

**Reef Fish Committee Report  
October 24 – 25, 2022  
Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair**

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

*Review of Reef Fish, CMP, and IFQ Landings, Federal For-Hire Red Snapper Landings, and Status of Revised Recreational Red Snapper Calibration Ratios (Tab B, Nos. 4a-c)*

Mr. Andy Strelcheck (NMFS Southeast Regional Office [SERO] Administrator) noted that the for-hire red snapper landings were estimated to be at 99.2% of the for-hire component's ACT, and that NMFS would not reopen that component of the recreational sector for the 2022 fishing season. Mr. Strelcheck also noted that the recreational harvest of red grouper was estimated to have exceeded the recreational ACL, and that NMFS would not reopen recreational red grouper harvest in 2022. Mr. Peter Hood (SERO) reviewed preliminary 2021 and 2022 commercial and recreational reef fish landings. Recreational landings data for 2022 are only available through Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) wave 3 (May and June). Once wave 4 (July and August) data are available, NMFS will know better where some of the stock harvest levels are relative to their 2022 catch limits.

Dr. Richard Cody from the NOAA Office of Science and Technology (OST) briefed the Committee on the proceedings of the MRIP Transition Team and ongoing work to update calibrations for the state red snapper surveys to align catch advice with monitoring methods. The states will present revised calibrations to the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) in January 2023. Landings estimates in pounds and number are available in both MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) and Fishing Effort Survey (FES) data currencies by wave, from 2015 – 2021. The states were encouraged by NMFS to maintain consistency in methods where possible and provide their reports about their calibration methods and estimates for the January 2023 SSC review by November 30. The SSC will then present its findings to the Council in January 2023 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A Committee member asked for clarification regarding the expectation that states provide their calibration reports by November 30, 2022. SERO replied that the calibration letters went out to Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi. Louisiana's calibration is unchanged, and Texas' data are not calibrated; thus, they were not expected to present revised calibrations in January 2023.

A Committee member asked about outliers, especially with respect to incidentally caught species in small states. The Committee member thought some of the catch estimates appeared implausible, given the effort available to land the estimated catch. Dr. Cody replied that the issue was largely related to sample size, despite samples having been appropriately collected. He said small sample sizes, under some conditions can result in implausible landings estimates and his office has provided guidance in the handling of such estimates; however, he thought censoring those data before they can go through a review was not a preferred approach.

*Review of State-specific Private Angling and State For-Hire Red Snapper Landings (Tab B, No. 5a-e)*

Council representatives from the five Gulf States reviewed their 2022 private angling seasons for red snapper. The states also characterized available data for observed mean lengths and weights, which increased (MS), remained similar (FL, LA), or marginally decreased (AL, TX) from 2021 to 2022. Some states attributed a decrease in catch rates in 2022 compared to 2021 to factors like increased fuel prices.

A Committee member noted that landings updates are being provided at each meeting, which may be more frequent than necessary. Another Committee member replied that the state-specific information is not necessarily available for each state without a data request. Council staff indicated they could work with the states to develop a template presentation for the April Council meeting where states would inform the Committee about their expectations for their respective fishing seasons for that year. In October, the states would use the current template to inform the Committee on the state's fishing season for that year. Another Committee member expressed concern about losing the reporting resolution mid-season for species of concern. The Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission added that it was working with the states to provide these data in a summary format on its webpage.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to direct staff to work with the state representatives to provide state recreational red snapper management presentations, pre- and post-season, for the April and October Council meetings, annually.**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

***Final Action: Draft Amendment 54: Modifications to the Greater Amberjack Catch Limits and Sector Allocations, and other Rebuilding Plan Modifications (Tab B, No. 6a-d)***

The Committee was presented an amendment which considers modifications to greater amberjack catch limits and sector allocations. Council staff summarized virtual and in-person public hearing and written comments. For Action 1, several Committee members stated that conservative measures were warranted given the stock status, and other members contended that establishing catch levels based on recreational data collection calibration should be a priority. The various allocation scenarios were also discussed with several members stating that allocation from the recreational to the commercial sector was inappropriate due to variations in their respective data collection programs and monitoring. Others argued that a modification to the sector allocation should occur during the allocation review scheduled for 2025.

