

**Summary Report of
Reef Fish Advisory Panel
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Webinar Meeting
Tuesday, October 6, 2020
9:00 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.**

The Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) was convened at 9:00 A.M. on October 6, 2020. The meeting agenda and the minutes from the October 2, 2019 meeting were approved as written.

Draft Reef Fish Amendment 53: Red Grouper Allocations and Annual Catch Levels and Targets

Dr. Freeman presented the purpose and need and the current actions and alternatives in Draft Reef Fish Amendment 53, which examines Gulf red grouper allocations and catch limits. He also discussed the commercial and recreational sector annual catch limits (ACL) and annual catch targets (ACT) and the projected recreational sector closure dates that would result from combined alternative choices in Actions 1 and 2 of the draft amendment.

Mr. Pulver presented preliminary analyses on how changing the current two fish per angler bag limit to one fish per angler may impact the predicted closure dates for the recreational sector. This analysis does not account for the aggregate grouper bag limit, and does not include data for Louisiana and Texas and other factors. Mr. Pulver provided information on the percent of trips harvesting red grouper for private, charter, and headboat modes from 2017-2019. A total reduction in annual harvest of 12.7% is predicted with a one red grouper per angler daily bag limit. The contribution of each mode's landings to overall red grouper landings was considered with the analysis, and the charter fleet would be the most heavily impacted by a reduced bag limit within the recreational sector. An AP member inquired if the bag limit analysis was applied to the predicted closure dates in Dr. Freeman's presentation. Mr. Pulver noted that the current analysis was preliminary, but that some lengthening of the predicted seasons would be expected.

An AP member asked if red grouper reported landings in 2020 were similar to recent years, to which another AP member responded that he had observed landings that were slightly below normal for 2020. It was also noted that reductions in bag limits for other species had not resulted in substantial season extensions in the past, creating some reticence to decreasing the bag limit in order to increase the season duration. The AP recounted the concerns expressed by the Gulf states, and by members of the Gulf Council, about the use of the recreational data generated from the Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES).

Dr. Freeman pointed out that if the recreational sector exceeds its ACL, accountability measures (AM) would be triggered, and since landings data lag the point in the season during which they are collected, it may not be possible to close the fishing season before the ACL is met. Therefore, a season closure may occur the following year, as an accountability measure. Ms.

Martha Guyas (Council representative) stated that it would be helpful for the Council to know if the AP would be interested in pursuing seasonal closure dates to avoid potential AMs being triggered. An AP member stated that red grouper biomass seemed cyclical, and that the current state of the fishery was not bleak. He further stated that the recreational sector needed the season to be as long as possible, and preferred to avoid triggering AMs. Ms. Guyas commented that Alternative 3 of Action 1 can be thought of as keeping the status quo of the sector allocations, using the MRIP-FES data, and using the same timeframe of landings as was used in the current sector allocations. An AP member stated that since the recreational sector had historically been landing more fish the stock than was originally thought, the stock was also likely in better shape than previously thought. The AP did not recommend reallocation using more recent years, which would include those years during which the individual fishing quota (IFQ) program for red grouper was in place. The AP then made the following motion, but it was tabled following further discussion:

Motion: To recommend the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council not consider changing allocations of red grouper at this time due to inconsistencies between recreational surveys.

Motion tabled.

Ms. Guyas stated that an alternative other than Alternative 1 needs to be selected, and additional input by the AP is needed, regardless of what recreational data source is used. It was clarified that not changing the sector allocation (i.e., selecting Alternative 1 or 2) is still a reallocation, since it would not accurately reflect the sector landings thought to have occurred from 1986-2005 using the MRIP-FES data. Mr. Rindone noted that interim analyses for red grouper would be completed annually, or as requested, by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC), allowing the Council and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to regularly re-examine red grouper catch limits relative to the spawning stock biomass. A motion to make Alternative 3 of Action 1 the preferred alternative failed. An AP member stated that, within the AP, there was little confidence in MRIP-FES as the best scientific information available. One AP member responded that he was confused why there was so much pushback against the SSC's decision that FES represented the best scientific information available, and Mr. Rindone noted that the SSC had a workshop on the evolution of data from CHTS to FES. The AP then decided to offer a resolution to assist the Council in its decision-making with respect to Action 1:

Resolution: Whereas we the Reef Fish AP have thoroughly considered all the options in Action 1 of Reef Fish Amendment 53 presented to us, and whereas we have been unable to reach a consensus due to a lack of confidence in the recreational data used to inform the proposed allocations in the alternatives. Therefore, be it resolved the Reef Fish AP cannot recommend any of the proposed alternatives in Action 1.

