

**Reef Fish Committee Report
June 16, 2020
Ms. Martha Guyas – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) and approved the minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) of the January 2020 meeting as written.

Update on Federal Fisheries Assistance Package, Process, and Status (Tab B, No. 4)

Ms. Kelley Denit from the Department of Commerce updated the Committee on the Federal Fisheries Assistance Package, which is part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and will be administered for Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas through the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC). Funding for Florida will be administered through the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. Revenue histories were calculated by region and fleet to determine the funding levels that would be made available to fishery segments. Fishery businesses are considered eligible (commercial, recreational, and for-hire) if they experienced at least a 35% loss in revenue, with some business-type exclusions. States are responsible for determining the amount of revenue loss for businesses, and for determining spend plans.

Committee members asked whether the data used to determine the funding allocations per state would be made available for the states to discern how their allocation was determined. Ms. Denit replied that the Department planned to post those data by next week. Businesses should apply for funding in the state in which they land their fish, or for processors, in the state in which their facilities are physically located. For businesses operating in multiple states, those businesses may need to apply in each state in which their business(es) experienced at least a 35% loss in revenue. States may require a signed affidavit from business owners to certify a business's eligibility. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) will provide the states with an example of an affidavit which the states may use if they choose.

The Committee asked whether the Department of Commerce spoke with fishermen about how to allocate funding from the Act. Ms. Denit replied that the Department had not consulted fishermen and instead used the data they had available, in order to release funding quickly. Further, the states and the GSMFC will discuss in future meetings how to make public each state's spend plan.

Status of Gulf State Recreational Data Collection Programs and 2020 Red Snapper Seasons

Texas

Texas landed approximately 98% of its private recreational red snapper allocation in 2019. Part of that allocation was apportioned at the beginning of the season for the state waters year-round season, which was also done for the 2020 fishing season. The Texas 2020 private recreational

red snapper fishing season will be 63 days (June 1 – August 2). Some fishery sampling effort has been scaled back as a result of social distancing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Louisiana

Almost all creel sampling in Louisiana through the LA Creel program was conducted from March 2020 onward. Louisiana has observed about 18% more trips and 20% more anglers on the water, and about 7% more catch compared to 2019. Louisiana's 2020 private recreational red snapper fishing season opened on May 22 with weekends (Fri-Sun) only, with Monday also included on holiday weekends. Thus far into the 2020 fishing season, about 22% of Louisiana's state allocation has been harvested. Louisiana doesn't project its seasonal closure at the beginning of its fishing season due to variability in catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) due to weather conditions and socioeconomic considerations.

Mississippi

Mississippi's private recreational red snapper fishing season is open seven days a week, with a two- to three-week closure during July. The CPUE estimates for 2018-2020 (so far) are stable, as are mean weights for red snapper landed in Mississippi. The state's main goal is stability in the fishing season. Fishery-dependent and fishery-independent sampling supports that Mississippi is experiencing a very stable red snapper fishery. Mississippi saw some increase in CPUE in 2020 compared to past years for the opening weekend, but CPUE has leveled out to the mean as the fishing season has progressed. The state's goal is for the private recreational red snapper fishing season to go through Labor Day, including the summer closure.

Alabama

Alabama's 2020 private recreational red snapper fishing season was determined by considering the state's available allocation, landings trends, and weather to decide on a May 22 opening date, closing on July 19 (Fri-Mon each week). As of June 8, Alabama anglers have landed 50% of the state's allocation. Alabama experienced only minor impacts to recreational data collection programs due to COVID-19. The CPUE for the 2020 fishing season appears to mirror that of 2018, which demonstrated considerable effort in the first half of the season.

Florida

Florida opened its private recreational red snapper fishing season on June 11, and will close it on July 25. The state suspended all fishery-dependent monitoring sampling on March 25, and has gradually resumed sampling activities beginning mid-May. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission field staff routinely undergo temperature checks, wear masks, and follow social distancing guidelines. Florida's Gulf Reef Fish Survey mail survey continued uninterrupted since March 2020, during which CPUE was observed to be lower when compared to 2019; this was not surprising, due in part to public park and boat ramp closures.

