Summary Report of
Reef Fish Advisory Panel
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Webinar Meeting
Wednesday, February 24, 2021
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 February 24, 2021. The meeting agenda and the minutes from the October 16, 2020, webinar meeting were approved as written.

SEDAR 64: Southeastern U.S. Yellowtail Snapper Stock Assessment

Ms. Shanae Allen from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute presented the findings of the SEDAR 64 stock assessment of southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper. A key difference for this assessment was the inclusion of recreational catch and effort data from the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES). The model data included the years 1992 – 2018. Biomass has continued to increase, while discards have decreased, albeit with considerable uncertainty in the discards data. The majority of landings are from the private recreational fleet, followed by the commercial fleet, with the Florida Keys being the focal point of fishing pressure, regardless of fishing fleet. The Florida Keys landings are included with the Gulf landings for data analysis because of how the data are collected. However, the landings are apportioned and counted against the South Atlantic portion of the stock catch limits because of how the stock is managed. Fishing mortality has oscillated around fishing mortality at optimum yield (F_{OY}), or F at 40% of the spawning potential ratio ($F_{40\%SPR}$), since the early 2000s. As such, the stock is not experiencing overfishing. Further, the stock has been above the minimum stock size threshold throughout the time series, meaning that yellowtail snapper has not been overfished since at least 1992.

Several projection scenarios were presented to the Gulf and South Atlantic Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSCs). The bulk of the spawning biomass comes from age-2 to age-6 fish. An AP member asked about the maximum age of yellowtail snapper, which was shown to be about 20 years. This assessment focused on Florida only, since over 99% of the stock and the fishing pressure on it occurs off Florida. A 28-year-old fish was once sampled off North Carolina, but that sample does not represent the preponderance of the stock. By about age-2 to age-2.5, yellowtail snapper is thought to be sexually mature. The AP member also asked about the trend in biomass declining in the last two years of the model, which Ms. Allen suggested may be linked to the declining recruitment in the same time period.

Mr. Ryan Rindone provided an overview of the joint Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs' recommendations. Those were to use a P* value of 0.375, which represents a 37.5% probability of overfishing the stock, for the acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations for the Councils, and F at maximum sustainable yield (F_{MSY}, or $F_{30\%SPR}$) for the overfishing limit (OFL).

Table 1. OFL (at $F_{30\%SPR}$) and ABC (at P* = 0.375) recommendations for southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper from SEDAR 64 by the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs. Values are in millions of pounds, whole weight.

Year	$F_{30\%SPR}$	P* = 0.375
2021	4.754	4.655
2022	4.301	4.242
2023	4.028	3.991
2024	3.863	3.836
2025	3.756	3.736

Ms. Emily Muehlstein presented results from the Something's Fishy tool for yellowtail snapper which gathered responses from the public in early 2019 for both the Gulf and South Atlantic. A majority of the 363 respondents identified as private anglers, and the overall response sentiment in both manual and automated analyses was positive. Respondents could report observations for one or more locations; the highest number of responses were observations reported off the coast of Tampa and the Florida Keys. Comments were sorted in manual analysis by sentiment type as well as relation to stock abundance. The results of manual analysis and automated analysis were more similar for abundance related comments than for overall response sentiment. When comparing responses by sector and component, a larger proportion of private anglers had a negative sentiment than the for-hire or commercial respondents; however, the overall sentiment by the private angling component was still positive.

AP Discussion

The AP noted that the change in the annual catch limits (ACLs) would not be detached from any change in the apportionment of the yellowtail snapper stock between the Gulf and South Atlantic Council jurisdictions. It was also noted that yellowtail snapper was added to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's State Reef Fish Survey in July 2020, and the data collected will supplement the data collected by MRIP. Staff showed the recent landings of yellowtail snapper by fishing sector and region, which showed that the combined sectors in the Gulf, and the recreational sector in the South Atlantic, had not been landing their respective ACLs.

The AP discussed how much the apportionment might change, and what that would mean for the Gulf's apportionment of the stock ACL for yellowtail snapper. The AP did not settle on a specific recommendation for the apportionment or for the value for the Gulf's stock ACL. However, the AP thought that the general conditions under which the Gulf has been fishing should be maintained with respect to access to the fish for both sectors. The AP also acknowledged that work on revising management measures for yellowtail snapper would be done in concert with the South Atlantic Council, since the stock is shared by the Councils.

