Standing, Reef Fish, Socioeconomic, and Ecosystem SSC
Meeting Summary
February 27 – 28, 2024

The meeting of the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Standing, Reef Fish, Socioeconomic, and Ecosystem Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSC) was convened at 8:30 AM EDT on February 27, 2024. The agenda for this meeting was approved along with the minutes from the September and October 2023 SSC meetings. Verbatim minutes from past SSC meetings can be reviewed here.

Dr. Jim Nance will represent the SSC at the Council's April 8 – 11, 2024, meeting in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

Review of SEDAR 85: Gulf of Mexico Yellowedge Grouper

Model review and SSC discussion

Dr. Skylar Sagarese (Southeast Fisheries Science Center [SEFSC]) provided an overview of the yellowedge grouper stock assessment (SEDAR 85) model data inputs, results, diagnostics and sensitivity analyses. The terminal data year of the assessment was 2021. Including updates and improvements to the stock assessment model (relative to SEDAR 22) and recreational landings data collected through the Marine Recreation Information Program Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES).

A two-region approach, informed by the life history of yellowedge grouper, was separated at the Mississippi River. One improvement from SEDAR 22 was fixing the hermaphroditism transition rate (first age male) rather than estimating it in the model based on histological studies of gonadal tissue. Similar life history information was used in SEDAR 85 and SEDAR 22. However, there were some slight changes to the alpha parameter for the weight-length relationship. For age and growth, stock assessment analysts did not retain the growth curves from SEDAR 22 and instead developed those curves based on the east/west delineation. Natural mortality was derived from catch curve analyses from as far back as the 1970s and appeared to be a good representation of the estimate. SEFSC staff re-evaluated the representativeness and reliability of sex-specific composition data; an approach used in SEDAR 22. Due to a number of identified issues, including small samples sizes and non-representative data, the determination was made to construct the SEDAR 85 model with both sexes combined. Yellowedge grouper are a long-lived species (maximum age 85 years) and age is arduous to assess as they get older resulting in more uncertainty in the ageing estimate. To address this issue, an ageing error matrix was developed for the stock assessment using data collected between 1977-2009 and 2013-2021.

SEDAR 85 used the Beverton-Holt recruitment relationship to model yellowedge grouper recruitment. This stock generally does not appear in the landings data until approximately 8 years of age. Steepness was not estimable, so a plausible approximation was derived from FishLife[1] resulting in a steepness value of 0.827. Sigma R was fixed at 0.5.

[1] https://github.com/James-Thorson-NOAA/FishLife

Recreational landings for yellowedge grouper only accounted for about 2% of the total removals over the total time series. An anomalous peak in recreational landings observed in 1982 was smoothed by averaging the landings collected between 1981-1985. Broadly, landings of yellowedge grouper were characterized as vertical line (commercial "other" gears, recreational landings, and dead discards) and longline (commercial longline and dead discards) by region. To account for uncertainty, an approach of weighting by state landings was performed since yellowedge grouper are harvest throughout the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf). For age-composition, nominal composition was used due to concerns over assumptions and poor model fits, exclusions were made for fleet/year combinations with less than 10 otoliths collected, and otoliths collected from 2010-2012 were excluded since they were non-representative of landings. For fishery-independent survey length composition, composition was nominal, sample size was represented as number of fish, and information from the NFMS bottom longline was excluded pre-2000 due to gear changes in hook type. The same conditions were applied when assessing age composition from fishery-independent surveys. Additionally, data from the NMFS SEAMAP groundfish trawl survey from the eastern Gulf were excluded due to low samples sizes.

An SSC member asked whether there was any way to ascertain whether yellowedge grouper landed in a particular region were harvested within that region. He continued that most of the landings information come from the east but it's possible that vessels may take trips more than a week in duration and could fish in other parts of the Gulf while landing their catch in a different region. SEFSC staff replied that the majority of landings come from the region in which they were harvested and if that distinction is unknown from the logbooks, there are other locational information collected that can help assign those data fields. Additionally, positional data collected from Vessel Monitoring Systems, required in the reef fish commercial fishery since 2007, can also provide fishing location information.