Review of Reef Fish and Coastal Migratory Pelagics Landings (Tab B, No. 6)

Mr. Peter Hood (NMFS) presented 2019 and 2020 commercial and recreational reef fish and coastal migratory pelagic (CMP) landings. For 2020, only wave-1 data (January and February) from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) are currently available for 2020 preliminary landings. At the end of May 2020, 48% of the gray triggerfish and 35% of the

greater amberjack commercial annual catch limits (ACLs) had been landed; 2019 harvest for both species remained under their respective commercial ACLs. To date, 34% of the recreational greater amberjack ACL has been harvested; whereas 87% of the ACL was harvested during the same period last year. Only wave-1 landings for recreational gag, gray triggerfish, and for-hire red snapper are currently available for 2020; however, pounds harvested are minimal thus far. In 2019, recreational gray triggerfish harvest exceeded the ACL; harvest will continue to be monitored closely. Preliminary 2019 recreational red snapper landings were provided by each state to compare to each states' ACL. Louisiana was the only state that reported exceeding their state allocation by approximately 4%. Based on preliminary data, lane snapper landings did exceed the ACL in 2019. King mackerel gillnet landings in the Southern Zone exceeded the ACL in the 2018-2019 season, but not for the 2019-2020 season. Very few landings have been reported since the 2020 season opened for Spanish mackerel and cobia. A Committee member suggested that SERO provide the summation of state-generated red snapper landings for discerning the total landings to date from the landings report. The Committee also recommended implementing a standard protocol for states to provide relevant red snapper information for inclusion in meeting materials. It was also suggested that partial MRIP wave data be made available, rather than only reporting completed waves.

Presentation and Discussion on Calibration Process for Red Snapper with the Gulf States (Tab B, Nos. 7a-d)

Dr. Richard Cody of the NOAA Office of Science and Technology (OS&T) provided a status update on the Gulf state red snapper survey calibration efforts. These survey calibrations were performed as part of the MRIP transition plan, to account for differences between the state survey and MRIP estimates. Benchmarking for the Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) and the Fishing Effort Survey (FES), during which these MRIP surveys ran alongside the respective state surveys, was completed for Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana for various time periods between 2014 and 2019. The FES replaces the previous Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS), against which the state data collection programs were developed. A ratio was calculated for each state to convert between that state's data to MRIP-FES and then ultimately to the MRIP-CHTS data currency for the purpose of quota monitoring. The next steps are to establish approval and acceptance of the calibrations, including any additional refinement of the ratios. This would be done via a workshop, possibly in July 2020 via webinar, and before the August 2020 Council meeting.

Dr. Cody also provided an update on impacts from COVID-19 on MRIP survey operations. APAIS dockside intercepts were limited for waves 2 (March-April) and 3 (May-June), with dockside intercepts largely suspended for all of April and May of 2020. The FES mail survey and the for-hire telephone survey efforts continued as scheduled; however, out-of-state angler effort will be missing. Options for producing estimates for wave 2 and 3 in 2020 include modeling efforts (time-intensive), imputation based on previous years' estimates (faster, but would rely on key assumptions), or other options for proxy catch information for 2020.

Mr. Andy Strelcheck (NMFS) reviewed the state survey to MRIP-CHTS red snapper data calibrations. Based on the calibration results, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana would experience a considerable reduction in landings. The Committee stressed the importance of

reviewing the calibration methods, and Dr. Frazer stated that a meeting with NOAA OS&T and state agencies should be convened so that the methodology and justification for these calibration methods are fully understood. The Committee also recommended consulting with the Council's Science and Statistical Committee (SSC) about state survey calibrations for red snapper at its July 21-23, 2020 meeting. Several committee members pointed out that these initial calibration results were preliminary, subject to future adjustments, and should not be interpreted as finalized estimates.

The Committee asked about the delay in the release of the calibrations report by NMFS that was based on a September 2018 red snapper workshop. Dr. Cody replied that the goal was to avoid confusion between the *Recommended Use of the Current Gulf of Mexico Surveys of Marine Recreational Fishing in Stock Assessments* document (released fall 2019) and the calibration report, the latter which is to be completed before the anticipated July 2020 workshop to finalize the calibrations.

