

Reef Fish Committee Report September 29, 2020 Ms. Martha Guyas – Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) after adding a discussion of the management proposal offered by the Charter Fisherman’s Association, and an update on the status of the Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP) trawl survey for Fall 2020. The minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the June 2020 meeting were approved as written. A Committee member noted that there was a gap in the verbatim minutes related to a technical issue with the recording, which has since been addressed and is unlikely to occur in future meetings.

Review of Reef Fish Landings (Tab B, No. 4)

Mr. Peter Hood from the National Marine Fisheries Service’s (NMFS) Southeast Regional Office (SERO) reviewed the reef fish landings for the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) recreational and commercial sectors by species. Wave 2 and 3 data for 2020 from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) were not available due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, only gray triggerfish recreational landings and lane snapper stock landings exceeded their respective annual catch limits (ACLs).

The Committee asked about the effects on dockside sampling due to COVID-19. Mr. Hood said that samplers were not sent out in late March through April. Dr. Richard Cody (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration [NOAA] Office of Science and Technology [OST]) added that the Fishing Effort Survey (FES) using postal mail continued unimpeded throughout MRIP Waves 2 – 4; however, dockside sampling through the Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) was largely not conducted during those waves. NOAA OST anticipates generating an annual intercept estimate, as opposed to wave-specific estimates, for 2020. The Committee requested a presentation on how NOAA OST would handle the gaps in sample coverage due to COVID-19 for 2020.

Discussion of Fishing Industry Impacts Due to COVID-19 and Potential Emergency Rule Requests (Tab B, No. 5)

Dr. Jessica Stephen (SERO) reviewed an analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 on individual fishing quota (IFQ) program fisheries for red snapper, red grouper, and gag grouper. Dr. Stephen compared 2020 landings to both 2019 landings and the average of 2017 – 2019 landings. Overall, trends are similar to what was observed in recent years; however, some notable differences may be attributable to COVID-19. Fewer red snapper trips were taken in 2020, but seasonal patterns remain similar. Ex-vessel value for red snapper is lower for 2020, but has been increasing steadily in 2020 towards the average value observed from 2017 – 2019. Likewise, weekly ex-vessel prices were at their lowest near weeks 15 and 16, but are now approaching pre-COVID-19 levels. Gag grouper showed a similar pattern to red snapper; however, Dr. Stephen noted that 2020 ex-vessel values for gag grouper are currently above the average for 2017 – 2019. Red grouper was also observed to be similar to gag grouper and red snapper, with the

caveat that the difference in landings values reflects the quota decrease in 2019 and 2020 in response to the 2018 red tide event. Pounds of red grouper landed in 2020 now exceed that landed in 2019, although the weekly price per pound did decrease. Dr. Stephen followed landings data with allocation total values and prices per pound. Red snapper allocation values in 2020 have been very similar to those in 2019. Gag and red grouper were similar to each other, with 2020 allocation values being less than 2019.

Landings comparisons through August 2020 showed that commercial red snapper is on track to reach its quota for the 2020 fishing year. Red grouper, gag grouper, deep water grouper (DWG), shallow water grouper (SWG), and tilefish quotas are not anticipated to be met, but landings for those species or species groups haven't typically reached their respective quotas in recent years. SERO will closely monitor landings for the remainder of 2020, especially DWG and tilefish as the percent landed is less than typically landed in previous years.

A Committee member was concerned with the decrease in landings and price per pound due to COVID-19, and what may happen if cases increase and cause another economic shutdown. Dr. Stephen responded that SERO has not made landings projections because each state has different safety procedures; however, she does expect to see a general decline if shutdown procedures are reinstated. When discussing a possible carryover of unused quota for the red snapper IFQ program, Ms. Leann Bosarge said she would be in favor of one for those who have to lease their IFQ allocation. Dr. Crabtree noted that if the economy shuts down again, everyone invested in the program will potentially lose money; further, carryover can be very difficult to implement, and requires a complex decision-making process. Applying a carryover could also possibly distort the markets in the following year. Several Committee members agreed that a carryover may not be necessary. Dr. Stephen concluded her presentation with an explanation of what will need to happen if a carryover were implemented, and noted that any carryover amount cannot be calculated until December 31 and carryover dissemination would not be available until the first quarter of the following year. A mechanism would also have to be built into the IFQ system software to monitor the carryover amount to prevent an overage. The Committee expressed a desire to receive updates on IFQ program landings at subsequent Council meetings.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to have the Council review IFQ data at each upcoming Council meeting through January 2021 to assess the need for a possible emergency action due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Motion carried without opposition.