Motion: To recommend maintaining status quo fishing conditions/levels for yellowtail snapper in the Gulf of Mexico considerate of any changes due to MRIP-FES or

declining yield streams.

***Motion carried with no opposition*.**

Discussion: Gray Triggerfish Recreational Fixed Closed Seasons

Ms. Carly Somerset presented an action to modify the recreational gray triggerfish fixed closed season, specifically, when the season is projected to close based on the action alternatives. The action stems from a motion made at the November/December 2020 Council meeting to modify the recreational fixed closed season for gray triggerfish to be January 1 through the end of February and June 1 through the end of June. The Council recently approved increased recreational catch limits at its January 2021 meeting; the fixed closed season analysis used these increased catch limits. Data used in the analysis combined landings from four different recreational surveys: MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey (MRIP-CHTS), Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS), LA Creel, and the Texas Creel Survey. A majority of the landings (> 90%) are from MRIP. Data sources for each two-month wave differed due to the different closure dates each year and the variation in compatibility of state and federal closures. Thus, data from 2018 and 2019 were primarily used . Landings were difficult to predict due to the changes in gray triggerfish recreational season closures and various management measures implemented within the last decade. There were no data to predict landings for July through December since the recreational sector has not been open throughout those months since 2013. The analysis provided predicted landings for January through June with a majority of the predicted landings occurring in May and June. The predicted landings and 95% confidence intervals were cumulatively summed to determine when the annual catch target (ACT) of 274,323 pounds whole weight (lbs ww) would be reached for each of the different seasonal closure alternatives. The new ACT is expected to be reached in April or early May.

AP Discussion

The AP discussed the need to have something to catch during different parts of the year, particularly for the for-hire and private vessel fleets. Some AP members expressed a desire to have gray triggerfish available in the spring, specifically in March and April, to meet the spring break demand, with any extra fish being made available in August when other species such as red snapper and greater amberjack would be closed to recreational harvest. The AP agreed with taking smaller steps in opening additional access for gray triggerfish, since the stock was still in a rebuilding plan. Additionally, panel members noted that they did not want to exceed the recreational catch levels and gray triggerfish payback measures for overages that would shorten future recreational season lengths.

Motion: Recommend that the Council not modify the recreational closed seasons for gray triggerfish.

***Motion carried with no opposition*.**

SEDAR 70: Gulf of Mexico Greater Amberjack Stock Assessment

Mr. Ryan Rindone presented an overview of SEDAR 70, which assessed Gulf greater amberjack. This assessment updated data sources through 2018, and incorporated recreational catch and effort estimates from MRIP-FES. Most of the observed fish in the combined video survey ranged in fork length between 35-85 cm (13.8-33.5 inches), indicating that the survey was capturing juvenile and subadult greater amberjack. The commercial sector tends to harvest larger and older fish than the recreational sector, and also discards fewer fish. The majority of removals are by the recreational sector, which is allocated 73% of the stock ACL. A recent study by LGL Ecological Associates indicated that much of the greater amberjack biomass may be associated with offshore oil rigs and associated artificial structure. This study was focused on habitats in the western Gulf. These study results suggest the potential for a larger spawning stock biomass (SSB) than what is presently estimated; however, these spatially explicit data could not be incorporated into the model at this time. The Council is considering a future research track assessment for greater amberjack that would account for these data.

Overall, the model indicated a marked decrease in greater amberjack SSB since the 1980s. Recruitment, though poorly understood, appears to have been depressed since the 1980s, but may be increasing in recent years. The results of the stock assessment indicated that the stock is overfished and that overfishing is occurring. SEDAR 70 was compared to an MRIP-FES calibrated version of the previous stock assessment (SEDAR 33 Update, 2016). This comparison indicated that the recent conservation management measures for greater amberjack have failed to slow the decline in SSB and that stock condition has not improved.

