

**Reef Fish Committee Report
October 22, 2019
Ms. Guyas – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) as written and approved the minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) of the August 2019 meeting as written.

Review of Reef Fish and Coastal Migratory Pelagics Landings (Tab B, No. 4)

The Committee asked to be briefed on what recreational data collection programs are being used for which species when the landings are reviewed. Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff said landings are generated in Fishing Effort Survey-calibrated Marine Recreational Information Program (FES-MRIP) data for each species, and can then be converted back to other data currencies depending on the quota monitoring program for each species.

Commercial fishing for gray triggerfish remains open for 2019, while greater amberjack closed on June 9. Recreational fishing for greater amberjack was closed for the remainder of the 2018/19 fishing season, which reset on August 1, 2020. Gray triggerfish is closed for the remainder of 2019. Fishing for red grouper and gag remains open for the recreational sector. The for-hire component for recreational red snapper is closed, but not all data have been received to know the total landings in 2019. The landings for the private angling component for recreational red snapper are below the respective quota limits for all states for data received thus far. Fishing for species with stock annual catch limits (ACL) (hogfish, lane snapper, mutton snapper, and vermilion snapper) are all expected to remain open thru end of 2019.

Commercial landings for king mackerel remain open in all Gulf zones except for the Southern Zone Gillnet, which opens on January 22, 2020. For the 2018/19 commercial fishing season, commercial vertical line landings of king mackerel were under the combined ACL, with 96.6% of the vertical line portion of the commercial ACL landed. The Southern Zone Gillnet fishery exceeded its quota in 2019, landing 107.7% of its portion of the commercial ACL, and will have payback when gillnet opens in 2020. The recreational sector for king mackerel landed 37% of its ACL in the 2018/19 fishing season. Spanish mackerel and cobia landings are both below their stock ACLs.

The Committee discussed receiving state-specific feedback on data collection and management activities for the 2019 private angling component's fishing season for red snapper. This information would allow the Committee to better understand the progress being made through the states' management of the exempted fishing permits issued for 2018 and 2019. The US Coast Guard requested that the states provide them with their management plans for state management, expected to be implemented for 2020.

Without opposition, the Committee recommends, and I so **move: to request that the Council receive an update from each state at the January 2020 Council meeting on that State's 2019 red snapper private angler management.**

Motion carried with no opposition.

Draft Amendment 36B: Modifications to Commercial Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Programs and Presentations (Tab B, No. 5)

Staff presented the revised Amendment 36B and the Committee discussed the alternatives for requiring shareholders to have a commercial reef fish permit. The Committee suggested that more discussion relative to the duration of shares (i.e., indefinite or finite time period) may be warranted. Committee members noted that additional discussion may also be needed concerning landing requirements for shareholders. The Committee considered whether those shareholder accounts that may be grandfathered in (i.e., not required to have a permit) should be allowed to increase their shareholdings or only to maintain them. Committee members also discussed the history of developing the IFQ programs and the decision to allow shareholders to participate in the program after 5 years without a commercial permit. In the interest of time, the Committee postponed further discussion and review of Action 2.

Draft Framework Action to Modify Greater Amberjack Recreational Management Measures (Tab B, No. 6)

Council staff gave a presentation outlining the updates to the revised framework action, specifically focusing on the additional action regarding recreational zone management (Action 1). The Committee recognized that a zone management approach could complicate recreational management measures without necessarily achieving management goals. After discussing the trade-offs, the Committee decided to remove Action 1 from further consideration:

The Committee recommends, and I so move: **to move Action 1 to Considered but Rejected.**

Action 1– Establish Greater Amberjack Recreational Fishing Zones and Quotas

Motion carried with no opposition.

Ms. Levy stated that the Committee could consider split seasonal quotas for greater amberjack, which may be less complicated to implement than zone management. The Committee agreed that a split quota consideration may be worth considering. After reviewing the alternatives for modifying the recreational bag limit (Action 2) and fishing year (Action 3), the Committee stated that if a split quota measure was going to be included in the document, modification to the start of the fishing year would not be necessary and Action 3 was removed from further consideration:

The Committee recommends, and I so move: **to move Action 3 to Considered but Rejected.**

Action 3– Modify the Greater Amberjack Recreational Fishing Year

Motion carried with no opposition.

Additionally, the Committee decided to add another action in the document to examine a split recreational season quota for greater amberjack:

The Committee recommends, and I so move: **to add an Action to consider a split quota between seasons for recreational management of greater amberjack in the Gulf of Mexico based on NMFS projections designed to facilitate access to the stock in spring and fall.**

Motion carried with no opposition.

Dr. Froeschke stated that a previous examination for a recreational split season for greater amberjack resulted in a 65% fall and 35% spring division in harvest. Dr. Crabtree reminded the Committee that future MRIP data incorporating the new FES design may greatly increase landings estimates for the eastern Gulf; however, recreational landing estimates from Texas and Louisiana will remain relatively unchanged. The Committee also discussed removing the fixed closed season action (Action 4) from the document but decided to retain the action and review the subsequent analysis with the additional split quota consideration. A revised document will be presented at the January 2020 Council meeting.