An SSC member expressed concern about excluding commercial age samples collected during 2010-2012 and inquired if there was any way to account for that data gap. Dr. Sagarese replied that, up to 2009, the commercial age sampling design was informed from landing locations so they would be reflective of commercial harvest. For 2010-2012, there is no documentation on the sample design to collect those data, and when reviewing the fits for those years, they did not represent anything else collected during the time series. Starting in 2013, SEFSC staff began randomly assigning ageing data collection sites, so changes in sampling survey design have caused some concerns for constructing the model. Both the SSC and SEFSC staff acknowledge that better sampling documentation and changes in survey design need to be developed to avoid similar pitfalls in the future.

Dr. Sagarese reviewed ecosystem considerations for input in the model, including effects of red tide events and the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill. Yellowedge grouper did not exhibit the substantial drop in landings observed in other stock during unusually high red tide years. She postulated that red tide events could affect younger juveniles residing in more nearshore habitats, but to date, no detrimental stock-wide affects due to red tide have been observed. For the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill, the affects and potential mechanism for inclusion for the stock assessment is still unclear. An SSC member asked if there was still a market for yellowedge grouper since the oil spill. Dr. Jessica Stephen (Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) said yes that

yellowedge grouper represent 80% of all Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) deepwater grouper landings and also yielded the highest ex-vessel price in the Gulf.

The SSC discussed a moderate, but noticeable, rise in recreational landings in recent years. Several SSC members reported that recreational fishermen with larger vessels (more seaworthy, improved fuel range) have begun targeting yellowedge grouper offshore. However, these vessels are more likely to launch from privately owned docks (too large to easily trailer and launch at some public boat ramps) where they will not be intercepted by dockside samplers. Given these factors, several SSC members contended that recreational landings of yellowedge grouper are likely underestimated and that a potentially substantial private recreational fishery may be emerging.

For the model results, a specialized version of a continuity run indicated that changes from SEDAR 22 to SEDAR 85 were within levels of expectations. A bridging analysis indicated that a few of the biggest changes between models included combining sexes, fixing the hermaphroditism rate, and treating the ageing data as nominal. The SEDAR 85 model was a lot different from what was constructed in SEDAR 22 but this was so improvements could be incorporated in the newest assessment. For the landings, the most uncertainty occurred in the earlier years (pre-1986) which lead to poorer fits. Tighter fits were observed from 2010 onwards. There were poor fits observed for the index of relative abundance. There was not a lot of contrast and the model predicted a relatively flat relationship over time. This result was similar to SEDAR 22, so in this instance despite more years of data input, there was not a marked improvement in capturing abundance estimates in SEDAR 85. There was some improvement in fitting the length and age composition from SEDAR 22. Occasionally the groundfish trawl survey would capture a larger yellowedge grouper and the model had difficulty accounting for these observations when fitting survey length data.

Recruitment fits represented a challenge for the model to fit since there is such little data to inform the stock-recruitment relationship, and both steepness and Sigma had to be fixed. The model results indicated the last few years (since 2005) have had low recruitment; however, there is not a good fishery-independent index of abundance for juvenile yellowedge grouper in the Gulf. Thus, the recruitment index is all model derived from fishery-dependence indices. An SSC member noted that since yellowedge grouper do not recruit to the fishery until about the ages of 8-9 years, any strong recruitment classes after 2012 will not materialize in the fisheries landings as of the assessment period. Therefore, the stock dynamics may not be as worrisome as they seem.

Results of model diagnostic and sensitivity analyses were also presented. A jitter analyses revealed no lower negative log-likelihood scenarios relative to the base model. Sensitivity runs indicated that was an influence of early uncertainty in the landings data. However, beginning the landings history in 1986 would eliminate contrast observed in the eastern region where the majority of the landings are harvested, so the entirety of the available landings data years was used. Excluding recreational data did not change any of the model outputs, so SEFSC recommended their continued inclusion.

An SSC member advocated for the removal of the recreational landings data form the model. He contended that yellowedge grouper represented a “rare event” species for the recreational sector

and that the Office of Science and Technology who run MRIP-FES program have a history of extrapolating those types of data observations to unrealistically high landings estimates which affect management measures. Several SSC members replied that it appears the recreational interest in yellowedge grouper is growing, given the recent advancements in technology (e.g., mapping, spot-lock trolling motors). They also stated that the stock currently does not have a sector allocation, so taking the recreational data out of the model was not address the issues brought up by the concerned SSC member. Another SSC member also advocated for leaving the recreational landings data in the model as that data represented valuable social information that should be incorporated when evaluating a fishery.

