

Rick Warren – Charter Fisherman: Boca Grande, FL

Mr. Warren is a charter fisherman and has been one for a little over a decade. He understands that Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 is rough for the commercial sector, but it's important for him to be able to fish for red grouper as well. He doesn't want to be pitted against the commercial fishermen. He'd like the Council to consider removing the for-hire component from the recreational sector like they did with red snapper. Private anglers will want to be more accountable when they see that the for-hire component has longer seasons. He is for Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3.

Eric Schmidt – Commercial and For-hire Fisherman: Ft. Myers, FL

Mr. Schmidt has been fishing for 38 years commercially and recreationally. He is in favor of Action 1, Alternative 2 because it will otherwise be a slippery slope of reallocation based on FES. Sector separation should be pushed forward, to separate the private anglers from the for-hire component. The only user group growing exponentially without any accountability is the private angling component. As far as the commercial sector goes, they have an inability to find any allocation currently. It's his opinion that someone should have both a permit and a vessel associated with an account in order to own any shares. He stated that there is always an issue with red

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grouper where it cycles up and down, and the Council is always lagging behind in management for what fishermen are seeing in real time.

Tom Marvel – Commercial Fisherman: Naples, FL

Mr. Marvel supports Action 1, Alternative 2. He stated that the recreational sector is not accountable. If they were accountable, this issue would not be in front of them. He understands that the Council has to use the best scientific information available, but the Council doesn't have to reallocate to address the new survey data. He feels that the new survey is a little better, but not perfect. When allocations are set, they are sacred, and those things should not be treated lightly.

Randy Wamble – Commercial Fisherman and Dealer: Naples, FL

Mr. Wamble prefers Action 1, Alternative 2 and opposes Preferred Alternative 3.

Bucky Kauffman – Commercial Fisherman: Ft. Myers, FL

Mr. Kauffman stated that red grouper is pretty healthy and that he hasn't seen a downtick. Red grouper is recovering quite well since red tide. 31% of his income so far this year has been from red grouper, and he is against any amendment that would take away quota from commercial fishermen. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2.

Patrick Purslow – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Purslow is a commercial fisherman and is in favor of Action 1, Alternative 2.

Andy Egeland – Commercial Fisherman: Venice, FL

Mr. Egeland stated that any further reduction in quota will put him out of business and that Action 1, Alternative 2 is the only option for commercial fishermen.

Trenton Knepp – Commercial Fisherman: Nokomis, FL

Mr. Knepp is unable to find quota anymore because the people who have it keep it for themselves. He proposes the recreational bag limit be dropped to one fish per person, which will allow the season to be open year-round.

William Miken – Commercial Fisherman: Venice, FL

Mr. Miken commented that if the Council takes quota away, his business will go under. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2.

Wendell Kittles – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Kittles opposes anything other than Action 1, Alternative 2.

Nick Ruland – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Ruland has been in the business for almost 40 years. He opposes Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 and supports Alternative 2. The commercial sector has a huge investment in the fishery. Recreational anglers can get a license for \$20, but the commercial fishermen have to pay a lot more. That's missing in the impact from the commercial sector. Mexican importers would make more money. The commercial

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sector would be shut down all of the fall season. Unless someone is getting COVID monies, there's no way to financially support a family from commercial fishing.

Ralph Andrew – Commercial Fisherman: Ft. Myers Beach, FL

Mr. Andrew operates a bandit boat and has been fishing for 40 years. He opposes Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 and supports Alternative 2. He stated that it is wrong for the Council to take fish from commercial fishermen.

Matt Pless – Commercial Fisherman: Ft. Myers, FL

Mr. Pless is a new owner/operator. He opposes Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 and supports Alternative 2. He stated that he is at around 50% of his catch currently, so he will probably be done around November. As a new business owner, Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 would destroy his business. The recreational anglers could be made more responsible by having to report in a similar manner as the commercial fishermen. There are no real time numbers for private anglers. Private anglers who can afford a \$1 million boat should also be able to afford a VMS.