A Committee member noted that it would be ideal to have a place holder on all agendas to address impacts of COVID-19 for the remainder of the year for all sectors. Dr. Joe Powers, chair of the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), summarized the SSC recommendations on carryover in the red snapper IFQ program. The SSC addressed the stock rebuilding plan and discussed carryover implications, determining that recreational and commercial carryover should not impede the status of the rebuilding plan.

Status of Gulf State Recreational Data Collection Programs and 2020 Red Snapper Seasons (Tab B, No. 6)

Florida

Florida's 2020 season for red snapper was open June 11 – July 25. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) Gulf Reef Fish Survey (GRFS) was expanded on July 1 to include the whole state, becoming the State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS). FWC estimates that 30% of the 2020 Florida private angling ACL was caught in June; July data are pending. Further, the GRFS/SRFS mail survey was not interrupted by COVID-19.

Alabama

Alabama held a 35-day season for its private angling component for red snapper beginning May 22, with fishing allowed Friday – Monday. In late June, the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ALDCNR) announced the closure of the red snapper private angling component on July 3. As of July 3, 2020, approximately 994,000 pounds whole weight (lbs ww) had been landed in Alabama. ALDCNR then reopened the private angling component for red snapper for a 3-day fishing season from October 10 – 12. Of note, through the end of June 2020, daily vessel trips were higher than that reported for Alabama in 2018 or 2019.

Mississippi

Mississippi's Department of Marine Resources (MDMR) opened its fishing season for its private angling component for red snapper on May 22 through July 5, with fishing allowed seven days a week. MDMR observed more people fishing during COVID-19 than expected. MDMR reopened private angling for red snapper for one day on September 5, 2020, during which it observed 470 trips taken. MDMR reported landings of 142,526 lbs ww for 2020, or approximately 93% of Mississippi's 2020 private angling ACL, and 4,372 total trips taken.

Louisiana

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) reported a large increase in the number of private vessel trips targeting red snapper, but also far fewer fishermen participating in LDWF dockside intercepts due to COVID-19. LDWF's LA Creel survey reported the harvesting of approximately 777,000 lbs ww of its adjusted 784,000 lbs ww ACL for 2020, which accounted for its 2019 overage. Louisiana's 2020 fishing season was open from Friday – Sunday weekly from May 22 – August 13, including Memorial Day, and from September 4 – 7.

Texas

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) noted they weren't measuring as many fish through dockside surveys due to COVID-19 in late March and April of 2020, but were now back to full survey capacity. Texas' private angling season for red snapper in state waters opened on January 1, and in federal waters on June 1, with the federal waters season closing on August 2; the season in state waters is still open. TPWD estimated that 2020 private angling landings totaled approximately 69% of Texas' original 2020 private angling ACL. TPWD briefly discussed the lawsuit by the State of Texas against NMFS with regard to Texas' estimated 2019 landings and overage, and the subsequently revised 2020 ACL as determined by NMFS.

NMFS SERO Presentation on the 2019 Recreational Red Snapper Season

Mr. Jeff Pulver (SERO) compared the 2019 Texas private angling landings estimates for red snapper as calculated by NMFS Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) and TPWD. The SEFSC estimates that landings equaled 375,616 lbs ww, while the TPWD estimates 260,606 lbs ww. Likewise, the SEFSC estimated that Texas private anglers landed 65,626 fish, while TPWD estimated 53,793 fish were harvested. Based on SEFSC estimates, the Texas 2020 revised private angling ACL, accounting for an estimated overage of 110,526 lbs ww in 2019, equals 154,579 lbs ww. Further, SERO estimated that the private angling component overage in 2019 resulted in an overage of the red snapper stock OFL, meaning overfishing may have occurred in 2019.