An SSC member expressed some concern about the health of the stock. The concerns were primarily based on the low recent estimates of recruitment and the NMFS bottom longline survey trending downward. Overall, the SSC determined that the stock assessment model presented was appropriate for generating catch advice.

Motion: The SSC accepts the SEDAR 85 Gulf of Mexico yellowedge grouper assessment as consistent with the best scientific information available.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Presentation of the Fishermen Feedback Tool for Yellowedge Grouper

Council staff analyzed 63 responses received from September 15 – October 12, 2023. The majority of responses indicated an overall neutral sentiment followed in frequency, by a negative sentiment. Relative to stock condition, only 34 responses were analyzed as those comments included some information regarding abundance. The results for this subgroup of comments indicated a split between positive and negative sentiment. There was some misalignment in sentiments between the private recreational being more neutral and the commercial sector being more negative. Council staff speculated this was perhaps due to the yellowedge grouper being a deepwater species where recreational anglers may be newer to this fishery and thus have a different historical baseline than commercial anglers that have prosecuted this fishery for decades. Council staff also noted, that for the first time in several recent iterations of the tool, the word "shark" was not the most used negative word across all comments.

An SSC member suggested that assessing comments containing both negative and positive sentiment as a neutral comment was less than optimal. He recommended breaking up those comments into sentiment categories for subsequent analysis. Another SSC member asked if 63 responses represented a normal sample size for the tool and Council staff replied that the yellowedge grouper version of the tool received a moderate number of commenters. An SSC member inquired if the commercial industry had a relatively higher negative sentiment because respondents had a longer history with the fishery. Council staff answered that they are bound by the Paperwork Reduction Act, so asking pointed questions about fishing history is difficult. They did state that future reports of the tool could include parsing of the data by sector, location, and sentiment.

Discussion on the Conditions for Yellowedge Grouper Model Projections

The SSC re-evaluated the current Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) proxy of the fishing yield at 30% spawning potential ratio ($30\%_{SPR}$) for yellowedge grouper. Several SSC members argued for the merits of a more conservative proxy. The rationale included the long-life span of yellowedge grouper and the late age of male transition (about 40 years). The SSC reviewed its recent previous discussions to change the MSY proxy for other grouper species including gag (F_{MAX} to $40\%_{SPR}$) and scamp ($30\%_{SPR}$ to $40\%_{SPR}$). Given that yellowedge grouper is long-lived (max 85 years), and the high level of recruitment uncertainty, particular in the recent time series, as well as the complex life history of the species, the SSC determined that projections using a 40% spawning potential ratio ($40\%_{SPR}$) MSY proxy was appropriate.

> **Motion: The SSC recommends an MSY proxy of the yield at $F_{40\%spr}$ for yellowedge grouper.**
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> *Motion carried with no opposition.*

The SSC then discussed what years from the recruitment time series would be most appropriate to inform the projection analysis. An SSC member argued against using the entire time series as uncertainty is higher in earlier years. The SSC expressed a desire to capture some of the recent contrast in recruitment by including years of estimated higher recruitment with those years of estimated lower later in the time series. An SSC member noted that there are notable differences between the east and west regions from the bottom longline landings data creating a net positive relationship in newly recruited ages. Potentially the model maybe underestimating recruitment, so providing a contrast in recruitment years to inform the projections is important when developing catch advice.

