

**Reef Fish Committee Report  
January 30 - 31, 2023  
Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**). The minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the October 2022 meeting were approved as written.

*FINAL ACTION: Draft Framework Action for Gray Triggerfish Commercial Trip Limit (Tab B, No. 4)*

Council staff summarized written public comments received prior to reviewing the framework action to increase the gray triggerfish commercial trip limit from the current trip limit of 16 fish per trip. The Council chose Alternative 3 (25 fish) as the preferred alternative at its October 2022 meeting. Committee members had no further discussion on the document and decided to proceed with the preferred alternative for final action.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to recommend the Council approve Framework Action: Modification of Gray Triggerfish Commercial Trip Limits and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation, and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes in the document. The Council Chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate.**

*Motion carried 17 to 0 using Meridia voting system.*

*Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Focus Group (Tab B. No. 5)*

The IFQ Focus Group’s second meeting was held November 30 through December 1, 2022. One of the meeting’s facilitators, Dr. Joy Hazell, presented a meeting summary that highlighted benefits and drawbacks identified by the members and noted that a benefit to one member may be a drawback to another. She also summarized several themes that came out of the meeting. Next, Dr. Andrew Ropicki, the knowledgeable non-participant member of the focus group, presented on adaptive catch share management, which is a process of share redistribution based on vessel landing activity. Then, Dr. Jessica Stephen (Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) presented several IFQ-related issues and potential program changes, including modification of the program’s goals and objectives and information about the loan program. Committee members discussed difficulties with tackling changes to the program and expressed support for focusing on the goals and objectives first. There was support for two approaches: dedicating a small amount of time at subsequent Council meetings for focused discussion, or convening a separate Council session before a Council meeting begins to provide a longer amount of dedicated discussion time. The Committee deferred making a motion pertaining to convening a special session to address changes to the IFQ programs until full Council.

### *Draft Amendment 56: Modifications to the Gag Grouper Catch Limits, Sector Allocations, and Fishing Seasons (Tab B, No. 6)*

SERO staff reviewed the timeline for the gag interim rule that the Council requested, which is intended to reduce fishing mortality ahead of the development and implementation of Amendment 56. On January 1, 2023, commercial allocation in the IFQ program was withheld in anticipation of the interim rule being implemented by May 2, 2023.

Council staff reviewed the options under consideration in Amendment 56, including revised catch limits informed, in part, by the State of Florida's State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS), and highlighting new data for the recreational fishing season durations using SRFS and Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data. NOAA General Counsel (GC) clarified that Options b through d in Alternatives 2 and 3 constituted the maximum time to rebuild the stock ( $T_{Max}$ ). Whereas, Option a represents the minimum time needed to rebuild the stock ( $T_{Min}$ ). A Committee member noted that Options b and c were very similar to one another and thought removing the generation time option would be appropriate, and would simplify the document.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 1, to move Options 2c and 3c in Alternatives 2 and 3 to Considered but Rejected.**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

A Committee member noted that the Council can select a rebuilding time target between  $T_{Min}$  as shown in Option a, and  $T_{Max}$ , as shown in the remaining options, in Alternatives 2 and 3. Staff advised that any additional options would require revised projections, which would need to be reviewed and approved by the SSC prior to incorporating these additional options into the document. NOAA GC noted that the difference between  $T_{Min}$  and the  $T_{Max}$  with the shortest rebuilding time (Option b, 18 years), is 7 years, and thus a target could be chosen that came between those options. A Committee member thought selecting a rebuilding target between Options a and b would be fractional, due to the minimal differences between the rebuilding yield stream projections, and thus, of limited benefit to the stock.

Staff reviewed the options in Action 2 for modifying the recreational fishing season. SERO noted a spring season in state waters for gag in four coastal counties in the Big Bend region of Florida, which accounted for landings outside the federal season in 2019 – 2021. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) confirmed that this spring season has been eliminated in anticipation of the interim rule coming into effect in 2023. Another Committee member asked about the effects of starting a fishing season in the middle of an MRIP wave. SERO replied that most recreational landings come from private vessels and are determined by monthly SRFS landings estimates; the remainder of recreational landings would be subject to the two-month waves characteristic of MRIP. FWC replied that SRFS was not designed for in-season quota monitoring at short time scales. A Committee member asked about addressing discards in the summer months if the fishing season for gag were to open in the fall. Captain Ed Walker, chair of the Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP), replied that for west-central Florida, the overlap between red snapper and gag is not particularly problematic; though, that is not to say that fishermen would not catch any gag during the summer when fishing for red snapper. He

added that opening gag in warmer months may result in higher discard mortality from fishermen having to fish deeper water to find biting fish. He stated that the combination of fishing at deeper depths and releasing fish into warmer surface waters increased discard mortality. Another Committee member noted that fishing practices for gag are diverse across the eastern Gulf, recalling the preference from FWC for a September 1 opening date for the interim rule.

