

**Reef Fish Committee Report  
November 30 – December 1, 2020  
Ms. Martha Guyas – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) after moving **Tab B, No. 4** (*Review of Reef Fish Landings*) to the end of the agenda. The minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the October 2020 meeting were approved as written.

*Presentation on The Great Red Snapper Count (Tab B, No. 5)*

Dr. Greg Stunz presented the findings of “The Great Red Snapper Count” (GRSC). This collaboration involved 21 scientists from 12 institutions across the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) and the southeastern U.S and represented a novel approach to estimating absolute abundance. Red snapper abundance sampling was stratified by habitat type, estimated using direct visual counts, acoustic surveys, depletion surveys, and a Gulf-wide tagging program. Abundance estimates from the four regions were presented as follows (approximately): Texas, 23,000,000 fish; Louisiana, 29,000,000 fish; Mississippi and Alabama, 10,000,000; and Florida, 48,000,000 fish. Approximately 52% of age-2 and older red snapper are thought to occur in the eastern Gulf, and 48% in the western Gulf. Larger fish are still proportionately more abundant in the western Gulf. The GRSC project leaders will continue working with state and federal partners to review and integrate their findings for stock assessment and management applications.

The tagging portion of the GRSC will make it possible to examine effort by region, which will be reviewed by the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and presented to the Council at a later date. Tagging was done primarily over artificial and natural bottom; however, future tagging studies should include uncharacterized bottom based on visual survey results. Any areas without reliable habitat characterization were lumped into “uncharacterized bottom”. However, this does not mean that red snapper is homogenous and discrete structures appear to attract fish aggregations.

The Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) noted that National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Bottom Longline Survey occasionally catch red snapper in areas classified as “uncharacterized bottom”, albeit infrequently. The SEFSC plans to develop a strategy for interim acceptable biological catch (ABC) advice for the January 2021 SSC and Council meetings, which will incorporate data from the GRSC. The SEFSC will incorporate any feedback provided by the SSC, and will then provide a completed interim analysis to the SSC at its March 2021 meeting. The SSC is expected to provide a revised overfishing limit (OFL) and ABC that will be incorporated into this document for consideration by the Council at its April 2021 meeting. The SEFSC noted that the GRSC was quite costly compared to SEFSC surveys, which collect data on many species, but focused analyses only on red snapper. Dr. Stunz added that many upfront costs to develop and build sampling gear were incurred; however, recurring costs may be lower to continue smaller, directed studies on other species or complexes.

Length composition data were collected and compared between habitat and depth strata. The GRSC focused on “age-2” and larger fish, or those fish that were at least 254 mm total length.

This determination may result in an overestimate of length in some regions (e.g., the eastern Gulf) and an underestimate in others (e.g., the western Gulf). Larger fish make up a greater proportion of fish found over uncharacterized bottom habitat; however, fish from all observed lengths were found over each of the three habitat types. The SEFSC indicated that it may be able to match some of the length composition data collected by the GRSC with age composition data over the same areas from the NMFS Bottom Longline Survey, thereby aiding in the creation of the age-length key used in stock assessments.

Prior to the GRSC, the SEFSC hypothesized that red snapper was able to rebound quickly despite a smaller predicted spawning stock biomass. Informed with the results of the GRSC, it now seems likely that the rebound observed in the red snapper population was due to undocumented cryptic biomass present largely over uncharacterized bottom, meaning the proxy for maximum sustainable yield (MSY) may need to be revisited. The Committee requested that the SSC be afforded an entire day to review the GRSC when it comes to them for deliberation.

### *Draft Framework Action: Adjust State Recreational Red Snapper Catch Limits (Tab B, No. 6)*

Council staff presented an overview of red snapper catch limits including the various allocations between several fishing sectors and Gulf states. This information has been added to the draft document, as well as a description of applicable buffers between the management reference points.

Dr. Crabtree (NMFS Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) stated that it will be difficult to implement any changes in the catch limits prior to the start of the 2021 recreational fishing season. He emphasized that addressing the calibrations must be resolved prior to modifying the catch limits. Any guidance to staff as to the intended path forward with regard to state-by-state calibration (i.e., Alternative 2) or an across the board buffer (i.e., Alternative 3) may help reduce the time necessary to implement any changes to catch advice.

The Committee discussed the changes related to calibration, noting that those changes would be more accurately described as a conversion and requested that the language in the document be updated throughout. Staff will develop the document to include an additional action to address changes to the catch limits based on the interim analysis for the Committee review at a future Council meeting. A motion to make Alternative 3 the preferred alternative failed by a vote of 2 to 13 with 1 abstention. Some Committee members expressed a preference for a calibration-based approach (Alternative 2) but noted that this discussion would be better informed once more information from the interim analysis is available. Staff noted that simulations by the SERO showed that a 23% buffer across all states (i.e., Alternative 3) is likely to prevent an overage of the total private angling component ACL. Further, state-specific buffers based on the uncertainty in each state's data collection and catch monitoring would be tantamount to the calibration ratios presented in Alternative 2.