> **Motion: The SSC recommends to set the period for estimating mean recruitment for the purpose of constructing projections for yellowedge grouper as the 15-year period from 1998-2012.**
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> *Motion carried with no opposition.*

Comparison of the Reef Fish and Snapper Grouper Fisheries of the Southeastern US

Dr. Liese (SEFSC) discussed that the annual economic reports are designed to provide a financial overview of these fisheries and contain cash flow, income, and budget statements. Time series data for trip-level economics are available beginning in 2014. He then discussed the approach to quantify the economic effects of different management regimes on two otherwise similar fisheries (South Atlantic snapper and grouper fishery versus the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery). The snapper and grouper fishery are managed with input control measures in the South Atlantic, while the reef fish fishery transitioned into catch share management between 2007 and 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico for red snapper and grouper-tilefish, respectively. On a per pound basis, the number of trips and vessel are higher in the South Atlantic snapper-grouper fishery than in the Gulf of Mexico reef fish fishery; however, the revenue is lower for the snapper and grouper fishery. Dr. Liese explained conceptually that an Individual Fishing Quota can increase resource rent in a

fishery by regulating harvest instead of inputs, so a cost reduction can occur with an IFQ compared with a regulated open access situation.

Following the presentation, Dr. Liese fielded questions from several SSC members. An SSC member inquired why crew wages decreased from 2014 to 2018. Dr. Liese responded that the vessels sampled differ from year to year, so that could contribute to differences across years. In addition, questions on crew wages are difficult for respondents to answer correctly. Another SSC member noted that there was a fleet reduction prior to the IFQ program in the Gulf and inquired if that was the contributing factor to the differences in economic effects instead of the change in policy regime. Dr. Liese responded that quota is the limiting factor to harvest, not additional vessels. An SSC member inquired if these economic data could serve as an indicator for stock status and stock health. Dr. Liese stated that allocation and share prices should reflect fishermen's outlook for the future, thereby anticipating some developments in the fishery.

Review of Other Deepwater Grouper Landings Data and Catch Limits

Council staff presented the landings for the species within the deep-water grouper complex to discuss if these species should continue to be managed as a group. Within the complex, the majority of landings come from yellowedge grouper, which is the only species within the group with a completed stock assessment.

An SSC member noted the declining trend in landings for the deepwater grouper complex. The group also acknowledged that catch recommendations should incorporate the amount of data uncertainty. The potential use of yellowedge grouper as an indicator species was discussed. Council staff noted that an indicator species for the complex could result in potential implications for calculating and distributing commercial IFQ shares. The SSC discussed if Tier 3a or Tier 3b in the Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) Control Rule would be more appropriate given the declining trend in the landings data

Some SSC members were concerned about taking a conservative approach, given that there would not be much room for increasing harvest. However, the SSC determined that the declining trend in recent landings, uncertainty in the data, and the life history of the deepwater grouper species, it was appropriate to set the OFL and ABC using Tier 3b in the ABC Control Rule.

> **Motion: The SSC recommends that the OFL (244,035 lbs gw) for snowy, warsaw and speckled hind be based on tier 3b of the control rule and the time series be between 2010-2022 and that the ABC (183,026 lbs gw) be 75% of the OFL.**
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> *Motion carried 21-1 with 2 abstentions.*

Public Comment, February 27

Capt. Bob Zales II:

- We know MRIP-FES is all over the place and even though recreational data may not appear a big deal for a deepwater species, it will still make an impact.

- He reminded the SSC that FES overestimates landings by 40% and that this causes lots of social and economic problems with closures to the fishery.
- He requested that the SSC not rush to judgement when recommending catch advice for yellowedge grouper.
- He approved of using recreational data collected by the state of Florida for yellowtail snapper in the stock assessment process.

Day 2: Review of SEDAR 74: Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Research Track

Dr. Katie Siegfried (SEFSC) provided the SEFSC's response to a review, conducted in December 2023, of the SEDAR 74 Research Track Assessment model for Gulf red snapper. The review panel comprised four SSC representatives and three Council for Independent Experts reviewers (CIE). The overall conclusion of the group was that the presented stock assessment model was not suitable to proceed to an Operational Assessment and that instead a Benchmark Assessment and another full review should be conducted. Dr. Siegfried pointed out that, while the reviewers reported a number of criticisms, they did not provide any feedback on what data gaps may be contributing to those issues and broadly recommended using a simpler modeling approach based on the data available.