The Committee asked whether the state survey data or the MRIP survey data were more accurate, and when such a determination could be made. Dr. Cody replied that any survey comparison would take time to complete, with no guarantee of being able to assess all survey differences. NMFS is limited to comparing MRIP to one state at a time, which is not considerate of the region as a whole. Further, the states sample off-frame effort differently, and which are not necessarily directly comparable.

Dr. Paul Mickle noted that Mississippi did not recommend the use of 2018 and 2019 data for benchmarking MRIP to Mississippi's Tails and Scales data; these years were used only because they were the only years with consistent season lengths. In 2018, Louisiana opened its private recreational red snapper fishing season early in the year, and showed large landings in a time period during which Mississippi's fishing season was not open. Dr. Mickle reiterated that using few years of data is generally inappropriate. By not looking at all states together, but each state versus MRIP individually, some of the dynamics necessary for accurate calibrations is likely missed. NMFS agreed that a substantial amount of time would be necessary to further refine the calibration ratios further; however, it is necessary to compare the data in a similar currency.

The Committee supports efforts for conducting a "blanket effort survey" to more accurately understand recreational effort. Mr. Kevin Anson added that Alabama plans to deploy a camera at Perdido Pass, which accounts for 50-60% of Alabama recreational vessel traffic, and will be used to estimate private and for-hire recreational fishing effort. Further, Dr. Paul Mickle noted that Mississippi has conducted a mail survey parallel to the FES mail survey, which Mississippi thinks may demonstrate why FES is not appropriately sampling Mississippi anglers. Dr. Mickle indicated interest in presenting the findings of this survey to the Gulf SSC for review.

The Committee acknowledged that future stock assessments would need to be sensitive to how adjusted estimates of recreational catch and effort will affect perceptions of stock size. For red snapper, if the MRIP-FES data are used, the estimate of red snapper biomass in the Gulf would be expected to be higher than with the MRIP-CHTS data. The next assessment of red snapper (SEDAR 74) will consider this and the results of the Great Red Snapper Count project, which will be used to tune the model for biomass.

Mr. Ed Swindell commented on the need for vessel-level electronic reporting for all vessels, not just commercial and some for-hire vessels. Dr. Cody clarified that statistical considerations for collecting that much data would be significant, and that variations in the degree of compliance and skill with which observation systems are used should be expected. Dr. Cody reiterated the essential nature of the current surveys.

Dr. Roy Crabtree informed the Committee that NMFS Southeast Regional Office (SERO) received a letter from the Ocean Conservancy (OC), asking NMFS to issue a temporary rule to implement calibration ratios to adjust the state catch limits. Amendment 50 to the Reef Fish fishery management plan will not be compliant with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act without the use of the calibrations, since the data generated by MRIP have been deemed the best scientific information available (BSIA) by NMFS, and NMFS will be obligated to address this discrepancy between what is BSIA and the current data currency used for quota monitoring. NMFS SERO responded to the OC letter, acknowledging its role and the importance of using a common data currency, and that SERO would work with the Council on this issue. Application of the calibration ratios could be addressed in a number of ways. In the meantime, Council staff in cooperation with the Gulf SSC could begin work on a document to address the data, and NMFS can hold a workshop to work towards addressing some of the Council's and the states' concerns with the calibrations. The Committee agreed that it was a substantial challenge to get state data collection programs in place, and that the Committee wanted to see those programs succeed.

Until meetings to address calibration can be convened, the Council would need to consider a course of action to ensure that overfishing does not occur. Options for actions could include using the finalized calibration ratios to adjust state-specific allocations; or, the Council could consider a buffer on the state-specific ACLs. Either option would require different means for implementation, with the former ultimately requiring a plan amendment and the latter an emergency rule followed by a framework action to specify the buffers formally. Further, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center could conduct an interim analysis for red snapper to update the current catch advice. This interim analysis would need to be in CHTS currency to be comparable to the state-generated data currently being used for quota monitoring.