A Committee member thought derby fishing behavior may result from a compressed fishing season. They thought some additional measure may be necessary to try to reduce the chance of exceeding the recreational annual catch limit (ACL). Another Committee member asked to also account for discard mortality in the fishing season duration projections. NOAA GC reiterated that the projections were dependent on the data available now, and that NMFS would have to project when the fishing season would close based on the data available in each fishing year.

In October 2022, the Council requested that staff explore several management measures in the development of Amendment 56; staff recommendations were provided to the Committee for each requested measure. A Committee member asked that staff investigate a two-fish per six people recreational vessel limit, combined with keeping the recreational fishing season open as long as possible. Another Committee member asked about the benefit of selecting a date-certain closure for the recreational fishing season. Staff replied that the benefit comes when the date-certain closure is expected to be prior to the date when the ACL would be projected to be met, resulting in a positive biological benefit to the stock. However, as the ACL increases in successive years, a date-certain closure limits the potential of longer fishing season durations as the ACL increases, limiting future fishing opportunities. The Committee member countered that if the estimated closure date underestimates landings, and an ACL overage results in a payback because the stock is in a rebuilding plan, then there would be negative biological, social, and economic effects resulting from that overharvest.

A Committee member thought that moving the fishing season later into the fall may result in the FWC not implementing a reciprocal fishing season, with the majority of the gag recreational ACL being landed in state waters in earlier months during a state-waters fishing season. The Committee member also noted an effort by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council to manage gag in the same manner as black grouper, with respect to fishing seasons, minimum size and bag limits, and other measures, since the two species are caught concurrently there and have often been misidentified in the past by anglers and port samplers. Another Committee member discussed the low proportion of males, the current closed areas (Madison-Swanson, Steamboat Lumps, and seasonally, the Edges), and the directed fishing effort on females in shallower waters in the fall. A Committee member thought it was in the best interest of the Council to focus its efforts on items that were most likely to be implemented and result in net positive benefits to the gag stock and stakeholders; another Committee member thought these issues should be addressed in a sector-specific manner.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to direct staff to develop the following options for exploration in a framework action or amendment:

- Lowering the gag and black grouper recreational bag limit
- Establishing a gag and black grouper recreational vessel limit

- Spatial areas to protect spawning gag

*Motion carried without opposition.*

A Committee member asked about restocking efforts for a species like gag, and what the likelihood of success of such a program might be. The SEFSC described the difficulties of raising and preparing hatchery-grown fish to survive after being released, and will provide relevant previous research proposals exploring these issues. Another Committee member asked if the peaks in landings could be regionally correlated. Staff will explore the landings data and bring that information back to the Council in April. The Council should select public hearing locations during full Council.

### *Draft Framework Action: Modify the Greater Amberjack and Jacks Complex Management Measures (Tab B, No. 7)*

Council staff reviewed a draft document that would modify management measures for both greater amberjack and the Jacks Complex (almaco jack, lesser amberjack, banded rudderfish). Juvenile greater amberjack may be misidentified as other species within the Jacks Complex. Unintended harvest of greater amberjack misidentified as another jack species could influence the rebuilding goals for greater amberjack. To address this issue, the proposed alternatives include options to establish season closures for the Jacks Complex to reduce fishing mortality of juvenile greater amberjack.

Action 1 outlines proposed modifications to the recreational fishing season. Preliminary season projection analyses, assuming the new reduced catch limits, indicate that the greater amberjack fishing season will likely be only a few weeks in duration regardless of which month the season starts in the fall. The greater amberjack recreational season has not been open during the months of November and December in the past decade. Another method for predicted season duration will be explored in an updated draft of this document.