One of the main issues identified was the stock structure identification (ID). The Stock ID Working Group recommended a 3-regional model; however, that decision was not unanimous. While building the model, the analysts became aware of a number of data collection limitations for the eastern Gulf region (Cape San Blas to southern Florida). As a result, the stock assessment team had to integrate data streams from the eastern region and the central region (Cape San Blas to the Mississippi River) to parameterize the three-area model. This mirroring approach to the data in two of the three regions resulted in additional inherent uncertainty but allowed for successful convergence of the model. The reviewers suggested this approach may result in an over-parametrized model and recommended instead combining the eastern and central regions resulting in a 2-region model as was done in the previous SEDAR 52 red snapper stock assessment.

The SSC acknowledged that communication between the analysts and stock ID Work Group members could be improved in the future to avoid designing a model structure that was not supported by available data sources. There was agreement that the Assessment Development Team (ADT), which comprised a number of SSC representatives, was helpful in allowing for continuous feedback during the assessment process. Despite a lack of consensus, several SSC members stated that partitioning the model into 3 areas was helpful in elucidating regional population dynamics that were hypothesized to exist.

The SSC was opposed to the reviewers' suggestion of inputting recreational landings data without considering any error parameters. One SSC member stated that National Standard 1 requires transparency in handling uncertainty in stock assessment modeling. The SSC considered the reviewer's findings for exploring other approaches to integrating information from the Great Red Snapper Count (GRSC). Several SSC members stated that abundance estimates for the artificial reef and hard bottom habitats calculated from the GRSC were likely very aligned to abundance estimates generated from SEDAR 52. In general, the SSC concluded that the CIE reviewers

appeared unfamiliar with the red snapper stock and the realized high uncertainty of regional data sources within the Gulf. As such, the SSC determined that they would consider all of the reviewers' recommendations and provide rationale for any recommendation the Committee decided not to consider further in the next phase of the stock assessment process.

The SSC discussed the merits of the 2 versus 3-area model based on the review. The SSC sentiment was mixed with a few members stating that a 2-area model would be appropriate and result in less uncertainty. Others argued that, absent any direct comparison between two different models, it is impossible to actually test for utility of the regional differences in stock productivity and abundance. Instead, they contended that the 3-area model had been recommended by the Stock ID Work Group, and since the model was able to converge, should be pursued for management advice.

The SSC discussed the type of stock assessment pathway and next steps for SEDAR 74. Many SSC members agreed that further review and exploration of the reviewers' comments was warranted. However, they contended another Stock ID Work Group determination was unlikely to result in a different outcome. There was also concern among some members that expected changes to MRIP-FES estimations procedures, with a report due sometime in 2026, could have implications for interpreting results from SEDAR 74. An SSC member disagreed with the reviewers' recommendation of not fixing steepness at 0.99 and estimating natural mortality within the model as estimating these parameters within the assessment model has been consistently difficult and those decisions have a lot of influence on the model results.

SEFSC staff indicated that an operational-style assessment for red snapper could be tailored to achieve some of the potential Terms of Reference (TORs) the SSC had discussed. Such as inclusion of topical working groups to address some of the reviewer's concerns including an additional review process at the end of the assessment. Several SSC members agreed with creating a few topical working groups but stated there was not a need to conduct another CIE review. Specifically, the SSC thought it prudent to create a topical working group to explore how to better include information gathered from the GRSC in the stock assessment process. The SSC recommended that some of the principal investigators, or other available contributors from the GRSC could participate in the workgroup. The results of these deliberations would be made available, so that documentation of how or when GRSC data is integrated could be reported out. The SSC also agreed that a recreational working group would be helpful. The SSC will review potential TORs for SEDAR 74 at its May meeting and provided the following direction to SEFSC staff:

> **Motion: The SSC moves that the SEDAR 74 process move forward with a 3-area Gulf red snapper stock assessment, taking into account review panel, including CIE, concerns and criticisms to improve the model where appropriate and possible.**
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> *Motion carried 14 – 9 with 1 abstention.*

Review of SEDAR Process Recommendations from SEDAR 74

Dr. Siegfried reviewed the recommendations regarding the SEDAR assessment process (Item 9a) from the SEDAR 74 Review Workshop. The peer-review team made a number of recommendations, specifically about the Research Track process. The SSC noted that the SEFSC and the Council are currently in discussions about how to modify the current SEDAR process to better serve SEDAR cooperators and analytical partners. An SSC member stated that this process will be further developed at the upcoming SEDAR Steering Committee meeting (March 25-26, Charleston, SC) and the SSC could likely provide better guidance at the May SSC meeting in light of the outcomes of the SEDAR Steering Committee meeting. The SSC did provide some initial feedback based on the presentation.