Rebecca Bossert – Commercial Fisherman: Ft. Myers and Madeira Beach, FL

Ms. Bossert has been in the industry since the age of 6. She supports her two girls and her mom. If the Council takes away more of her quota, that will hinder her ability to support her family. She opposes Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 and supports Alternative 2.

Roy Kibbe – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Kibbe owns a fish house and is a third-generation fisherman. He doesn't own any quota, but tries to get allocation, which is almost impossible now. After stone crab season, he turns to red grouper. He can't afford red snapper allocation either. He is for Action 1, Alternative 2 and against Alternative 3. Otherwise, they are pretty much out of business after stone crab season. Some entities have bought a lot of quota and are just sitting on it.

Casey Streeter – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Streeter is a first-generation fisherman and owns a fish house. He is against Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 and for Alternative 2. Red grouper is primarily a Florida fishery. Taking away more red grouper will cripple the industry and put all the small boat operators out of business. He stated that people can't find or afford allocation right now. He opposes any reallocation.

Katie Fisher – Owner of Commercial Vessels and a Fish House

Ms. Fisher owns a fish house and several vessels. She was thankful for a local meeting and thinks these types of meetings should be a regular occurrence so that fishermen can provide input for management. She supports Action 1, Alternative 2 and opposes Preferred Alternative 3. She stated that they'd had one of the toughest years in 2020 and had to navigate through unpredictable circumstances. They have a retail fish house and deal directly with the American people and were important for people's food security. Reallocating this fish to the unaccountable recreational sector takes away

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from her community's food security and from America's food security. Reallocating takes away from job security as well. Trying to find allocation is already a problem in the commercial sector. They want to work towards solutions that will benefit everyone.

Jay Mullins – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Mullins is a commercial vessel owner/operator. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2 and opposes Preferred Alternative 3. He asked what would happen to small commercial operators when quota is taken away and questioned how anyone could justify the socioeconomic destruction. He stated that more sustainable decisions needed to be made. He stated that growth trends in Florida are being seen and that those people should be allowed to fish, but even with 10% of people having deviant behavior, that means a lot of people are fishing illegally. The commercial sector serves the American public.

Trent Mebust – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Mebust runs a boat for Casey Streeter. He opposes Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 and supports Alternative 2. Reallocating makes no sense to him. The recreational sector is overharvesting and not venting fish that they throw back.

James Bergan – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Bergan runs a boat for Casey Streeter. He stated that if the Council takes away any red grouper from the commercial sector, that will take away about 70% of his income. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2.

Zach Catlin – Commercial Deckhand

Mr. Catlin opposes Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 and supports Alternative 2.

Frank Ventimiglia – Charter Fisherman: Ft. Myers, FL

Mr. Ventimiglia stated that the Council and NMFS are not getting good data on recreational fishing. Due to overpopulation and pollution, good fishing is about 40 miles out now. He questioned how the private anglers have expensive boats, but can't report their landings on a cell phone. He proposed separating the charter component from the private angling component. He recommended closing the recreational season during hurricane season. He commented that individuals from other states could hold quota, which shows no respect for native rights. A focus of the Council should be on the future generation coming into the business. He doesn't think the Council needs to take away from the commercial sector and give to the recreational sector. He stated that the charter component needs red grouper from Halloween to July 4th and then they can fish for something else during that other time period.

Blake Dorchak – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Dorchak stated that it's impossible to find red grouper allocation. Red grouper is their main catch. He is against Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 and for Alternative 2.

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Alex Trapasso – Commercial Fisherman: Naples, FL

Mr. Trapasso does not own any quota and leases all of his allocation. He has struggled to find allocation for red grouper, red snapper, tilefish and even deepwater grouper. Reallocation of red grouper would be financially devastating for him. Reallocation would also increase the price of allocation. He is for Action 1, Alternative 2 and against Preferred Alternative 3.