The Committee asked whether NMFS has officially determined that overfishing occurred in 2019 for red snapper. Dr. Roy Crabtree (SERO) replied that such a determination is in review, and if confirmed, the Council would need to act to end overfishing. An issue was identified by the SEFSC with how average weights are determined between the SEFSC and TPWD, and the number of fish harvested. Texas 2019 high-use season data (May – November) were uploaded to the Gulf Fisheries Information Network (GulfFIN) and received by SERO and the SEFSC in July 2020, and analyses resulting in the overage estimation for the 2019 fishing season were determined thereafter since the SEFSC requires all landings data from 2019 to calculate an annual estimate.

NOAA General Counsel advised that, since this topic is the subject of active litigation between NMFS and the State of Texas, that the Council should refrain from discussions beyond the information already publicly available.

The Committee asked about the accuracy of MRIP estimates due to sampling coverage gaps within the APAIS because of COVID-19 safety procedures. Dr. Cody noted that the coverage gaps are why NOAA OST has not published completed wave data beyond Wave 1 from 2020. He added that the state surveys produce more precise and timely data than MRIP, but noted that the accuracy of the state survey-generated data has not yet been resolved for all Gulf states.

MRIP-FES Calibration Workshop (Tab B, No. 7)

Dr. Powers summarized the SSC's review of the new recreational catch estimation procedures and calibration of historical estimates to MRIP-FES. Previous methods under CHTS relied on contacting fishermen via landline telephone. The increase in the use of cellphones versus landlines resulted in reduced participation in the effort survey. The FES is a mail-based survey and is intended to provide deeper insight into fishing effort. Overall, the SSC noted that the conversion of historical data to MRIP-FES maintained the trends of the time series; however, the magnitude of the estimates tended to increase. Ultimately, NMFS determined that the estimates from MRIP-FES were suitable for estimating biomass and productivity in stock assessments.

Given that MRIP-FES increases estimates of the proportion of shore-based effort, the SSC proposed as a research recommendation the possibility of a pilot program to further examine if sampling on publicly-available locations is appropriate to estimate the full shore effort, or if an alternate method should be used to account for shore effort from private access locations. The

SSC also recommended a reevaluation of the assumptions used for data-limited species, as these may change with the pursuit of MRIP-FES calibration efforts.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, that **Council Staff draft a letter to the NOAA OST recommending an examination (pilot program, other method) be used to examine whether those publicly-available sampling location catch rates are appropriate for application to the full shore effort, or whether an alternative method is (more appropriate / preferable / possible) for private access locations. Further, NOAA OST should prioritize development a protocol and automated check programs to detect and flag extreme or unusual values in MRIP/FES catch estimates and determine the source of those extreme values, such as input data or calibration procedures.**

Motion carried without objection

Dr. Cody (NOAA OST) mentioned that NOAA OST has already begun developing a protocol to examine outlier data. The Committee had questions about a failed motion that proposed to include the SSC early in the process of determining data to be used in a stock assessment. The motion failed due to issues with protocol on how to integrate this step into the SEDAR process. The motivation behind the motion was to allow the SSC to weigh in early in the process, instead of at the end of an assessment.