Captain Ed Walker (Reef Fish Advisory Panel [RFAP] Chair) provided the recommendation from the RFAP regarding Action 1. The RFAP agreed on a constant-catch approach with status quo allocation. A Committee member inquired if the recommendation from the RFAP was

unanimous and whether the RFAP was populated with members from both sectors, to which Capt. Walker responded in the affirmative for both questions.

The Committee was encouraged by NOAA General Counsel to consider multiple factors when selecting a preferred alternative. Both sectors have, at times, exceeded their sector-specific quotas and greater amberjack species-specific identification was not recorded in the commercial data until 1993. The Committee decided that a more contemporary data series should be used to inform a sector allocation.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in **Action 1**, to make **Alternative 5** the preferred alternative.

**Alternative 5:** Revise the allocation between the recreational and commercial sectors using MRIP-FES adjusted average landings during the years 1993 through 2019. The allocations for greater amberjack are 80% recreational and 20% commercial. Revise the OFL and ABC as recommended by the SSC based on SEDAR 70 (2020). Set the total stock ACL equal to the ABC.

<b>Year</b>	<b>OFL</b>	<b>ABC</b>	<b>Total ACL</b>	<b>Rec ACL</b>	<b>Com ACL</b>	<b>Allocation (Rec:Com)</b>
<b>2022</b>	2,033,000	505,000	505,000	404,000	101,000	80:20
<b>2023</b>	2,167,000	631,000	631,000	504,800	126,200	80:20
<b>2024</b>	2,272,000	750,000	750,000	600,000	150,000	80:20
<b>2025</b>	2,345,000	854,000	854,000	683,200	170,800	80:20
<b>2026</b>	2,395,000	941,000	941,000	752,800	188,200	80:20
<b>2027</b>	2,429,000	1,012,000	1,012,000	809,600	202,400	80:20

Note: Values are in pounds whole weight. The recreational portion of the OFL, ABC, total ACL and ACL are based on MRIP-FES data.

*Motion carried 13 to 3 with 1 abstention.*

The Committee then reviewed Action 2, that would set the ACT for the recreational and commercial sectors, but made no further recommendations on this action.

*Draft Options: Modifications to Recreational and Commercial Greater Amberjack Management Measures (Tab B, No. 7)*

The Committee was provided various management measure options for greater amberjack. Council staff requested the Committee provide guidance on whether any of the proposed options should be removed or others added at this time.

The Committee discussed options for a fixed closed recreational season. A Committee member asked why the commercial season was closed in May during the spawning period while the recreational season was not. Capt. Walker stated that the RFAP had discussed this topic also and

decided an open recreational season of September 1 through October 31 would allow access, reduce harvest, and allow for data collection within MRIP wave 5 (September and October).

A Committee member stated novel thinking was required when considering a modification to the recreational season. The Committee decided to remove two options and add another.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 1, to move Alternatives 4 and 5 to Considered, but Rejected.**

**Alternative 4:** Split season: Open September 1 – October 23 and May 1 – May 19

**Alternative 5:** Split season: Open September 1 – October 5 and May 1 – May 31

*Motion carried without opposition.*

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 1 to make an Alternative for a November 1 through December 31 season.**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

The Committee discussed the proposed options for modifying the recreational minimum size limit. A Committee member requested consideration of also lowering the minimum size limit in the document. Council staff presented an option to increase the minimum size limit to 36 inches fork length and a second option that introduced a range of slot limits for consideration. There was concern that a slot limit would increase dead discards without reducing fishing mortality. Dr. John Walter (SEFSC) indicated that recreational selectivity exhibited a dome-shaped relationship with length, and that the recreational sector was not selecting many fish at larger sizes. Dr. Sean Powers (Standing SSC member) stated that his recently published study using acoustic telemetry techniques indicated that discard mortality was mainly dependent on length rather than capture depth or use of a descender device. Capt. Walker reported that the RFAP thought a slot size limit would potentially increase discards and high-grading. The RFAP recommended moving towards a full retention fishery; however, he noted that a few RFAP members cautioned that a full retention fishery could lead towards targeting of juvenile fish. The Committee decided that a slot size limit was unlikely to have a marked effect in achieving management goals and recommended not considering it further.