An AP member asked for clarification on the recent study of greater amberjack occurrence on offshore oil rigs. Council staff stated that preliminary findings of the study indicated that as much as 30-40% of greater amberjack biomass may be associated with these and associated structures. The AP expressed continued concern about the removal of these rigs, and the potential effects on the greater amberjack stock. Council staff stated that the U.S. Congress has appropriated approximately $10 million to fund research proposals to characterize greater amberjack habitat use, study its life history, and estimate Gulf-wide and South Atlantic-wide abundance. The AP emphasized that frequent management changes complicate the stock assessment process and encouraged stakeholders to allow current management strategies time to have a detectable effect on the stock.

Mr. Rindone reviewed projections and catch advice recommended by the SSC. The SSC decided to begin projections in 2022, since implementing any changes for 2021 was unlikely. Preliminary landings were used for 2019, and the average of 2016-2018 landings were used to estimate 2020 and 2021 landings. The 2019 landings were determined to be less reflective of historical landings trends due to implementation of the split recreational fishing year. Recognizing the uncertainty surrounding the assessment, the SSC recommended catch limits annually out to 2024. The AP asked why a constant catch scenario was not considered by the SSC. Varying catch limits annually decreases the probability of underestimating harvest in the early projection years and overestimating harvest as time goes on. Since greater amberjack appears to have been subject to elevated fishing mortality for decades, the SSC advised a more conservative approach in setting catch limits, partly in the form of increasing yield streams.

Council staff added that, even with this conservative approach, the recommended catch advice may be overly optimistic. This same approach has been used in the past but has yet to result in the anticipated recovery of the stock. Further, despite the incorporation of MRIP-FES, the greater amberjack stock size is thought to have decreased by approximately 40% since the last assessment.

Something's Fishy

Ms. Emily Muehlstein provided information on the Something's Fishy analysis for greater amberjack. Responses were gathered from the end of April to the end of May 2020, concurrent with the May season. Only 64 responses were received; Council staff reminded the AP the tool works better when the response rate is higher and requested AP members to promote the tool. A majority of the respondents were private anglers. Manual analysis showed that a majority of respondents reported a neutral sentiment while an overall positive sentiment was observed in the automated analysis. Manual analysis gave an overall neutral sentiment to responses that had both positive and negative comments. These neutral comments are critical of management decisions but indicated that greater amberjack is prolific. Abundance related comments had an overall positive sentiment. When sorted by location, most responses provided observations off central Florida and the Panhandle. Fewer responses were received from the Florida Keys and western Gulf. Most of the responses from the western Gulf were classified as positive; eastern Gulf responses were more likely to be neutral. Council staff noted that this was the first Something's Fishy in recent efforts that indicated the respondents disagreed with the most recent stock assessment. An AP member suggested it would be prudent for the group to create a list of preferences and priorities for the Council, knowing that there will likely be a decrease in catch limits in the future. Other AP members also discussed an observed disparity between the eastern and western greater amberjack fishery in relation to fishing effort and stock abundance.

AP Discussion

AP members thought that reducing greater amberjack discards may help the stock, especially during summer months when fishermen observe more dead discards. Some AP members also discussed managing greater amberjack regionally to account for differences in the stock and in fishing pressure. The AP discussed whether an emergency rule, such as a season closure, would be necessary to curb fishing mortality to end overfishing without reducing available fishing opportunities too drastically. The AP ultimately decided not to make a formal recommendation to the Council, since the discussion captured their concerns.

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

Dr. Matt 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 ACLs and ACTs and the projected recreational sector closure dates that would result from combined alternative choices in Actions 1 and 2 of the draft amendment. He noted the preferred alternatives selected as well as the new

alternative for Action 1 requested at the Council's January 2021 meeting. The Council will see a revised public hearing draft at its April 2020 Council meeting will consider final action during its June 2021 meeting.

AP Discussion

An AP member commented that the suite of alternatives is lacking middle ground choices. He did note that Action 1 Alternative 6 appeared to be a good middle ground choice but suggested that another alternative should be added to offer more choices that would split the total ACL reduction between the two sectors. He also noted that an interim analysis of the red grouper stock will be presented in the next few months to the Council and should be considered. Staff responded that the interim analysis has not been reviewed by the SSC and cannot be used for management purposes until then. Staff further noted that if the Council were to fold the interim analysis into the current amendment, instead of addressing that in a separate document, the current amendment would not be in place for the start of the 2022 year. Mr. Peter Hood (SERO) commented that a document addressing the results of the interim analysis could be implemented by spring of 2022 and that additional quota could be released to the commercial sector at that point. The AP then made the following motion:

Motion: To add an Alternative to Action 1 that would set the commercial ACL at 3.00 mp gw.