Review August 5, 2020, MRIP Red Snapper State Data Calibration Webinar (Tab B, No. 8)

Dr. Cody reviewed the progression of NOAA OST workshops working on calibration issues for recreational red snapper in the Gulf. The first three workshops focused on coordination among data collection partners, integrating specialized surveys into MRIP, and meeting management and assessment needs. Three independent consultants, contracted by NOAA OST, suggested making improvements to the MRIP general survey, and incorporating supplemental surveys to augment MRIP. The fourth workshop focused on the implementation of the Gulf state surveys, many of which were already certified by MRIP as statistically valid in their experimental design. Further, the fourth workshop examined calibration options between the FES estimates and the state survey-generated estimates. Modeling approaches for calibration were identified as time-intensive, and as such, a simple ratio method was identified as a timelier option. A calibration approach using modeling could also be considered in the future. Calibrations are necessary to express the MRIP-CHTS based ACLs in the state survey units for quota monitoring purposes. These data currencies need to be convertible in both directions for stock assessment and fisheries management purposes. The goal of the fifth workshop (August 5, 2020) was to focus on the state survey calibration ratios (for Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana) and their methods for determining those ratios, followed by SERO adjustments to those ratios. An additional subgroup from the original MRIP transition team of Gulf state and regional partners (transition team subgroup) will also explore these calibrations, data management and access by all partners, understanding drivers for differences between the surveys, and other related research

questions pertaining to this process. The Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission was identified as a suitable conduit for facilitating data sharing between the partners.

Generally, the NOAA OST consultants had no major concerns with the calibration methods offered by Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana. However, Mississippi's meta-analytical method could not be recommended for the purpose of generating that state's calibration to MRIP-CHTS. The consultants recommended consistency in approach wherever possible, and that NOAA OST compile all methods into a single report for reference documentation.

The Committee asked about the response rate for FES mailed questionnaires, which Dr. Cody said ranges from 30% – 35% and varies by state, with about 100,000 surveys mailed to fishing license holders annually nationwide. The ability of MRIP to target license holders is limited to the accuracy of those data as provided by the respective states, and the ability to solicit feedback on the effort of more than one individual using the same vessel for a trip is being explored. Non-responses to surveys are addressed by sending another follow-up survey, which can include an incentive for providing a response. Demographic information (e.g., age, gender) is also collected and compared to responses to help detect biases related to those data.

The Committee asked whether the SSC should be determining which survey represents best scientific information available (BSIA) for each species. Dr. Roy Crabtree (SERO) clarified that NMFS makes the determination of BSIA, but not without consultation from other scientific experts. The deliberations of the SEDAR process, the SSC, the SEFSC, and others all contribute to such a determination.

The Committee acknowledged that there are many ways to present catch and effort data, and noted concern by cooperating state partners that MRIP estimates are not viewed as reasonable for all states. Concern was expressed that the red snapper research track (SEDAR 74), and the subsequent operational assessment, may not be available for management action until 2023 or later.

Dr. Greg Stunz noted that, prior to the implementation of FES, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) found CHTS to exhibit several flaws, many of which were directly addressed through the implementation of FES. A recent NAS study found FES to be unsuitable for the purpose of in-season quota monitoring. Dr. Stunz thought that the Gulf state survey programs were likely more suitable for that purpose, and expressed a desire to further the science of querying catch and effort in consultation with the experts on the SSC.

Mr. Kevin Anson agreed that many critical decisions come before the Council with respect to red snapper in the near-term; however, the calibration of recreational data remains a persistent concern for the states and the Council. Alabama in particular could see its season substantially reduced if the ratio adjustment proposed by NMFS is used. Mr. Anson asked Dr. Porch about how the integration of the Great Red Snapper Count (GRSC) data will affect catch recommendations in the interim analysis previously requested by the Council. Dr. Porch replied that suppositions about the use of the data from the GRSC, and the effect on catch limit recommendations, will only be possible once the data are analyzed. It may be possible to generate abundance-at-age estimates, and use those estimates to inform comparisons with

previous assessments and determinations of spawning stock biomass (SSB); however, these analyses will have to wait until the SEFSC can work with the GRSC data.

Mr. Phil Dyskow recommended the priority be to resolve any discrepancies between the state survey methods, to better allow those data to be used for management. The GRSC may ultimately show greater levels of SSB than existing NMFS surveys. Therefore, he thought the Council needed to be able to move between different data currencies, and not focus only on using MRIP.