Resolution passes with unanimous consent.

SEDAR 67: Gulf of Mexico Vermilion Snapper Stock Assessment

Mr. Matt Smith (SEFSC) presented an overview of the SEDAR 67 vermilion snapper stock

assessment focusing on data inputs and changes made from the previous assessment (SEDAR 45). SEDAR 67 updated the data used in SEDAR 45 through 2017, reconsidered discards and shrimp bycatch estimates and transitioned from using MRIP-CHTS to FES for recreational landings. Mr. Smith explained that using the FES shows an increase in landings estimates when compared to landings estimates in SEDAR 45 but still indicates that the stock condition is improved since 2014. SEDAR 67 used a combined video survey as a fishery independent index that showed a broad and persistent increase of biomass that carried over into subsequent years. This can be attributed to a large recruitment spike in 2015 and 2016. Although this large pulse of recruits was not seen on all the video surveys, it was also present in other indices used in the assessment. Discards were included in SEDAR 67 but were not fit to the assessment model; this allowed for removals due to discarding to be included in the model, but didn't change the stock status. Historically, fishing mortality was attributed mostly to shrimp bycatch; however, most removals are now dominated by the Gulf recreational fleet since 2010. Overall, the assessment showed that the vermilion snapper stock is not overfished or experiencing overfishing. Projections were made for catch advice starting in 2021. Mr. Smith explained that the use of MRIP-FES recreational data accounts for a majority of the increase in future yields; though, some of the increase can also be attributed to a large influx of vermilion snapper from the high recruitment events in 2015 and 2016. However, it is difficult to determine how much of the increase in allowable harvest is associated with the change in data currency and how much is associated with the increase in biomass.

AP members voiced concerns about the sustainability of the stock based on the increase in yield streams. Again, Mr. Smith stated that much of the increase is related to the change in recreational data systems and would not affect the sustainability of the stock. An AP member asked if harvest estimates often reach the ACL or exceed it. Mr. Rindone said that landings have approached the ACL in recent years but stock ACL has only been exceeded once by approximately 3% in 2018.

Ms. Somerset reviewed the action and alternatives in the draft framework action, which will be presented to the Council at the November meeting. The framework action examines modifying the vermilion snapper ACL based on the results of SEDAR 67. Since the Gulf vermilion snapper stock is considered healthy (i.e., not overfished or experiencing overfishing), an ACT is not being considered for use in managing the stock. Ms. Somerset also reviewed the results of the Council's Something's Fishy tool, which indicated that most anglers across the Gulf have observed positive trends in the vermilion population.

The AP acknowledged that that vermilion snapper does not have sector allocations, and thus there are not expected to be concerns with allocation resulting from the use of MRIP-FES recreational data to track and landings for the recreational sectors. Since some of the increase in stock biomass is due to the vermilion snapper record recruitment years in 2015 and 2016, AP members asked what the estimated size of those fish would be now. The vermilion snapper spawned in those years would be expected to begin entering the fishery in approximately 2021 as five- or six-year-old fish approximately 10 to 13 inches in total length. AP members agreed that the fishery seems to be sustainable and it would not hurt the stock to increase the ACL.

Motion: to make Alternative 2 the preferred alternative.

Alternative 2: Modify the OFL, ABC, and ACL for vermilion snapper based on recommendations from the SSC for 2021 to 2025. The stock ABC is equivalent to the OY, and the ACL equals the ABC.

Year	OFL (lb ww)	ABC (lb ww)	ACL (lb ww)
2021-2025	8,600,000	7,270,000	7,270,000

Motion carried 7 to 6.