Steve Poppell – Commercial Fisherman

Mr. Poppell feels like this is a betrayal. He stated that this is a very difficult business to stay in and that operating costs are through the roof. After the virus, the cost of maintenance became very expensive. He is for Action 1, Alternative 2. The commercial sector is on the brink of destruction as is.

Jake Kibbe – Commercial Fisherman: Pine Island, FL

Mr. Kibbe stated that he can't afford to commercially fish anymore and will be the last generation in his family to fish. He is now in the construction business to be able to afford to fish commercially. He is for Action 1, Alternative 2 and opposes Preferred Alternative 3.

Mathew Sexton – Commercial Fisherman: Naples, FL

Mr. Sexton is for Action 1, Alternative 2. He stated that the recreational sector takes a lot more than anyone thinks.

Webinar
June 10, 2021

Council/Staff

John Sanchez
Martha Guyas
Matt Freeman
Emily Muehlstein
Carly Somerset
Jessica Matos

6 Members of the public attended.

Chad Hickman – Charter: Central Florida

Red grouper is a big part of his revenue throughout the year. There are smaller supplemental seasons, but red grouper is his bread and butter. Anything that is taken away from the charter side will affect his businesses. He's heard a lot about how it would impact the commercial side, however he doesn't know when the last time the commercial quota was caught. Mr. Hickman doesn't want any money or fish taken off their table, but they have a lot more options to catch fish. He doesn't have the luxury of running out 80 miles on a day trip. He supports Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3. There are a ton of vessels in the central Florida area that would be devastated by reductions. Charter vessels are lumped in with the private recreational sector and he would like to see consideration for separation in the future. In central Florida, red grouper needs to be open year-round. He doesn't want to see a bag limit change because two red grouper is an ideal number. A December closure is fine because their gag fishing is good in the winter. As an aside, he noted that the hogfish bag limit doesn't need to be five and expressed concern about the stock.

Chad Unger – Private Recreational Angler: Naples

He has several friends that are charter captains and doesn't want to take away from them. If he had to support anything, Action 1, Preferred Alternative 3 is the best bet. He doesn't want to see a season closure and would prefer an increased size limit over a change in bag limit. A 20-inch red grouper isn't ideal. He would like to see the size limit increase to 24 inches. The charter fishermen need a year-round fishing season. The average boat with today's technology is going out at least fifty miles, and if people are burning fuel they need to be able to fish.

Panama City, Florida

June 14, 2021

Council/Staff

Martha Guyas

John Froeschke

Emily Muehlstein

16 Members of the public attended.

Charlie Bergmann –

Since “No Action” is not a viable option, he supports Action 1, Alternative 2. It sticks in his craw that the commercial fishery has been limited access since 1990 and the for-hire has been limited since the mid 90’s. The recreational component of the fishery expands every year and there is not effort cap. The Council should consider managing red grouper with three sectors or require tags in the recreational sector. The Council has talked about tags and he is supportive of that if we want an accurate count of the number of anglers and what they’re harvesting. If there is a fish in the cooler without a tag snapped on, then the anger is in violation. Deer hunters use tags and that system should work for fish. Mr. Bergmann supports Action 2, Alternative 2.

Bob Zales II – SOFA and National Association of Charterboat Operators

Allocation is a critical issue. Arbitrarily shifting the current allocation based on the new FES data system is a mistake. That system changes regularly because of its shortcomings and every time it changes the data has to be calibrated back in time. Leaving the status quo allocation benefits the commercial industry. Mr. Zales didn’t see any consumer or restaurant impacts accounted for in the document and he would like to understand that better. The recreational sector would lose \$16 million, and the season would be impacted. In the recreational sector, the discards are high so shifting allocation in favor of the recreational sector would increase the discards. The Preferred Alternative 3 would shift allocation and benefit no one, including the stock. There is only negative impact from Preferred Alternative 3. He supports Action 1, Alternative 2 and Action 2, Alternative 3. The access to multiuse grouper shares should be preserved and the recreational buffer should be increased according to the control rule. This amendment has existed for a long time, and it will create a disaster. This has been going on for years and the stock is cyclical. You can’t change mother nature. Every time allocation discussions have come up, the recreational sector has come out of the woodwork to support allocation but, none of them are advocating to change this allocation. The commercial sector is asking for the allocation to remain as is and the recreational community must not see the benefit of it.