Motion carried with no opposition.

An AP member asked if the AP needed to recommend alternatives during this meeting. Staff responded that the amendment is scheduled to go final at the Council's June meeting, and the AP is not scheduled to meet again prior to that. Therefore, the AP would not get another opportunity to make a recommendation. A motion to make the new Alternative 7 (setting the commercial ACL at 3.00 mp gw) the preferred alternative failed. The AP expressed interest in automating management response to interim analyses.

Motion: To modify the reef fish and CMP fishery management plans to automate catch advice based on interim analysis.

Motion carried with no opposition.

A motion to make Alternative 4 the preferred alternative failed. An AP member stressed that the multi-use allocation is important for a lot of commercial fishermen and that the current 5% commercial buffer between the ACL and ACT should be maintained.

Motion: To consider the proposed Action 2 Alternative 3 the preferred.
Preferred Alternative 3: Maintain the current buffer between the ACL and ACT for the commercial sector, and apply the ACL/ACT Control Rule to revise the buffer between the ACL and ACT for the recreational sector. The commercial buffer is 5%,

and the recreational buffer is 9%.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Discussion: Commercial Electronic Logbooks

Dr. Lisa Hollensead provided a presentation synthesizing information regarding changes to the commercial electronic logbook program. The presentation highlighted two previous presentations from SEFSC staff that was provided to the Council at its June and October 2020 meetings. Broadly, proposed changes to the program will require electronic reporting at the set-level rather than trip-level, eliminate the need for paper logbooks, include a number of new data entries, streamline reporting timing, reduce entry errors, and will improve indices of abundance for stock assessment. Preliminary results of a pilot study to test the program changes, conducted in 2015, were also presented. This will affect numerous commercial fishery permit holders, and Council staff stated that this topic will be discussed at the upcoming Coastal Migratory Pelagic AP meeting in March 2021. According to the SEFSC's timeline, a voluntary participation period of one year would be first applied before mandatory implementation.

AP Discussion

An AP member inquired as to the impetus of the program changes. SEFSC staff answered that the changes were requested by NMFS as well as non-agency partners in 2011 to improve commercial data collection. Several AP members voiced support for the elimination of paper logbooks and a more streamlined reporting approach. However, there was concern that not all commercial fishing practices would benefit from program changes and that the changes seemed more conducive to longline vessels. AP members stated that smaller-scale commercial operations working off smaller center console vessels make several fishing explorations in a single 24-hour day which requires rapid transitions to several fishing sites. It was noted that there are already several monitoring and reporting requirements for the highly-targeted commercial reef fish fisheries in the individual fishing quota (IFQ) program. They expressed that the process of recording catch and effort information during those transitions would be burdensome without providing any improved data over a conventional trip log. Other AP members indicated that providing more 'real-time' information would improve accuracy which is beneficial for data collection. SEFSC staff stated they were working with application vendors to provide as many automated features as possible to reduce data entry requirements. An AP member asked that many of these requirements complement the current hardware/software reporting requirements of the commercial IFQ program, instead of adding additional costs and reporting requirements to the industry. The SEFSC staff noted that many of the concerns expressed by AP members were reported from the 2015 pilot study. SEFSC stated that several definitions of what constitutes a set would be provided to avoid excessive data entries. The AP pointed out that stakeholders who were already aware and generally positive about the program were likely to volunteer for the program before mandatory implementation. They suggested that further outreach was required to inform the larger industry. The AP determined that more information on the program changes would be necessary to inform feedback from commercial stakeholders.

Motion: To inform the mackerel, reef fish and shrimp commercial fishermen of the Gulf about these ELB proposals and hear back from them before implementation.