The Committee discussed the structure of the language used in the document alternatives and discussed whether other season start dates should be considered. A Committee member suggested that a table title reporting the fishing season duration across the document alternatives be amended to explicitly state that these results were based on greater amberjack harvest only. He continued that a table of greater amberjack landings by state would also be informative and staff indicated that those changes could be incorporated in the next draft of the document. Another Committee member stated that adding an option that would close the Jacks Complex fishing season during peak greater amberjack spawning would aid in protecting greater amberjack while limiting the closure period for the Jacks Complex. A Committee member asked if the different recreational data collection programs between the two stocks would be problematic. Staff indicated that while ideally both stocks would have harvest estimated using the same data collection methodology, this distinction does not prevent the action from being implemented as intended. Staff added that they would explore reworking the action alternatives such that a Jacks Complex-specific fishing season alternative could be added and then concurrently selected as preferred with a greater amberjack fishing season alternative.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 1, to add an Option b to Alternatives 2, 3, and 4:**

Option b: Modify the recreational fishing season for the Gulf “Jacks Complex” (i.e. lesser amberjack, almaco jack, banded rudderfish) such that this season is open June through February.

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

In Action 2, staff indicated that the commercial trip limit step down from 1,000 lb to 250 lb when 75% of the annual catch target (ACT) had been harvest has yet to be triggered. Staff stated it was highly likely that the trip level step down would be triggered once the reduced stock catch levels are implemented. The alternative of a 5 fish trip limited was recommended by the Council’s Reef Fish AP during its October 2022 meeting. The rationale of the AP was that it was easier to comply with a number of fish than a weight limit. Staff stated that the commercial fleet average weight of an individual greater amberjack was approximately 30 pounds (lb). A Committee member noted that a limit of 5 fish was equal to approximately 150 lb, which was less than the other alternatives. The Committee suggested that an additional alternative be added that would consider a commercial trip limit in numbers of fish that would be closer in terms of weight to the other alternatives.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 2, to add an Alternative 4: Establish a commercial trip limit of 7 fish (~ 210 lbs gutted weight [gw] [xxx lbs whole weight, ww]).**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

The Committee informed staff that a decision tool to support the document discussions was not necessary at this time.

The Committee discussed the problematic nature of monitoring small catch levels for a short fishing season duration, especially when the stock has a payback provision for the following season if the ACL is exceeded in the previous fishing season. A Committee member contended that MRIP struggles to capture fishing effort in states with smaller coastlines like Mississippi. He reported some occurrences where a small number of intercepts during a wave translated into large harvest estimates. With greatly reduced catch levels for greater amberjack, monitoring harvest for this stock will need to be precise to achieve management goals. SEFSC staff stated that low sample size at angler intercepts can influence harvest estimates and recommended using a multi-year average for the ACL. This could aid in managing recreational greater amberjack and other species. This method is permissible under National Standard 1 and may be worth exploring. The Committee agreed that more information on this approach would be beneficial.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to request SEFSC provide a presentation to the Council regarding multi-year ACL averages to monitor ACLs.**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

*Revised Recreational Red Snapper Calibration Ratios (Tab B, No. 8)*

Dr. Jim Nance (SSC Chair) presented the SSC’s deliberations and recommendations based on its review of the revised recreational red snapper calibration ratios, as presented to the SSC by representatives from Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi at the SSC’s January 2023 meeting. Each state presented a proposal to revise calibrations for its respective estimates of private vessel and state charter for-hire landings of red snapper to MRIP’s Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS; Mississippi and Alabama) or MRIP’s Fishing Effort Survey (FES; Florida). The states provided justification for their recommended selection of year(s) and wave(s) within year(s). Dr. Nance discussed the SSC’s review of the terms of reference for each state’s proposal, and the SSC’s resultant recommendations by state. Committee members expressed appreciation for the SSC’s efforts to review the revised calibration proposals, and the transparency demonstrated in the SSC’s review process.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to request that staff begin development of a framework action to update the recreational red snapper data calibration ratios for Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi, using the calibration ratios recommended by the SSC during their January 2023 meeting.