Mark Tryon – Commercial Fisherman: Gulf Breeze, Florida

Mr. Tryon primarily fishes for red snapper. He has not caught any red grouper this year. One thing that is peculiar in this situation is that there have been very few recreational anglers at any of these meetings advocating for reallocation. If it is such an urgent issue to reallocate to the recreational sector then where are they? Any reallocation shouldn’t

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be done without recreational accountability. The current system of estimating, extrapolating, and essentially guessing recreational harvest is woefully inadequate. It is unconscionable to make such an important decision based on inadequate data. Back when the Council dealt with red snapper reallocation, it was described as “tangible pain” for the commercial sector with little gain for the recreational side. This is the same situation. Unlike the other reef fish species, which are severely regulated, red grouper has had year-round access and a 2-fish limit. If there is any concern for closures, the Council should consider a step-down from a 2-fish bag limit to a one fish on the bag limit. We’ve had a tremendous imbalance on seafood trade and this exacerbates the problem by taking more domestic seafood off the market. He doesn’t understand why we never seem to have an alternative that reallocates from the recreational side to the commercial side. Especially with the IFQ being a totally accountable fishery.

Chris Niquet- Commercial IFQ Owner

In the red grouper fishery 287,000 fish were discarded by the commercial sector and \$2,500,000 fish were discarded by the recreational sector. Recreational fishing causes nine times the discards. In Action 1, all of the alternatives presented only have an 8 or 9 percent buffer on the recreational sector, how can you have a 9% buffer if you have 100% discards rate vs. fish caught. There is something extremely wrong with this. Recreational anglers complain that they don’t have access to the fish, but they do, and they’re throwing it away with these discards. The recreational sector needs to get its house in order. Reallocation penalized commercial fishermen twice: first, you’re taking away commercial quota and second, you’re reducing the overall quota. A 20% reduction is devastating to the commercial industry including fish houses, restaurants, and transport trucks which all contribute to the economy. If you take 600,000 pounds of red grouper from the seafood supply chain, you will impact \$9,000,000 worth of shares, \$3,300,000 of allocation each year. Hitler said, “you can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time but, you can fool all the people all the time.” Mr. Niquet is tired of being lied to. He believes the Council agenda is to put all the fish in the IFQ fishery and shift fish in the recreational sector which wastes 10 times what the commercial industry does.

Buster Niquet- Commercial IFQ Owner

Mr. Niquet advises the Council to table Amendment 53. Forget about it until you get data that is believable. There is no reason to take action and he is against all of the proposed changes. None of the alternative satisfy him.

Austin Abrams- Seafood Dealer

The commercial industry has shrunk because more laws lead to less commercial fishermen. The recreational industry however, has skyrocketed. Action 1, Alternative 2 is the best choice. Alternatively, the Council shouldn’t do anything at all until there are better numbers. This Amendment and red grouper are just the start. Next, it will be red snapper, then deep water grouper. The commercial industry provides seafood to the people that don’t have the ability to fish. The recreational sector doesn’t care about grouper, that’s why there are no recreational representatives at the meetings, because they don’t care. The commercial industry cares about this fishery.

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Eddie Davis – Seafood Restaurant: Panama City, FL

Mr. Davis Supports Action 1, Alternative 2. Gutting the commercial ACL impacts tourism and the working class. The recreational benefits of allocating shifting don't out way those impacts. His restaurant has 130 employees and sell 600 pounds of grouper a week. Their customers expect them to have grouper on the menu. If you cut the quota, it will have a ripple effect and cause them to cut employees. Maintain the current allocations.