NMFS clarified that the total harvest of red snapper (commercial and recreational) for 2019 was approximately 9,000 pounds less than the 2019 overfishing limit (OFL), using the MRIP-CHTS data currency. The Committee expressed concern about any effects on the for-hire component of the recreational sector and commercial sector as a result of the consideration of the proposed calibration ratios, and requested that the SSC review the pertinent data at the next available opportunity. Staff noted that the SSC is scheduled to meet twice in July, with the earliest opportunity for the SSC to consider this information being at its July 21-23, 2020, meeting.

The Committee asked whether the results of the Great Red Snapper Count project would be reviewed by the SSC before being used for management purposes. Additionally, many SSC members remain directly involved in GRSC as principal investigators.

Mr. Anson presented the State of Alabama's perspective on federal/state recreational red snapper data calibrations. Of concern to Alabama is how the state and federal accounting methods (catch and effort estimates) correspond with the assessment results. Alabama thinks their data collection program, Snapper Check, is more accurate than MRIP-CHTS or MRIP-FES, especially given that Snapper Check allows Alabama to monitor harvest with greater temporal resolution than MRIP. The Committee inquired about the reporting compliance for Snapper Check. Mr. Anson indicated that the annual reporting compliance was estimated to be approximately 46% in 2019 and about 31% so far in 2020. He explained the variation about the reporting estimates by suggesting that during periods of ideal marine weather more fishermen are likely on the water; however, many of these fishermen may not be aware of the program and are less likely to report. In periods of inclement weather, more experienced fishermen are likely to take trips and are often more involved in the reporting program resulting in an increase in reporting compliance. Mr. Anson advocated for an SSC review of state survey methods in comparison to those used for MRIP to better inform fishery management. Finally, Mr. Anson noted that Alabama's private recreational red snapper landings for 2020 are thus far similar to 2018, and that because Snapper Check is mandatory, it is equivalent to vessel-level reporting.

Ms. Martha Guyas summarized the discussion, reiterating that calibration results were preliminary and could change, and agreed that several questions about the calibrations should be considered at the upcoming SSC meeting scheduled for July 21-23, 2020. The Committee encouraged the Council to continue these calibration discussions into the fall Council meetings. The Committee decided to consider any motions regarding calibrations during full Council.

Discussion of Fishing Industry Impacts Due to COVID-19 and Potential Emergency Rule Requests (Tab B, Nos. 8a-b)

Ms. Muehlstein presented the results from the online comment form which gathered public comments related to impacts associated to the COVID-19 pandemic. Most respondents identified as members of the commercial sector. Overall, public comment indicated that it is engaging in less fishing activity than usual. Private recreational anglers attribute this to factors that limited access to the water including, closing of ramps and beach access, cancellation of fishing tournaments and closure of charter businesses. The for-hire industry reported loss of revenue due to temporary business closures and a lack of tourism. In some cases, the per person cost of taking a charter increased to accommodate social distancing requirements. The commercial sector reported loss of revenue due to reductions in demand for seafood as fish markets and restaurants closed. Fishermen noted that allocation prices remained high while ex-vessel value dropped. Similarly, ex-vessel and wholesale prices dropped while retail prices remained the same. Stakeholders suggested the Council consider including requests for modification of seasons and bag limits to allow people to make-up for the lack of fishing during quarantine. Commercial respondents requested that uncaught quota and allocation be allowed to roll over to next year. Some respondents recommended no action to avoid a risk of overfishing.

Dr. Stephen presented a comparison of landings data for red snapper, gag, and red grouper. Since the pandemic started, similar trends were reported for all three species, with a decrease of trips, pounds landed, total ex-vessel value, and weekly price per pound value. Although the data

show a decrease after the onset of social-distancing, the data are within the confidence interval and similar for the trends observed in 2017-2019.

The new individual fishing quota (IFQ) system is moving to a cloud-based design to monitor weekly landings that can be accessed through any device with a web browser. The potential for carryover will be calculated at the end of 2020. As part of this process, the SSC will need to approve the acceptable biological catch (ABC) with carryover pounds. If approved, the disbursement of the quota would occur on the first quarter of 2021. A comparison of landings data for the last four years shows that, even with the pandemic, landings between these years have been consistent. Dr. Stephen reminded the Council that the red grouper catch limits significantly decreased between 2018 and 2019. To move forward with the carryover, considerations should be given to the amount to be carried over and to whom it would be distributed, and determine if the carryover will be for primary usage or multi-use.