Capt. Walker reviewed the RFAP's recommendation on potential modifications to the commercial trip limit. The RFAP stated that the commercial sector was interested in managing greater amberjack as a bycatch fishery, and thus recommended a five fish trip limit that would reduce to a two fish trip limit when 75% of the commercial quota was harvested.

The Committee requested a decision support tool to aid in analyzing potential alternatives. The Committee acknowledged the importance of understanding the various effects of the considered management measures on catch levels to achieving conservation goals for greater amberjack.

*IFQ Focus Group (Tab B, Nos. 8a-b)*

Staff informed the Committee that the dates of November 30-December 1, 2022, had been selected to convene a second IFQ Focus Group meeting, and that the member representing the public participant had resigned from his position. Staff also provided a potential new meeting charge proposed by the facilitators. With this information, staff asked whether (1) the Committee intends for staff to proceed with convening a second focus group meeting, and (2) whether the Committee wanted to modify the meeting charge.

A Committee member made a motion that would ask the focus group to provide options on how to get quota increases above the current commercial quota, plus allocation associated with non-active accounts, to active fishermen who do not have shares. After discussion, the Committee tabled the motion pending the Council's decision on whether to proceed with convening focus group for a second meeting. A Committee member noted that a second meeting of the focus group could help inform the Council on what works and what does not work in the IFQ programs.

The Committee recommends and I so **move, to reconvene the IFQ Focus Group for a 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting with the remaining 8 members.**

*Motion carried with 3 in opposition.*

Having made the decision to reconvene the focus group, the Committee un-tabled the previous motion, but did not vote during the Committee. The Committee discussed the motion below and other potential changes to the focus group's meeting charge:

***MOTION:** To modify the IFQ Focus Group's charge to consider an Action that provides options on how to get to active fishermen who own no shares:*

- 1) increases in annual allocation (not shares) above the current commercial allocation (approx. 6.3M lbs), and*
- 2) allocation held in non-active accounts.*

The Committee discussed addressing changes to the IFQ programs and Mr. Strelcheck suggested that staff provide the Council with potential program changes that the Council could consider.

The Committee recommends and I so **move, to direct staff to develop a list of proposed IFQ related issues the Council would review and prioritize at their January 2023 meeting. Thereafter, the Council would either convene a special Council meeting or dedicate significant time on a future Reef Fish committee agenda to discuss the highest priority issues recommended by the Council.**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

*Draft Framework Action for Gray Triggerfish Commercial Trip Limit (Tab B, No. 9)*

Council staff presented a draft framework action to explore increasing the gray triggerfish commercial trip limit from the current trip limit of 16 fish. Commercial fishermen have requested this increase to allow them the opportunity to land the commercial ACT and reduce dead discards. Council staff reviewed trip limit analyses provided by SERO staff that used a three-year average body weight from 2019-2021 and trip data from commercial logbooks. This analysis resulted in predicted changes in landings and closure dates for each of the five alternatives. Alternative 5 (40 fish per trip), is the only alternative that is predicted to result in an early closure due to the percent increase in landings. Captain Walker provided the RFAP's recommendation of Alternative 3 (25 fish per trip), because it was a more conservative option that would still provide the commercial sector an opportunity to reach its quota while avoiding a seasonal closure and discards. Captain Walker added that the 25-fish trip limit would also keep gray triggerfish as a bycatch fishery for the commercial sector which was a goal of the RFAP.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 1 to make Alternative 3 the preferred.**

**Alternative 3:** Increase the commercial trip limit to 25 gray triggerfish per vessel.

*Motion carried without opposition.*

The Committee also decided to remove Alternative 5 from consideration as it results in a predicted early closure date.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 1 to remove Alternative 5.**

**Alternative 5:** Increase the commercial trip limit to 40 gray triggerfish per vessel.

*Motion carried without opposition.*

Committee members asked when the document can be ready for final action. Dr. Simmons stated a plan to have the document ready for final action in January 2023. The Committee requested that the triggerfish framework not include any modifications to management measures for greater amberjack in order to expediently move forward with this action.