***Motion carried with no opposition*.**

Discussion: Modifications to Vermilion Snapper Recreational Bag Limit

A presentation was given by Ms. Carly Somerset on an action to modify the vermilion snapper recreational bag limit. A motion was made at the November/December 2020 meeting to modify the recreational bag limit for vermilion snapper, including alternatives for a 15-fish bag limit and to eliminate the bag limit, but retain the 20-fish aggregate bag limit for those reef fish species without a species-specific bag limit. A preliminary bag limit analysis was completed using Gulf MRIP-FES and headboat data from 2017 - 2019; Texas creel, and LA Creel data have not yet been organized for inclusion in the analysis. Vermilion snapper landings have only exceeded the stock ACL once since 2012, and the fishing season has never been subject to an ACL closure. The preliminary bag limit analysis indicates that most anglers harvest within the bag limit, with a majority of those anglers harvesting 1 to 5 vermilion snapper per angler. It is not expected that changing the recreational bag limit will meaningfully affect recreational harvest.

AP Discussion

Some AP members stated that if the stock appears to be healthy and if increasing catch limits is sustainable, then increasing the bag limit provides more opportunities for anglers to harvest additional vermilion snapper. Other AP members were reticent to increase the bag limit if most anglers do not keep their daily bag limit.

Motion: To not remove the vermilion snapper from the 20-fish aggregate bag limit.

***Motion carried with no opposition*.**

Motion: To increase the bag limit to 15 fish per person within the 20-fish aggregate bag limit.

***Motion carried with no opposition*.**

Other Business

Commercial Trip Limit for Gray Triggerfish

An AP member thought the Council should consider increasing the commercial trip limit for gray triggerfish in response to the increase in the ACL from the interim analysis. Commercial fishermen are currently avoiding gray triggerfish due to the low catch limits, and when they do

get into them, the discards can be very high on bottom longline gear due to depth fished. AP members commented that increasing the commercial trip limit will reduce dead discards, as there is not currently a directed commercial fishery for the species, and one is not expected, even if the Council decided to raise the trip limit from 16 fish to 20 or 25 fish per trip.

Motion: To start a document that would consider adjusting commercial triggerfish trip limits in response to increased quota.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Red Grouper Recreational Landings in Weight

An AP member thought the Council should make it a priority to get clarity on why the data used in SEDAR 61 and the data used in Reef Fish Amendment 53 differ so much for the recreational data, especially in recent years (e.g., 2017). Council staff reviewed the presentation given previously by the SEFSC to this effect to the SSC with the AP; however, the AP thought that making a motion to this effect would demonstrate their concern to the Council.

Motion: To recommend that the Council have the Science Center reevaluate the difference in the recreational landings in weight between the data in Amendment 53 and SEDAR 61. The Science Center should clarify why these differences exist. A reconciliation of this should be completed before using this in Amendment 53.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Public Comment

Public commenters showed support for the motions made by AP members. There is still concern about the transition from MRIP-CHTS to MRIP-FES as there appear to be large enough discrepancies (e.g. red grouper) in landings data to merit more investigation on its accuracy and precision across species and whether it constitutes best scientific information available. The public also expressed uneasiness about how the change in landings data has affected sector allocations, specifically discussion involving potential reallocation measures for red grouper. Comments were made that there appear to be differing perceptions of stocks, such as red grouper and greater amberjack, between stakeholders and fisheries managers. Commenters also remarked that the commercial industry will likely not be ready for the commercial electronic logbook program to begin without additional efforts to foster communication and provide more information on program details and expectations. Public comment ended with discussion of greater amberjack management and the implications for anglers if the Gulf quota decreases to help mitigate the overfished and overfishing status. AP members agreed that more real-time data are needed and that the Council needs to be made aware of their concerns regarding lack of data and the uncertainty surrounding 2020 landings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:30 P.M.

Participants

Reef Fish AP Members
Ed Walker, Chair
Troy Frady, Vice Chair
Doug Boyd
Jane Black-Lee
Patrick Cagle
Jason Delacruz
Josh Ellender
Johnny Greene
Buddy Guindon
Dylan Hubbard
Chris Jenkins
Mike Prasek
David Walker
Clarence Seymour Jr.
Johnny Marquez

Council Representative
Martha Guyas

A list of all meeting participants can be viewed here.