Stock Assessment Review: SEDAR 61 – Gulf of Mexico Red Grouper (Tab B, No. 7)

Dr. Skyler Sagarese of the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) reviewed the data used in the SEDAR 61 stock assessment of Gulf red grouper, which assessed the stock using data through 2017. Some improvements from the previous assessment (SEDAR 42) include the addition of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) Repetitive Time Drop survey, the estimation of commercial discards, the combination of several video surveys into a single index, and the estimation of recreational fishing effort. The larger estimate of initial biomass in SEDAR 42 as compared to SEDAR 61 was identified as a computational error, which has been corrected in SEDAR 61. The Committee asked what the trend in biomass would look like in SEDAR 42 if the computational error were resolved. Dr. Sagarese replied that the biomass trend from SEDAR 42 becomes very similar to SEDAR 61 when the error is fixed in that model.

Red tide is an important source of mortality for red grouper, with SEDAR 61 recognizing and modeling large red tide events in 2005 (worst) and 2014. Red tide is incorporated, applying mortality in red tide years to reflect the predicted removals from the stock. Recent fishing mortality has been much lower than previous years.

Based on data through 2017, and using the Council's definition of minimum stock size threshold from Reef Fish Amendment 44, red grouper is not overfished and is not undergoing overfishing. However, the spawning stock biomass remains below the biomass at maximum sustainable yield, and this stock status determination does not take into consideration the 2018 red tide event.

Yield projections rely on the current sector allocations (76% commercial, 24% recreational), assume constant recruitment, selectivity, catchability, retention, and discard mortality based on the 2010 – 2017 time period, and begin in 2020. The projections are very sensitive to the degree

of mortality assumed for the 2018 red tide event. The Council's "Something's Fishy" tool for red grouper was useful as a litmus test for estimating the intensity and spatial extent of the 2018 red tide, and suggested that the 2018 event was significant. Further, the information provided suggested that there were many small individuals in the population, and that the stock was generally being found in deeper water than in previous years. Further, the SEFSC received funding to compare the 2018 event to previous events through stakeholder interviews, with local knowledge again suggesting the 2018 event was quite significant.

Initial spikes in yield projections result in part from the 2013 recruit class moving into the fishery, with the magnitude of a spike dependent on the predicted severity of the 2018 red tide. Dr. Sagarese described harvest levels corresponding to the probability of overfishing. Ultimately the SSC decided to recommend setting the OFL at a 50% probability of overfishing (5.35 million pounds [mp] gutted weight [gw]) and the ABC at a 30% probability of overfishing (4.9 mp gw), and assumed that the 2018 red tide event was equivalent to the 2005 event (approximately 34% mortality). These catch recommendations are made using the FES-MRIP data currency under the current sector allocations. For comparison, the recreational landings for 2017 under Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) adjusted MRIP data (CHTS-MRIP) were less than 1 mp gw, and under FES-MRIP, were equivalent to 2.1 mp gw.

The Committee asked whether the application of red tide within the model was influencing the trend in biomass in the stock. Dr. Sagarese replied that sensitivity runs excluding red tide mortality still showed declines in abundance, indicating the model was picking up on declines in total biomass even without looking at red tide explicitly. Dr. Sagarese cautioned against looking at the projections in the absence of the 2018 red tide event, since those projections do not likely represent reality.

The SSC recognized the SEDAR 61 assessment as the best scientific information available, and recommended the aforementioned stock status and catch levels for the OFL and ABC. Dr. Barbieri noted that the total biomass of the stock is lower than it has ever been in the observed time series. The SSC thought that a number of factors are likely affecting red grouper, including mating dynamics and sexual transition from females to males, and other ecosystem-level elements such as competition for habitat and prey with other reef fish species. Given these and other factors such as red grouper's intermittent recruitment and vulnerability to red tide, the SSC decided to set the ABC at a 30% probability of overfishing (4.9 mp gw) as opposed to using the P* analysis of the ABC Control Rule, as 30% represents the lowest probability of overfishing considered by the Control Rule. To avoid the spike in the projections partially resulting from 2013 recruitment, the SSC set its catch advice based on a 5-year average of years 2020 – 2024. These catch recommendations are made in the FES-MRIP data currency. The Council's Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) has also reviewed the SEDAR 61 assessment, and thought that an ACL of 3.5 mp gw, based on CHTS-MRIP, would be appropriate. The Reef Fish AP recommended the equivalent value in the FES-MRIP data currency.

Dr. Crabtree discussed the implications of SEDAR 61 on sector allocations for red grouper. The transition from CHTS-MRIP to FES-MRIP results in an increased estimate of total biomass based on the increased landings and effort coming from the recreational sector. Because the increase in the total biomass estimate is attributed to changes in the recreational data, it means

that the historical data used to determine sector allocations (1986 – 2005, from Reef Fish Amendment 30B) using FES-MRIP data for the same time series would result in different sector allocations than the Council has presently. Applying the new FES-MRIP landings to that same time series results in new sector allocations of 59.48% commercial and 40.52% recreational. The yield projections, rerun to accommodate this new sector allocation and based on the parameters used by the SSC in their catch recommendations, result in an OFL of 4.67 mp gw and an ABC of 4.27 mp gw. The commercial ACL would be 2.54 mp gw, and the recreational ACL would be 1.73 mp gw.