*Draft Options for Amendment 56: Modifications to the Gag Grouper Catch Limits, Sector Allocations, Fishing Seasons, and other Rebuilding Plan Measures (Tab B, Nos. 10a-e)*

SERO staff reviewed the development progress for the proposed interim rule for gag grouper, which is intended to reduce fishing mortality ahead of the development and implementation of Amendment 56, which will be a rebuilding plan for gag grouper. SERO staff indicated this

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interim rule was expected to be implemented in early 2023, and that commercial IFQ allocation could be withheld in anticipation of that implementation.

Dr. Powers reviewed projections for gag under  $F_{40\%SPR}$  for the 61% recreational, 39% commercial, sector allocation scenario and the four rebuilding timelines, which all assume a total ACL of 661,000 lbs gutted weight (gw) in place via the interim rule for 2023. The projections assume management will begin in 2024. The SSC found the projections to be appropriate, and noted that it was up to the Council to determine the sector allocation and the pace of rebuilding.

Council staff presented options for modifications to catch limits and the sector allocation, and for modifying the recreational fishing season. The Council will also have to select the pace at which the gag stock will be rebuilt from its overfished status, for which there are four options. The rebuilding timelines for the alternatives range between 11 to 22 years, with all rebuilding to the same target stock size.

Capt. Walker reviewed recommendations by the Council's RFAP at its October 2022 meeting. The RFAP unanimously recommended the Council adopt the  $T_{Min} * 2$  rebuilding timeline (rebuilding in 22 years) in Action 1; request annual interim analyses for gag to be reviewed by the SSC, and be considered for revisions to catch advice; and, that the Council adopt Alternative 2 (with Option 2d) in Action 1 as its preferred alternative. The RFAP thought changing the sector allocation was unwise with the stock in its present overfished condition, and that it was critical that the Council be updated on the rebuilding progress of gag as often as practical.

Action 2 discusses modifications to the recreational fishing season. The proposed interim rule used MRIP-FES data to determine a September 1 – November 10 recreational fishing season for gag, which was selected to provide stability in the fishing season. Council staff noted concerns from the interdisciplinary planning team and the RFAP about the ability to accurately project the fishing season over a short season duration, regardless of the alternatives considered. The season duration projections for Action 2 will be completed and provided at the January 2023 Council meeting. Capt. Walker reviewed recommendations by the Council's RFAP, which recommended that the Council adopt Alternative 2 in Action 2 as its preferred alternative. The RFAP thought that effort to avoid discards in the summer months had merit, yet was interested in optimizing recreational fishing opportunity where possible.

A Committee member asked about the timeline for development of Amendment 56. Council staff replied that a public hearing draft was planned for Council review in January 2023, and a final draft in April 2023. The Committee member noted gag has been overfished and undergoing overfishing for some time and thought changing the sector allocation at the beginning of a rebuilding plan was inappropriate. A Committee member noted that while Alternative 2 in Action 2 constrains recreational catch, it does not allow for flexibility and discretion for setting the season duration. Another Committee member added that Florida's State Reef Fish Survey is not designed for in-season quota monitoring, and thus the season projections would be entirely dependent on the data available from the previous fishing season(s). The Committee will discuss Action 2 further at full Council.