Dr. Shannon Cass-Calay (SEFSC) noted that the current SEDAR process would benefit from additional flexibility. In particular, she noted that establishing statements of work two years in advance is very challenging and would prefer to establish a list of key stocks to be assessed on a regular schedule with additional stock assessment completed as permissible. She also stated a preference to avoid specific types of stock assessments (e.g., benchmark, operational) and instead, prefers to work with the Council to develop an appropriate scope of work and timeline for each assessment.

Dr. Cass-Calay and Council staff stated that the Research Track Assessment process has not been as useful as intended in that the gains in efficiency and throughput have not been realized and has created more workload on the data provisioning process. The SSC and SEFSC staff also discussed the need for independent peer-review of particular stock assessments (e.g., CIE review) and agreed that this could be determined on a case-by-case basis for each assessment and included in the Terms of Reference (TORs) for each stock assessment. A similar approach could be used to determine if Topical Working Groups or other panels are necessary for each assessment. The SSC plans to continue this discussion at its next meeting.

Review of SEDAR 96: Southeastern US Yellowtail Snapper Operational Assessment Terms of Reference and Participants for Recreational Data Topical Working Group

Dr. Julie Neer presented the draft TORs, for the Florida Yellowtail Snapper Operational Assessment (SEDAR 96) for SSC review and approval. Dr. Neer noted that the TORs have already been approved and recommended by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's SSC. An SSC member suggested specifying the actual Maximum Sustainable Yield proxy to the TORs and Dr. Neer agreed to amend the list to reflect the request. The SSC Chair noted that volunteers would be needed to serve on a topical working group panel to review the recreational data streams. Doug Gregory, Jim Tolan, and Jim Nance volunteered to serve on the working group. s

An SSC member asked if a sensitivity run would be performed to assess how the different recreational data landings program (MRIP-FES and Florida's State Reef Fish Survey [SRFS]) affected the model. Dr. Neer replied that the recreational working group would analyze whether calibrating SRFS to MRIP-FES to generate a historical time series was possible. Depending on that outcome, the recreational working group would then recommend either SRFS or MRIP-FES for use in the base model. She anticipated the analysts would then perform a sensitivity analysis using the non-selected recreational data source to assess the model's performance.

Motion: To accept the terms of reference for the yellowtail snapper operational assessment.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Review of SEDAR 85: Gulf of Mexico Yellowedge Grouper Projections

Dr. Sagarese presented the results of a projection analysis generating the Overfishing Limit (OFL) and ABC for yellowedge grouper using the MSY proxy and recruitment years stipulated by the SSC. By modifying the MSY proxy to the yield at $40\%_{SPR}$ the stock is not considered overfished but is undergoing overfishing. The SSC determined that using a 5-year average to calculate constant catch limits was appropriate since no other stock assessment for yellowedge grouper is expected to be conducted in the near future. Since several deepwater grouper species inhabit similar environments, the SSC acknowledged the difficulty fishermen would have of attempting to avoid catching yellowedge grouper when targeting other deepwater grouper species. Therefore, the SSC also recommended keeping yellowedge within the deepwater grouper complex. Since yellowedge grouper has a stock assessment catch advice informed by SEDAR 85 will added to the OFL and ABC (calculated using Tier 3b of the ABC Control Rule) for the rest of the deepwater grouper complex. This determination maintains the current management structure for the complex.

Motion: For GOM yellowedge grouper, the SSC recommends the OFL based on 5 years (2025-2029) of 487,000 lb gw and an ABC of 372,000 lb gw.

Motion carried 20 to 2 with 1 abstention and 1 absent.

Discussion: Revised Black Grouper and Yellowfin Grouper Landings and Catch Limits

Council staff presented historic landings for black and yellowfin grouper which had been corrected to remove landings from Monroe County, Florida. Landings from Monroe County are managed by the South Atlantic Council. The corrected landings are much lower given that this is a tropical fishery and the bulk of the landings come from Monroe County. The SSC agreed that removing landings from Monroe County and calculating new catch advice was appropriate.