*Motion carried without opposition.*

*January 2023 Gulf SSC Summary Report (Tab B, No. 9)*

SEDAR 75: Gulf Gray Snapper Operational Assessment

Dr. Nance reviewed the SSC’s discussions on the SEDAR 75 stock assessment of Gulf gray snapper. Dr. Nance reviewed the settings for generating yield projections, and the SSC’s recommendations for the overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC). The SSC did not recommend a change from the current proxy for the fishing mortality at maximum sustainable yield ( $F_{MSY}$ ), which is calculated using a 26% spawning potential ratio ( $F_{26\%SPR}$ ). The recommended catch limits in the table below are an increase above the current catch limits.

**Table 1.** SSC recommended OFL and ABC for 2024 – 2028 for Gulf gray snapper based on SEDAR 75, in millions of pounds (mp) ww.

<b>Year</b>	<b>OFL (mp ww)</b>	<b>ABC (mp ww)</b>
2024	9.402	7.063
2025	8.351	6.633
2026	7.405	6.199
2027	6.610	5.795
2028	5.969	5.438

The SSC also supported a 5-year constant catch scenario that results in an OFL of 7.547 mp ww and an ABC of 6.226 mp ww. A Committee member asked for clarification about the SSC’s planned discussion about MSY proxies at its March 2023 meeting. Dr. Nance clarified that the planned March 2023 discussion did not affect the SSC’s recommendation regarding gray

snapper. Another Committee member asked about the contrast between the SEDAR 75 assessment and the previous assessment (SEDAR 51, completed in 2017), and whether this would constitute a reason for revising the estimation of variance for calculating the uncertainty in the stock assessment when calculating yield projections. The SEFSC replied that the difference between the assessments would be included in the determination of that variance.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to direct staff to start a document to modify Gulf gray snapper catch limits.**

*Motion carried without opposition and with one abstention.*

### 2023 Red Grouper Interim Analysis

Dr. Nance reviewed the SSC's discussions of the 2023 interim analysis (IA) for Gulf red grouper. This is part of a standing request for annual IAs for red grouper, to be reviewed by the SSC. The last IA from 2022 was used as a health check, as the 2021 IA was used to revise the catch limits for red grouper to their current levels. The SSC evaluated the NMFS Bottom Longline (BLL) index, which selects for larger and older red grouper relative to those selected by the commercial vertical line fleet and the private angling and for-hire fleets from the recreational sector. The NMFS BLL index was relatively flat over the last 10 years (2013 – 2022), therefore the IA indicated that no substantive change in ABC was warranted. Given the age of the last stock assessment, which used a terminal year of 2017, and that any change in catch limits would not take effect until 2024 (when the next operational assessment of red grouper is to begin, and end in early 2025), the SSC did not think it had any additional basis to support modifying the OFL and ABC. The SSC acknowledged the increased recreational landings of red grouper in 2021 and 2022. However, without having more data to evaluate, like those generated from a stock assessment (e.g., recruitment, age and length compositions, reproduction, stock responses to management, red tide), to determine the reason for and effects of changes in landings, the SSC decided not to recommend catch limit modifications for red grouper at this time.

### *Other Business*

#### Discussion of Transfer of Federal For-hire Reef Fish Permits

A Committee member discussed an issue, primarily with the Texas for-hire fleet, with switching vessel permits to allow for-hire vessels with federal for-hire reef fish permits (hereafter, just permit) to move that permit off the vessel and fish in state waters for red snapper when the federal for-hire season was closed. NOAA GC clarified that the red snapper for-hire ACL and ACT applies to vessels that have been issued a valid federal permit at any point during the fishing year (which is the calendar year). Therefore, if a vessel has a permit on January 1, the vessel is considered a federal for-hire reef fish vessel for the calendar year and cannot fish for red snapper in state or federal waters when the federal for-hire season is closed, even if that permit is removed from the vessel at some point during that year. However, if the vessel does not have a permit on January 1, it can fish in state waters as part of the private angling

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component until the federal permit is put on the vessel. This would allow the vessel to fish the Texas private angling season beginning on January 1, add the permit before June 1, and then fish during the federal for-hire season. The Committee member added that they thought this permit switching practice has been common for a limited number of vessels for a number of years, and that these vessel owners are not intending to break the law; rather, they are seeking clarification on what is legal to do. Another Committee member thought that the practice of these vessels fishing both the federal for-hire and the private angling fishing seasons was against the spirit of sector separation regulations, and that the Council should consider explicitly addressing this issue. Staff recommended that clarification on this issue be added to the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER) or permits website.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.