The Committee asked for clarification on why the adjusted projections under the revised sector allocation result in overall lower catch recommendations. Dr. Crabtree clarified that the reduction is because of the projected size and age at harvest by fleet, combined with the discards by fleet projected into the future and the effects of those factors on total biomass. The Committee noted that the recreational grouper fishery has expressed a desire in the past to have red grouper available through the end of the year, which may require management changes given that the recent FES-MRIP recreational landings are have exceeded the 1.73 mp gw projected recreational ACL under the revised FES-adjusted allocation.

The Committee expressed some concern about changing allocations based on FES-MRIP estimates for previously used time series for determining species sector allocations. Dr. Crabtree reminded the Committee that retaining the current sector allocations would be a *de facto* reallocation to the commercial sector, since the increase in biomass for red grouper is the result of the revised recreational landings and effort data.

The Committee discussed timing for making catch recommendation and allocation changes, noting that the SSC needed to review the projections under the revised FES-adjusted allocations before providing new catch advice. A plan amendment would be needed to revise allocations, with the updated catch recommendations specified within the amendment. The Committee thought that it would be unlikely to complete and submit this amendment to the Secretary for implementation until late-2020 at the earliest.

The Committee recommends, and I so move: to ask the SSC to review red grouper projections based on the allocation time series from Reef Fish Amendment 30B, 1986-2005, and the best available landings used as inputs in the new stock assessment (40.52% recreational / 59.48% commercial) and direct staff to start work on a plan amendment to update the red grouper allocation and establish catch levels based on the new assessment.

Motion carried with no opposition.

The Committee recommends, and I so move: to ask the Science Center to conduct interim analyses of red grouper annually starting in 2020.

Motion carried with no opposition.

SEDAR 61 Executive Summary

The Committee reviewed the content and organization of the SEDAR 61 executive summary, the format for which will be used to generate similar standalone summaries for each stock assessment for the public. The Committee recommended adding a hyperlink to the full assessment on the first page, and a hyperlink to the location in the most recent assessment which details the main model deviations. Further, the Committee praised the success of the Council's "Something's Fishy" tool, and asked staff to follow up with respondents by sending them the executive summary and perhaps identifying differences between their input and the assessment.

Stock Assessment Review: iTarget Model Update and Projections for Gulf Lane Snapper (Tab B, No. 8)

Dr. Sagarese reviewed the work of the SEFSC to update the headboat index used to assess lane snapper in SEDAR 49. This index was selected as representative of the trend in the stock, and updated through 2018. The reference period used for this index was 1999 – 2008. Landings of lane snapper have increased, with lane snapper occurring in headboat landings 38% – 68% of the time. The effort from the headboat index for lane snapper was similar to the overall headboat effort for the same time series. Landings include CHTS-MRIP data for the recreational sector, with all landings data (recreational and commercial) updated through 2018. These landings were compared to the reference period to determine the recommended catch level.

When reviewing the lane snapper analysis, the SSC determined it represented the best scientific information available, and recommended an OFL of 603,195 pounds and an ABC of 588,965 pounds. The OFL was set based on a 50% probability of overfishing, and the ABC on a 30% probability. The Reef Fish AP recommended setting the ACL equal to the ABC. The same analysis of the headboat index is available in FES-MRIP, and the SSC will review that analysis at its January 2020 meeting.

Remaining Items from the Reef Fish AP Summary Report (Tab B, No. 9)

Discussion of Removing the Rule Allowing Trolling in the Steamboat Lumps and Madison-Swanson Marine Protected Areas (MPA)

A Reef Fish AP member reported observing fishermen bottom fishing under the guise of trolling within the Steamboat Lumps and Madison Swanson MPAs. Bottom fishing is not allowed inside either of the MPAs, and trolling is only permitted from May through October. Reef Fish AP members did not consider the MPAs a legitimate trolling destination for fishermen, and noted that rampant reef fish poaching is occurring in the area, which is known to hold large numbers of mature gag and red grouper. Law enforcement officers rarely report encountering typical trolling activity in either of the MPAs. Commercial vessels can transit through the MPA boundaries with reef fish on board as long as all fishing gear is stowed. The US Coast Guard added that enforcement in the MPAs can be difficult due to distance from port. The AP expressed a desire to maintain the ability to transit through the MPAs while in possession of reef fish species with all fishing gear stowed, with which the Committee agreed.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move:** to ask staff to begin a framework action to reevaluate the trolling provisions in Madison Swanson and Steamboat Lumps.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Other Business

The Committee asked about the status of the discards data for the longline fleets. Staff replied that the discard data already received from the SEFSC are still being compiled. Staff will provide a letter to the SEFSC with the Council's request. The Committee is interested in these data as they may relate to Draft Amendment 36B.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.