Walter Akins – Wildlife Statistician, Charter and Commercial Fisherman

He believes this is a joke. He retired from UGA where he was a wildlife statistician. In the 1800's fish tags were used. They tagged as many as they could and counted recovery. He focused on quail. He is presently a Coast Guard instructor. Tagging is a good way to estimate fish populations. A previous amendment that he read was filled with statements such as "assumed that this, estimated that," and none of that is statistics. Ronald Reagan said "Be afraid of a person that says 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'" Several years ago, at a meeting in Destin, FL he said there is no way a charter boat can legally fish. Nine of his last ten trips were ruined by dolphins. He was supposed to throw fish back, but that meant they were breaking the law by feeding dolphins. His suggestion is that the Council doesn't close the season. Instead, anglers should keep the first two fish they catch whether its 2-inches or 2-feet.

Greg Abrams – Seafood Dealer

He tried to get his kids/family to go a different route and not get involved in the seafood industry. Government employees get paychecks no matter what. You tell us we can't falsify our testimony, but the government is doing it with this bad data. This is about reallocation. We know what the Council is trying to do and we know this is a dog and pony show. This is a waste of time. The Council is not considering restaurants and what an economic disaster reallocation will have on the state of Florida.

Collins Abrams – Seafood Restaurant

This is only the second or third meeting he has attended. The Council is here to manage the fishery and take care of what's in the ocean based on scientific data. The data is bad. Personally, he's never been approached at the dock, nor has he had a mail-in survey. Use the good data you have from the commercial sector which is recorded and accounted for. Why do all the alternatives in the document move away from data by allocating to an unaccountable sector? If the goal is to protect the species and understand what's coming from the Gulf, why do that? The restaurant industry equates to jobs. You can put whatever economic impact into the analysis, but taking away from the commercial sector takes away jobs (fish cutters, restaurant employees, processors, truck drivers). This is the worst time to shut down a domestic product and the data doesn't prove that it should be done.

John Harris – Commercial Fisherman

He supports Action 1, Alternative 2. He is against reallocation of any kind.

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David Krebs- Ariel Seafoods: Sebastian, FL

He has been around the commercial fishery his entire life. Back in the early 80's, he caught 4,000 pounds of yellowedge grouper in 4-days with longline gear. He went back out and did it again the next day. Since then, he's gotten smarter and became a steward. The entire commercial industry has and they have continuously come before the Council to ask for accountability. The commercial industry is also begging for recreational accountability. There is no way to set a season length that will satisfy the problem. High-grading and discarding from the unaccountable recreational system is a problem in a growing fishery. He supports what everyone else in the room is saying.

Bj Burkett- Charter and Commercial

He has a big problem with Preferred Action 1, Alternative 3. There is no reason for this change. Leave allocation and catch limits the way they are; it's not going to change the fish stock either way. Neither side, recreational or commercial, has caught its quota in the last four years. The stock is getting better so, why change it at this point, it solves nothing. If no action can be selected, Mr. Burkett supports status quo: Action 1, Alternative 2.

Webinar
June 16, 2021

Council/Staff

Martha Guyas
Matt Freeman
Emily Muehlstein
Carly Somerset
Jessica Matos

6 members of the public attended.