SEDAR 64: Southeastern US Yellowtail Snapper Stock Assessment

Staff briefed the AP on the status of the SEDAR 64: Southeastern US Yellowtail Snapper stock assessment. The assessment has been completed, but the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs still need to review the projections and provide catch recommendations. The AP will be reconvened once the SSCs make those recommendations to the Councils.

Gray Triggerfish Interim Analysis

Mr. Matt Smith (SEFSC) presented the interim analysis of gray triggerfish. This interim analysis uses the SEAMAP combined video survey as a representative index of abundance for gray triggerfish. This index has shown an improvement in the estimate of spawning stock biomass of gray triggerfish in recent history. Following the advice of the SSC, based on the interim analysis, the AP recommended increasing the ABC from 305,300 lbs ww to 456,900 lbs ww. The AP was reminded that these catch limits were in the MRIP-CHTS data currency. The AP was pleased to see that the gray triggerfish stock was improving, and thought it most appropriate to follow the management approach currently in use by the Council, which sets the total ACL equal to the ABC. The AP recommended continuing to use the sector ACTs in the same manner in which they are currently used. The AP passed the following motion:

Motion: to go with the SSC recommendation and set the ACL equal to the ABC at 456,900 lbs ww.

Motion carried unanimously

Draft Reef Fish Framework Action: Modification of the Gulf of Mexico Lane Snapper Annual Catch Limit

Dr. Hollensead reviewed the draft framework action for updating the catch limits and modifying accountability measures for lane snapper. Updated catch limits are based on the results from the SEDAR 49 update stock assessment (2019), which used MRIP-FES data for the recreational sector. The Council has not yet reviewed this document; however, input from the AP on the proposed actions will be provided to the Council at its October meeting. Overages of the lane snapper stock ACL were observed in 2016 – 2019. The stock is not considered to be overfished,

and overfishing (i.e., exceeding the OFL) only occurred in 2017.

Action 1 in the draft framework action considers modifying the catch limits for lane snapper based on the updated catch advice. Alternative 2 would modify the catch limits based on this advice, but not use an ACT, while Alternative 3 would use an ACT to prevent exceeding the ACL. The migration in data currency from the old Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey to MRIP-FES along with an increase in stock size allows for approximately a doubling of the proposed catch limits.

Action 2 considers modifications to the seasonal accountability measure. Alternatives ranged from implementing in-season closures in subsequent years of a harvest triggered being met to enforcing in-season closures should a harvest trigger be met within the fishing year. Alternatives considered setting seasonal management triggers at either the ACL or ACT.

AP members were pleased that the lane snapper stock appeared to be healthy, and remarked on the importance of lane snapper as a target species for West Florida headboats. The AP preferred closing the season in the current fishing year if the ACL was to be met, as opposed to deferring the effect of an accountability measure to the following year. The AP passed the following motions:

Motion: in Action 1 to make Alternative 2 the preferred alternative.

Alternative 2: Modify the lane snapper OFL, ABC, and ACL based on the recommendation of the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) for 2020 and subsequent years from the updated yield projections, as presented to the SSC in March 2020. Do not set an ACT.

Year	OFL	ABC	ACL
2020+ (MRIP-FES)	1,053,834	1,028,973	1,028,973
2020+ (MRFSS)	592,941	578,953	578,953

Note: Catch limit values in MRFSS are provided for comparison only.

Motion carried unanimously

Motion: In Action 2 to make Alternative 3a the preferred alternative.

Alternative 3: Modify the seasonal closure AM such that if annual landings in a given year meet or are projected to meet the prescribed trigger, NMFS would prohibit harvest of lane snapper by the recreational and commercial sectors for the remainder of the fishing year.

Option a: Prescribed trigger is the ACL.

Motion carried unanimously

Public Hearing Draft Amendment 36B: Modifications to Commercial IFQ Programs

Dr. Lasseter reviewed the actions and alternatives in the amendment including some questions that will be posed to the Council regarding its intent for IFQ accounts that may be exempt from the permit requirement. Captain Walker noted his understanding of the action's intent is to end the practice of people buying shares in the fishery for investment purposes rather than for commercial fishing, while protecting those participants who followed the rules and have already bought into the fishery. AP members discussed the pros and cons of requiring all shareholders to have a permit or allowing some to be exempt, including issues of liability from consolidating related accounts and permit price and availability. AP members recommended a new alternative be added that would exempt all accounts established as of today's meeting from the requirement to hold a reef fish permit to retain shares. The rationale for the alternative is to discourage outside speculators, thereby protecting commercial fishermen engaged in fishing activity, while also protecting existing shareholders who do not fish. In addition, the AP felt that the alternative would eliminate the need for shares to be divested or for shareholders to locate and purchase a permit. This would keep the price of permits down and ensure that permits are available to those who need one for the purpose of fishing. The AP passed the following motion.