### *SSC Recommendations: Review of the SEDAR 68 Operational Assessment for Gulf of Mexico Scamp (Tab B, No. 10a)*

Dr. Powers summarized the SSC's review of the SEDAR 68 operational assessment of Gulf scamp and yellowmouth grouper. These species were assessed concurrently due to extreme difficulty in discerning between the two at smaller sizes during dockside intercepts, and similar life history characteristics. Landings historically were dominated by the commercial sector, though recreational landings have increased considerably in recent years. Recruitment of scamp, which is estimated by the model, has shown a decrease in recent years. The SSC reviewed the scamp and yellowmouth grouper stock assessment (SEDAR 68) at its September 2022 meeting, and found it to be consistent with the best scientific information available. Although the assessment originally used a Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) proxy of  $F_{30\%SPR}$ , the SSC asked that the SEFSC also produce a run using  $F_{40\%SPR}$ , considerate of the species' life histories, increased rate of exploitation of the stocks in recent years, and empirical studies demonstrating the benefits of managing stocks like groupers to a higher MSY proxy. Under both presented proxies for MSY, SEDAR 68 estimated that scamp and yellowmouth grouper are not overfished and are not undergoing overfishing as of 2020. The SSC abstained from recommending catch advice until receiving guidance from the Council about how it foresees the future of scamp and yellowmouth grouper management, considerate of the species' inclusion in the shallow-water grouper complex, and in the commercial IFQ program.

A Committee member asked about the rationale for discussing changes to the management of the shallow-water grouper complex. Dr. Powers replied that because scamp and yellowmouth grouper now have an accepted stock assessment using MRIP-FES, whether those species remain in the shallow-water grouper complex is the Council's decision. It's also the Council's prerogative to define the MSY proxy for a species or complex; however, the Council typically relies on scientific input from the SSC to inform that decision. If there are options for an MSY proxy for a stock or complex that are both equally defensible, then the choice is a policy decision; however, if the current MSY proxy is determined to no longer be defensible by the SSC, then the decision of an MSY proxy should follow the recommendation of the best scientific information available. The SSC's recommendation does not preclude further consideration of  $F_{30\%SPR}$ , but it does emphasize the SSC's support for  $F_{40\%SPR}$  as the MSY proxy, given the groupers' life histories and that scamp especially are being directly targeted more so than in the past. The Committee discussed the SSC's recommendation, and recognized that it was made given the best scientific information available. Council staff added that the catch limits for the shallow-water grouper complex ACL was established in the Generic ACL/AM Amendment, without a specified proxy for MSY; after that amendment, a proxy of  $F_{30\%SPR}$  was established in Reef Fish Amendment 48, but was not used to revise the ACLs for the complex. The SEFSC noted that producing projections for both proxies would represent a considerable analytical effort, and that scientific justification would be necessary to decide which proxy to use. A Committee member asked that IFQ program staff from SERO present the current composition of the Grouper-Tilefish IFQ program share categories to better inform the Committee.

Capt. Walker reviewed discussions by the Council's RFAP. The RFAP did not make a formal recommendation, but noted the complex interconnectivity within the Grouper-Tilefish IFQ program, and cautioned against modifying the program.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to direct staff to provide catch levels for scamp and yellowmouth grouper utilizing an MSY proxy of  $F_{40\%SPR}$ , and consider other management changes necessary for the shallow-water grouper complex.**

*Motion carried 10-6 with one abstention.*

### *Reef Fish AP Recommendations from October 2022 Meeting (Tab B, No. 6b)*

Council staff reviewed remaining items from the summary report from the October 11, 2022, meeting of the RFAP in Tampa, including a discussion of the results of the recent update to the SEDAR 64 assessment of southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper and the U.S. Coast Guard inspection requirements for Gulf federal commercial reef fish permits. The RFAP also passed a motion to have a fixed reopening determination date for the federal for-hire red snapper season, if there is available quota remaining after the initial projected season. SERO staff indicated that the recreational landings for MRIP wave 4 (July and August) are not available until the middle of October, and that any fixed reopening of the season would need to be considerate of the availability of the landings data and of providing sufficient notice to the for-hire fleet.

### *Other Business*

No other business was brought before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.