*Draft Framework Action: Modifications to Vermilion Snapper and Gray Triggerfish Catch Levels and Gray Triggerfish Recreational Fixed Closed Season (Tab B, No. 7)*

Council staff reviewed the actions and alternatives for modifying catch levels for vermilion snapper and gray triggerfish, and modifying the recreational fixed closed season for gray triggerfish. The modification of the vermilion snapper ACL is in response to the results of the SEDAR 67 stock assessment and uses recreational catch and effort data from the Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES; MRIP-FES). Based on the SSC's review, a recommendation was made to increase the catch limits for 2021 – 2025. There was some concern regarding the increase in yield streams, but a majority of the increase can be attributed to a change in data currencies from the MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS; MRIP-CHTS) to MRIP-FES, with the rest of the increase attributed to record recruitment in 2015 and 2016. A Committee member requested that a table showing the recreational landings data for vermilion snapper from Florida's State Reef Fish Survey be included in the draft framework action. The Committee also discussed modifying the recreational bag limit for vermilion snapper to increase angler access to the fishery.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, **to add an action 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.**

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

Council staff then reviewed modifications to gray triggerfish catch levels, in response to the SEFSC's 2020 interim analysis of the stock and using data from MRIP-CHTS. The SSC's review of the interim analysis resulted in a recommendation to increase the ABC from 305,300 lbs ww to 456,900 lbs ww for 2021 and subsequent fishing years. Committee members discussed a timeline for the document and noted that having both species in one framework action may increase the time it takes to complete the amendment development process.

Council staff reviewed Action 3, which would modify the recreational fixed closed season for gray triggerfish. The Committee asked whether the incorporation of additional actions into the document would delay the document's development. Staff replied in the affirmative, to afford time to complete the requisite analyses. Staff affirmed that the fixed season decision tool used for gray triggerfish during Reef Fish Amendment 46 would be updated and made available to the Committee for review at a future Council meeting.

Council staff reviewed the recommendations from the Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP), which recommended setting the ACL equal to the ABC for both vermilion snapper and gray triggerfish. A Committee member noted that the Reef Fish AP's vote on vermilion snapper was divided; staff clarified that some members of the Reef Fish AP were reticent to pass the motion as they lacked confidence in the MRIP-FES data.

Council staff noted that the 1-page hot sheets were available in the briefing book for both species. Mr. Anson noted that the information in the gray triggerfish hot sheet was not consistent with staff's presentation on gray triggerfish regarding the overfished status. Slide 9 of the presentation was correct in that it provided background information on the SEDAR 43 stock assessment and SSC recommendations on stock status. Subsequently, the Council elected to modify the minimum stock size threshold in Reef Fish Amendment 44, which no longer designated the gray triggerfish stock as overfished but in a rebuilding plan. Thus, the information provided in the 1-page hot sheet for gray triggerfish is correct.

### *Review of IFQ Program Landings (Tab B, No. 4b)*

Dr. Stephen with SERO reviewed the landings from the respective individual fishing quota programs with the Committee, noting that the trends continue to be similar to those presented at previous Council meetings. Pounds landed remain commensurate with past years, with ex-vessel values below, but not substantially so, compared to 2019. Allocation values and pounds transferred for 2020 are generally below the same for 2019. Through the end of October 2020, red snapper, gag, deep-water grouper, and shallow-water grouper landings are not dissimilar from the previous three years; red grouper and tilefish landings are generally below that observed for those species over the previous three years. The percentage of the quota landed annually is still below that observed in previous years with the exception of red grouper, for which the quota was reduced in 2019 in response to the 2018 red tide event.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, **that the Council request that NMFS capture IFQ data on 12/31/2020 which details individual accounts and the pounds remaining in those individual accounts at the close of business on 12/31/2020.**

*Motion carried with no opposition.*

### *Draft Framework Action: Modification of the Gulf of Mexico Lane Snapper Annual Catch Limit (Tab B, No. 8)*

Council staff reviewed the draft framework action to modify the lane snapper OFL, ABC, ACL, and accountability measures (AM). Lane snapper recreational landings are currently monitored in the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS) data currency, but collected using MRIP-FES. Current lane snapper catch limits and AMs were defined in the 2011 Generic ACL/AM Amendment. An assessment update was conducted and reviewed by the SSC in 2020. The updated model used landings data through 2018, and recreational data were converted to MRIP-FES. The SSC recommended setting the OFL and ABC using the Tier 2 approach of the Council's ABC Control Rule. The SSC recommended establishing an ABC with a 30% probability of overfishing and the OFL with a 50% probability of overfishing. A value for ACT was calculated using the Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule and resulted in a 16% buffer between the ACL and the ACT. Modifications to catch limits and the ACT are considered in Action 1.

## Tab B

Action 2 would modify the seasonal closure AM for lane snapper, which presently limits harvest of lane snapper to the ACL in the subsequent fishing year if the stock ACL is exceeded in the previous fishing year. Alternative 2 would modify the AM to limit harvest of lane snapper to the ACT in the subsequent fishing year if the stock ACL is exceeded in the previous fishing year. Alternative 3 would limit the harvest of lane snapper once a prescribed trigger is met or projected to be met, with those triggers being either the ACT or ACL. The October 2020 Reef Fish AP meeting summary was reviewed, with the AP having selected Alternative 2 in Action 1 and Alternative 3, Option 3a in Action 2, as preferred.

The Committee discussed whether the bag limit for lane snapper should be revisited, as was done for vermilion snapper in a separate document. Council staff clarified that the current minimum size limit (8 inches total length) is slightly less than with the length at which 50% of female lane snapper are sexually mature (9 inches total length).

### *Review of Reef Fish and CMP Landings (Tab B, No. 4)*

Mr. Peter Hood (SERO) reviewed the status of reef fish and coastal migratory pelagic landings in the Gulf. No additional seasonal closures are expected prior to the end of the calendar year. Due to previously discussed data collection issues related to COVID-19, recreational sector-specific landings were not presented. Mr. Hood also presented the data graphically, as an alternative to its current table presentation, to garner Committee feedback on a preference for how the data are presented. The Committee lauded the graphs as an informative method to present the data, so long as the tables continue to be regularly updated by SERO. The Committee also asked that SERO include southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper landings in future landings reviews.

### *Other Business*

No other business was discussed by the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.