Motion: To add an Alternative 6: In order to obtain (transfer into a shareholder account), or maintain shares (hold existing shares in a shareholder account), shareholder accounts established after October 6, 2020, (Reef Fish AP meeting date) and that are still active must be associated with a valid or renewable commercial reef fish permit.

Motion carried unanimously

After Dr. Lasseter reviewed Action 2, the AP did not make any motions regarding that action.

*Testing assumptions about sex change and spatial management in the protogynous gag grouper, *Mycteroperca microlepis**

Dr. Sue Lowerre-Barbieri, from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), presented the results from a study to assess sex ratios and sex change of gag grouper (gag) in west Florida. The project sought to resolve issues from the last stock assessment (SEDAR 33 Update 2016) on the estimation of sex ratios. The study areas included the Madison-Swanson Marine Protected Area (MPA), the Edges, and an open area northeast of Madison-Swanson. In Madison-Swanson, 5% of captured gag were determined to be male, while no males were reported outside of the MPA (i.e., the Edges and the open area). The study also noted sex change in pre-spawning, female-only aggregations, suggesting that protecting shallow-water pre-spawning aggregation areas could help improve the ratio of transitional females which turn into males.

The AP asked about the size range at which gag transitions to male. Dr. Lowerre-Barbieri noted

that in general, individuals larger than 1,000 mm total length (i.e., 39 inches) can show evidence of transitioning to male. The AP noted observing individuals at approximately 40 lbs which appeared to have male coloration; however, females of similar weights have also been observed. Dr. Lowerre-Barbieri added that pigmentation has been a highly accurate indicator of sex, with larger males showing black scales with a copper-colored belly. The AP commented that the number of copper-bellied male gag has been lower than it used to be. Dr. Lowerre-Barbieri was interested to hear from fishermen as to why gag landings seem to increase during the fall. The AP attributed this seasonal increase in landings to colder water temperatures, which cause gag to move to warmer, shallower waters. Dr. Lowerre-Barbieri mentioned that the FWC is working on a project using acoustic tags to study spatial use of shallow water habitat, movement patterns, and mortality rates of gag.

Other Business

No other business was brought before the AP. Members of the public were given the opportunity to provide comment to the AP.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:50 P.M.

Participants

Reef Fish AP Members

Ed Walker, Chair
Troy Frady, Vice Chair
James Bruce
Jane Black-Lee
Patrick Cagle
Jason Delacruz
Josh Ellender
Buddy Guindon
Dylan Hubbard
John Marquez, Jr.
Mike Prasek, Jr.
David Walker

Council Staff

Matthew Freeman
John Froeschke
Karen Hoak
Lisa Hollensead
Ava Lasseter
Jessica Matos
Natasha Méndez-Ferrer

Kathy Pereira
Ryan Rindone
Bernadine Roy
Charlotte Schiaffo
Carrie Simmons
Carly Somerset
Emily Muehlstein

Council Members

Roy Crabtree, NMFS
Martha Guyas
Chris Schieble

Others

Kelli O'Donnell, NMFS
Ashford Rosenberg
Catherine Bruger, OC
Nancie Cummings, NMFS
Michael Jepson, NMFS
Michael Larkin, NMFS
Sue Lowerre-Barbieri, FWC
Jeff Pulver, NMFS

Mike Travis, NMFS
Peter Hood, NMFS
Matt Smith, NMFS
Luiz Barbieri, FWC
Jeanne Bloomberg, NMFS
Kristin Foss, FWC
Nikhil Mehta, NMFS
Larry Perruso, NMFS
Katie Siegfried, NMFS
Kali Spurgin, FWC
Alexandra Taylor, NMFS