Chad Unger – Private Recreational

Mr. Unger supports Action 1, Alternative 3. The Council should consider increasing the recreational size limit to 24-inches. This would keep the smaller spawners in the stock and hopefully help avoid a season closure benefiting the private anglers and charter industry that was hit so hard by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Eric Brazer- Reef Fish Shareholders Alliance

While the Council is bound by 'best scientific information available' and has to take action, it does not need to take action on reallocation. Separate considerations for allocation from actions that adjust catch limits. Calibrating with MRIP-FES does not require reallocation. Action 1, Alternative 2 will accomplish the necessary data calibration while legally avoiding allocation. The Council needs to push for an interim assessment. This extra work for the Science Center staff could allow the industry to avoid negative economic impacts. Charter fishermen are put in a bad situation and this could impact their season. Action 1, Alternative 2 is the clear path. Get the interim assessment done now. Give the for-hire sector the chance to build a better management system. If they're concerned about season length, then do something to lengthen the season. Reallocating won't accomplish that.

Steve Papen

Mr. Papen has been fishing for a long time. He has seen grouper fishing go up and down. It's cyclical, and some years it is bad and some years it is outstanding. Last year it was slow and this year it is epic. The interim assessment is necessary before any management changes are pushed. He really thinks the interim assessment will show that the Council does not have to reduce harvest. The fishery is in good shape. It doesn't make sense that the MSA requires the Council to reduce harvest if there is new information that could make it so we don't have to endure reductions.

Summary of Written Public Comment Received

Full text comments can be found here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1bsheXOkgT7F85vbhkuitYJCTWkwhxWyBNbkgdcvmggE/edit#gid=1921071198>

105 Written Comments Received

Action 1:

Support for No Action

- The current regulations are working fine and there are tons of red grouper.
- There are few boats targeting red grouper, the catch limits are fine, and there are plenty of small fish.
- No one should be rewarded for overfishing.
- It's too difficult to fish with all the rules and regulations.
- The red grouper stock is healthier than ever with plenty of small fish. It doesn't make sense to lower the catch limits with so many red grouper.
- The Gulf Council and the public should have a chance to review an updated analysis to determine if there is any change since SEDAR 62 and before further action is taken on Amendment 53.
- The red grouper stock numbers are wrong.

Support for Alternative 2

- The proposed reallocation relies heavily on the recent landings data recalibration, but recalibration does not necessarily indicate that a reallocation is appropriate.
- Using the current FES MRIP recalibration estimates as the basis for reallocation is premature before completion of research into potential bias within the FES.
- If the Council were to reallocate red grouper, the resulting change to the size and age composition of the catch could necessitate a quota reduction.
- Adjusting that allocation by simply plugging revised landings estimates into the existing formula needs much more analysis before the Gulf Council could rationally conclude that the change meets the same requirements and objectives.
- Both NMFS and the Gulf Council have recently devoted substantial time and effort into developing allocation policies. The recent Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on Allocations in Mixed Use Fisheries (GAO-20-216) also describes ways to improve allocations. Yet it does not appear that the Gulf Council followed these allocation policies or guidelines in developing the purpose and need for Amendment 53.
- Reallocation harms commercial fishermen twice: first from the overall reduction in catch limits required to account for disproportionate recreational sector impacts, and second from the percentage reduction in their sector ACL.
- The recreational sector already has as many species of fish as they want to catch. Reductions to the commercial fleet have already negatively impacted the industry.