Motion: The original OFL and ABC values for GOM black and yellowfin grouper provided by the Gulf SSC in May 2023 should be revised to reflect corrected landings that remove recreational landings from Monroe County. The new values are 91,997 lb gw for OFL and 80,717 lb gw for ABC.

Motion carried with no opposition.

The SSC also asked about the status of the black grouper stock assessment. Dr. Luiz Barbieri reminded the SSC that there are too many uncertainties with the data (e.g., issues with species identification in the historical landings). The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

has contracted a company to help develop management procedures for black grouper. FWC staff are expecting to present options for alternative management approaches to the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs when complete.

Review: 2024 Gulf of Mexico Red Grouper Interim Analysis

Dr. Sagarese presented the annual Gulf red grouper Interim Analysis (IA) using data from the NMFS Bottom Longline survey through 2023. At its January 2023 SSC meeting, the SSC decided not to make further catch limit recommendations for red grouper based on the IA process due to the amount of time that had elapsed since the last stock assessment (SEDAR 61, with data through 2017). Therefore, this interim analysis was presented for the SSC's information only and did not include catch advice. The SSC acknowledged that the SEDAR 88 stock assessment for red grouper is currently underway and is expected to be reviewed by the SSC at its October 2024 meeting. Dr. Sagarese noted that the indices used in this report were the same methodology as previous IA but extended the time series. She stated that the NMFS Bottom Longline Index (fishery-independent index), which serves as an index for larger and older individuals remained stable and the Summer Groundfish Trawl index that tracks abundance of age 1-2 red grouper has increased in the most recent three years relative to 2019. This has been corroborated by similar reports of increased juvenile abundance by fishery participants and may indicate an increased pulse in the fishery in the coming years.

Public Comment, February 28

Capt. Clay Shidler:

- He reported to the SSC that many of his fellow charter fishermen are able to target red snapper on sandy bottom areas south of the Florida Middle Grounds. An observation he thinks aligns with the GRSC.
- This type of fishing requires some more patience and skill to harvest red snapper this way (moving more spots more frequently) than anchoring near hard bottom structures north of the Florida Middle Grounds where fish tend to aggregate in larger numbers.
- He continued that when fishermen report about seeing less red snapper they may actually be speaking just to high-relief hardbottom areas and have not explored fishing in other habitat types.
- He added that fishing along sandy habitats helps reduce the chance of also encountering gag grouper in the off season as well as avoiding shark depredation.
- He stated that fish fall charters encountered more gag grouper in the fall than in previous years and predicted for a strong spring based on his catch and release charter trips.

Capt. Bob Zales II:

- Expressed concerns over the lack of accountability for recreational discard mortality, pointing out that the estimated numbers, though imprecise, are significantly higher than those in the commercial sector, leading to reductions in overall quotas due to the uncertainty surrounding these discards.
- Advocated for the inclusion of recreational discards in stock assessments to prevent their impact on commercial fishing quotas, emphasizing the need to segregate recreational discard mortality from affecting the commercial sector's allocations.

- Called for the SEFSC to explore alternative methods until there is an improvement in the data collection process for the recreational sector, underlining the urgency of addressing this issue.

- Highlighted the problem of depredation, noting that even with the use of descending devices, predators like dolphins can still capture the fish once released, complicating efforts to reduce mortality rates through technological solutions.

Other Business

No other business was brought before the SSC.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:30 pm eastern time on February 28, 2024.

Meeting Participants

Standing SSC
Luiz Barbieri, *Vice Chair*
Harry Blanchet
David Chagaris
Roy Crabtree
Doug Gregory
David Griffith
Paul Mickle
Trevor Moncrief
Jim Nance, *Chair*
Will Patterson
Dan Petrolia
Sean Powers
Steven Scyphers
Jim Tolan

Special Reef Fish SSC
Jason Adriance
Mike Allen
John Mareska

Special Socioeconomic SSC
Luke Fairbanks
Cindy Grace-McCaskey
Jack Issacs

Council Representative
Billy Broussard

Special Ecosystem SSC
Mandy Karnauskas
Josh Kilborn
Steven Saul

A list of all meeting participants can be viewed here.