The Committee agreed to wait until the August 2020 meeting before providing recommendations for any emergency rules, given the current data are not dissimilar from previous years that were not affected by a pandemic. The data from the past few weeks show a possible increase in landings as the economy slowly reopens and landings data through August may be informative for interpreting COVID-19 impacts. The Committee also agreed to continue discussing this topic during full Council, to also consider any feedback received during public testimony.

Review of SEDAR 67: Gulf of Mexico Vermilion Snapper Stock Assessment (Tab B, Nos. 9a-c)

Dr. Joe Powers reviewed the results of the SEDAR 67 stock assessment of Gulf vermilion snapper. SEDAR 67 found that vermilion snapper is not overfished and is not experiencing overfishing, as of 2017 (the terminal year of the assessment). Overfishing did occur between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s; however, the stock is thought to have never been overfished. SEDAR 67 included the updated recreational catch and effort data as adjusted for MRIP-FES. Because the projections appeared to underestimate the uncertainty in the estimates, the SSC decided to use the projections at 75% of the fishing mortality rate at maximum sustainable yield (75% of F_{MSY}), which was set at the proxy value of a spawning potential ratio of 30% ($F_{SPR30\%}$). The projected yields spike early in the projection period, because of two factors: 1) the landings have been below the ABC for much of the historical time series; and 2) strong recruitment in 2015 and 2016 showed the greatest recruitment events on record for the stock. This suggests that the stock is currently above the spawning stock biomass level at MSY, and can be harvested above F_{MSY} in the short term, as harvest ultimately approaches a level equivalent to F_{MSY} with time. Ultimately, the SSC recommended a constant catch OFL of 8.6 million pounds (mp) whole weight (ww), and an ABC of 7.27 mp ww.

Mr. Anson asked about the exclusion of indices as a function of the jack-knife diagnostic analysis, which is used to test the model's reliance to each particular index. In the case of SEDAR 67, the fishery-independent indices and the fishery-dependent CPUE indices were removed one at a time to test the model's stability; however, the fishery-dependent catch and composition data were left in the model, as they were deemed fundamentally necessary to stabilize the assessment.

Ms. Bosarge suggested not truncating the commercial effort data since the inception of the IFQ programs. Dr. Powers replied that the assessment panels have not given up on including the effort from IFQ years; however, the methods for including those data appropriately have not yet been finalized. The SEDAR 74 stock assessment for red snapper will explore these data further.

The Committee will discuss the proposed catch recommendations during full Council.

Update on the Recreational Closure Analysis for Gulf Red Grouper (Tab B, Nos. 10a-d)

Staff reviewed the actions and alternatives in Reef Fish Amendment 53 and noted that they result in a variety of annual catch targets (ACTs) for the recreational sector. Mr. Pulver, from the SERO, then presented on the predicted recreational season length for Gulf red grouper based on the ACTs currently under consideration in Amendment 53. The analysis uses MRIP-FES recreational landings from 2017-2019 and is based on two-month waves of those landings. Mr. Pulver provided predicted closure dates along with season length with a 95% confidence interval, associated with the various ACTs from Action 2's alternatives.

The Committee stated that with the reallocation in Amendment 53, fairness to various user groups was a goal, and indicated a preference for Alternative 2 of Action 1, since it uses the same timeframe on which the current allocation is based. The Committee noted that there would be implications to the recreational sector, depending on which alternatives in Amendment 53 were selected, and encouraged public testimony. Staff requested the Council discuss whether virtual or in-person public hearings would be preferred for Amendment 53, as well as locations if in-person public hearings were selected. The Committee inquired about the timeline for public hearings. Staff responded that if no additional actions were added to the amendment, public hearings might occur in September or October.

Draft Framework Action: Modification of the Gulf of Mexico Lane Snapper Annual Catch Limit (Tab B, Nos. 11a-b)

This item was not covered during the Committee meeting due to time constraints, and will be reviewed during the August 2020 Council meeting.

Other Business

No other business was brought before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.