Ms. Bosarge stated that if red snapper has undergone overfishing, as was suggested by the data presented by SERO, then the Council must act to correct that status determination. She added that overfishing the stock affects everybody. Ms. Bosarge then asked whether the data generated from the GRSC will be peer-reviewed before being used for management. Dr. Porch stated that the SSC would be the review body for the GRSC.

Dr. Cody acknowledged that MRIP does not do a good job of quota monitoring for the purposes of in-season management, but added that MRIP is designed to work for all species in all areas, and performs other survey responsibilities well. Dr. Frazer added that improvements will be made to data collection systems over time, being incorporated as available.

SSC Recommendations

Dr. Powers reviewed the SSC's evaluation of the calibrations presented by each Gulf state for converting between a state's survey and MRIP-CHTS; the data currency against which the state survey programs were designed. Dr. Powers also reviewed the SSC's motions regarding those calibrations. He reiterated that these calibrations could be used for stock assessment purposes, but that it was a more difficult task to determine how these calibrations would relate specifically to allocation issues between the Gulf states. Dr. Powers also emphasized the importance of the anticipated work of the MRIP transition team subgroup, and the continued examination of improved methodologies for standardizing state survey estimates. In the meantime, in order to monitor landings across the Gulf states, the SSC recommended using the prescribed calibration ratios.

SERO Presentation on Options for Private Recreational Red Snapper

Mr. Hood presented options for addressing quota monitoring and catch levels for the private angling component for recreational red snapper. Two methods were proffered: applying the prescribed calibration ratios to adjust each state's ACL; and, applying a 23% buffer to the private angling component's ACL, and then allocating quota to each state based on the allocations prescribed in Reef Fish Amendment 50. Otherwise reallocating among the states would require a plan amendment, perhaps with an emergency rule implemented while the amendment is being developed. When examining state-by-state ACLs under the buffer option, Mr. Hood noted that Alabama and Mississippi would receive greater respective ACLs than they would under an option applying the calibration ratios, albeit at the expense of the ACLs for the other Gulf states.

Mr. Robin Riechers clarified that there should be no expectation of revising calibrations by the Spring of 2021, by when the Council would hope to have revised management measures in

place. He instead recommended focusing on the immediacy of the need to resolve the 2021 ACLs and the issues surrounding the calibration ratios.

Dr. Stunz explained that although the GRSC could estimate a level of SSB much different than that determined by SEDAR 52, the GRSC is not supposed to replace that assessment but rather enhance current knowledge of stock biomass. The GRSC could help evaluate SSB estimation methods currently in use, and help calibrate those methods for future assessments. Close collaboration with the SEFSC will be key to see how the GRSC data can be incorporated into a stock assessment.

Dr. Porch added that the GRSC is an independent assessment of biomass, using new technologies, to stitch together an estimate of absolute abundance of Gulf red snapper. It will also inform scientists of how to improve current survey methods. The issue of state survey data calibrations, however, is separate from the GRSC.

Mr. Anson stated that many issues remain unresolved with respect to the catch and effort estimates generated by MRIP-FES. After offering a motion, Mr. Anson added that such a measure would serve as a temporary fix until those unresolved issues can be addressed. Dr. Simmons reminded Committee of the Council's request to the SEFSC for an interim analysis of red snapper using the GRSC data, to be reviewed by the SSC in January 2020 before the January 25-28, 2020, Council meeting.

Motion: The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council instructs that management advice for Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper be derived using the unadjusted harvest estimates from the state surveys (TPWD, LA Creel, MS Tails n' Scales, AL Snapper Check and FL Gulf Reef Fish Survey) until such time as the causal factors and relationships explaining the disagreement between MRIP FES survey and the state surveys are established.

Motion seconded but NOT voted on. This motion was withdrawn Wednesday morning for discussion in full Council.

Other Business

Due to a shortage of time, the two items previously added by the Committee for discussion under Other Business were not reviewed.

- Charter Fisherman's Association proposal
- Status of the Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP) trawl survey for Fall 2020.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.