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- Results of Florida's State Reef Fish Survey casts doubt on the accuracy of FES and estimates; that FES landings are three times higher than those reflected by SRFS. All fishery dependent data systems should be incorporated into the assessment before making a change.
- Red grouper Spawning Stock Biomass is at its lowest point in thirty years. Therefore, shifting a greater portion of the allocation to a less accountable sector of the fishery with a "considerably greater" magnitude of discards could have negative impacts on an already depressed stock.
- Given the complicated and controversial nature of recalibration and reallocation, the Gulf Council should split Amendment 53 into two documents: a framework action to adjust the overfishing limit (OFL) based on SEDAR 61, and an amendment that analyzes red grouper allocations.
- Reallocating to the recreational sector unfairly hurts commercial fishermen who already had a difficult year due to the pandemic.
- Reallocating takes fish away from the non-fishing public.
- For non-share owning commercial fishermen, it's already a struggle to secure allocation and reallocation would make it even harder.
- Fixed cost of commercial fishing is high, but the income isn't. Cutting 20% of their pay will unfairly hurt commercial fishermen.
- Increasing allocation to the recreational sector will increase discards.
- Amendment 53 will drive foreign fish market dependency and destroy local fishery jobs.
- Regardless of the time span used to allocate to a non-accountable fishery from and accountable sector is wrong. It rewards the recreational sector for overfishing their allocation.
- Action 1, Alternative 2 is the only legally viable alternative that does not change the allocation percentages between sectors. It adheres to the FMP Objectives (especially Objectives 5 and 12) and to the National Standards in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA).
- Giving a larger percentage of the quota to the recreational sector means that overall discards and discard mortality increases. National Standard 4 requires that allocations must promote conservation, but reallocating quota to a sector that discards more fish does exactly the opposite.
- Reallocation will not guarantee a longer recreational season.
- Reallocation through recalibration will set a dangerous precedent.
- Amendment 53 would reallocate a significant portion of the red grouper quota from the commercial sector to the recreational sector. The action alternatives in Amendment 53 would reduce the commercial sector's quota by up to 32 percent, or approximately 1.2 million pounds. This action would reduce the supply available for our restaurant customers to enjoy.
- The slight increase to the recreational sector proposed does not offset the huge number of grouper taken off the table of the American consumer.
- The IFQ program was supposed to bring stability to the industry, however, this harms small operators.
- Red grouper IFQs are becoming a commodity due to speculation.

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- It is impossible to find red grouper allocation as is. Reducing the catch limit makes this problem worse.
- Taking fish away from the commercial sector takes away their livelihood.
- The commercial sector is accountable and should not be punished.
- The Gulf Council's own SSC has cautioned against accepting these MRIP-FES estimates.
- Reallocating fish between sectors based on incomplete data and only a single factor is a not fair and equitable way to manage the fisheries.
- If the cost of domestic seafood increases exponentially we will not be able to offer the product at a reasonable price to our customers. Instead we will have to look to a commercially imported product to remain profitable. The restaurant industry has suffered greatly during the global pandemic with many businesses fighting to stay solvent. Changes to food quality will lead to loss of customers and loss of revenue.

Support for Preferred Alternative 3

- Shortening the recreational season would put tons of for-hire fishermen out of business.
- The economic benefits gained by the recreational sector far outweigh the commercial fishery loss.
- Red grouper is the primary target of the for-hire fleet for half the year. They should remain open.
- Commercial fishermen have a lot more options to catch and make money than the charter fleet.
- The stock is healthy and any closure is unhealthy and would impact captains negatively.

Support for Alternative 6

- The commercial sector should not be negatively impacted by recreational overfishing.

Action 2:

- Eliminating the multiuse allocation will increase the price of allocation. This will hurt smaller operators and new entrants. They may be very dependent on the multiuse to avoid discards.

General:

- Red grouper is a staple and needs to remain open year-round. If anything, consider dropping the bag limit to 1-fish.
- The Council should consider creating a recreational boat limit of 8 fish.
- Recreational anglers who recognize low red grouper abundance support increases in size limits instead of seasonal closures.
- Consider closing red grouper fishing during spawning months.
- Grouper fishermen should be required to use descending devices.
- The size limit should be decreased and the aggregate bag limit for grouper should be increased to 6 fish.
- Increase the recreational bag limit to 3-fish.
- A 18-inch, 2 pound fish is too small to be sold.

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- Council should consider revising SDCs by increasing the overfished threshold and raising SPR levels for red grouper to encourage stability and protect this stock, whose biomass is at critically low levels. Specifically for red grouper, we request that the Council revise MSST to 0.75 and set SPR to 40%; as scientific guidance has suggested these are the advised levels which will buffer the stock from overfishing and natural disturbances.
- The for-hire sector should not be lumped in with the unaccountable recreational sector.