

## Reef Fish Committee Report April 4, 2023 Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) after adding an item under **Tab B, No. 9** to discuss the Allocation Review Policy, and a discussion on red grouper under Other Business. The minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the January 2023 meeting were approved as written.

### *Review of Recent Reef Fish, For-hire, and Individual Fishing Quota Landings (Tab B, No. 4)*

Ms. Kelli O'Donnell (NMFS Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) reviewed the recent commercial and recreational reef fish landings. These landings updates are provided in April and October each year. State recreational landings of red snapper from private vessels will be reviewed in June 2023.

### *Public Hearing Draft: Draft Amendment 56: Modifications to the Gag Grouper Catch Limits, Sector Allocations, and Fishing Seasons (Tab B, No. 5)*

SERO staff reviewed the timeline for implementation of the Council's requested interim rule for gag grouper, which is expected to be implemented in late spring 2023. Council staff began by reviewing Action 1 in Amendment 56.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in **Action 1, to select Alternative 2 in Action 1 as the preferred alternative.**

**Alternative 2:** Revise the SDC for gag based on the results of the updated Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 72 stock assessment as reviewed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Council) Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) in July 2022. MSY is defined as the yield when fishing at a 40% spawning potential ratio (SPR) or  $F_{40\%SPR}$ . The MFMT is equal to the fishing mortality at the  $F_{MSY}$  proxy (e.g.,  $F_{40\%SPR}$ ). The MSST is defined as 50% of the biomass at MSY or its proxy. The OY is defined as being conditional on rebuilding plan, such that: if the stock is under a rebuilding plan, OY is equal to the stock annual catch limit (ACL); if the stock is not under a rebuilding plan, OY is equal to 90% of MSY or its proxy.

*Motion carried without opposition.*

A Committee member commented on the interim rule, expressing concern about the recreational season duration (71 days; September 1 – November 10). The Committee member thought it was likely that the recreational sector would exceed its annual catch limit (ACL) in 2023, and a subsequent payback could negate a 2024 fishing season. Further, the Committee member questioned the availability of the data necessary to close the recreational fishing season in time to

avoid an overage of the recreational ACL. SERO replied that it would use all data available, but acknowledged the limited information available to adjust the fishing season in 2023. The Committee member stated that the data to project the fishing season duration were based on the average daily catch rates, which do not account for effort shifting due to changing the fishing season start date. The Committee member stated their concern for continuing paybacks by the recreational sector due to the imprecision of the season duration projections.

Staff reviewed the alternatives in Action 2. A Committee member commented on the assumption that discards would be reduced commensurate with reductions in catch, adding that if these assumed reductions are not met, the pace of rebuilding would be slowed. Increasing the buffers between the catch limits would increase the probability of rebuilding, but assumptions about angler behavior also need to be considered in these calculations. The Committee member thought it prudent to also discuss potential variations in discard dynamics in greater detail in Action 3. Another Committee member thought it necessary to reallocate using the new State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) landings data, since those data will be used for monitoring the catch limits, which would be reflected in the sector allocation scenario in Alternative 3. A Committee member was concerned about the relationship between the season duration afforded by each of the catch limit options, and the discards expected from those options. They thought summer discards, especially in deeper waters, needed to be considered at length. Another Committee member thought that modifying the sector allocation should not be considered at this time, given that other large changes in the management of gag are being considered in Amendment 56. A Committee member countered that changing data units is a valid treatment of historical landings based on the best scientific information available.

The Committee decided to bring up **Tab B, No. 5c**, to review the Allocation Review Components for gag. Staff reviewed the allocation review policy and the components required for analysis when considering changes in the sector allocation, and where those components are within Amendment 56. A Committee member noted that updating the landings data alone is not sufficient rationale for a change in the sector allocation. They mentioned tables in the economic sections in Chapter 4 in the document, which outline economic effects of changing the sector allocation, and recommended discussion of those effects before a decision is made. Another Committee member acknowledged the economic effects, and expressed further concern over the fraction of recreational catch that is discarded. A Committee member countered that using the SRFS data acknowledged historic recreational fishing effort and, not considering that would result in a purposeful reduction in that effort moving forward.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, in **Action 2**, that **Option 3b in Alternative 3 be the preferred alternative**.

**Alternative 3:** Revise the catch limits for gag and establish a rebuilding time for the gag stock. The OFL, ABC, and ACLs are based on the F<sub>MSY</sub> proxy of the yield when fishing at F<sub>40%SPR</sub>. The ABC is equal to the stock ACL, which equals the combined total ACLs from both sectors. Revise the sector allocation to 65% recreational, 35% commercial, using average landings from 1986 – 2005, but using SRFS recreational landings data for the private recreational vessel fleet and MRIP-FES for all other recreational landings data. The catch limits in lb gw are rounded down to the nearest thousand pounds to

ensure the sum of the sector ACLs does not exceed the ABC; the recreational ACL is informed by SRFS for private recreational vessels, by MRIP-FES data for the for-hire and shore modes, and by the Southeast Region Headboat Survey for headboats, and are as follows for each rebuilding timeline option:

**Option 3b:** 75% of  $F_{40\%SPR}$ , which would rebuild the stock in 18 years.

<b>F = <math>F_{40\%SPR}</math></b>	<b>OFL</b>	<b>ABC</b>	<b>Rec ACL</b>	<b>Com ACL</b>
<b>Year</b>	<b>mp gw</b>	<b>mp gw</b>	<b>mp gw</b>	<b>mp gw</b>
<b>2024</b>	0.591	0.444	0.288	0.155
<b>2025</b>	0.805	0.615	0.399	0.215
<b>2026</b>	0.991	0.769	0.499	0.269
<b>2027</b>	1.200	0.943	0.613	0.330
<b>2028</b>	1.454	1.156	0.751	0.404

*Motion carried 10 – 3 with three abstentions and one absent, by roll call vote.*

Council staff reviewed the options for modifying the sector annual catch targets (ACT) in Action 3. A Committee member revisited the issue of achieving the necessary reduction in discards determined as necessary by the yield projections from SEDAR 72. They thought it prudent to include a larger buffer on the recreational ACL for consideration, to account for the discards expected from that sector despite the reductions in the recreational landings expected from Action 2. The Committee member suggested 20% as an appropriate buffer. A Committee member asked how 20% was determined to be worth considering. The proposing Committee member replied that it was a doubling of what the ACL/ACT Control Rule generated for Alternative 2 in Sub-Action 3.1, and thus accounted for additional uncertainty in the rate of landings against the fishing season duration projections.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in **Sub-Action 3.1 of Action 3**, to add a **new Alternative 3 to set the recreational ACT 20% below the recreational ACL**.

*Motion carried without opposition.*

Council staff reviewed proposed changes to the treatment of the commercial ACT and quota. A Committee member expressed reservations with reducing the buffer for the commercial sector when reductions in discards are necessary, acknowledging that the commercial sector was likely adept to some degree at avoiding gag when it cannot be retained.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in **Sub-Action 3.2 of Action 3**, to make **Alternative 3 the preferred alternative**.

**Alternative 3:** Set the commercial quota for the gag IFQ program equal the commercial ACT. The commercial ACT will be fixed at 95% of the commercial ACL. The IFQ program functions as the AM for the commercial sector for gag.

*Motion carried 11 – 2, with one absent and three abstentions.*

Council staff reviewed Action 4, which examines modifications to the recreational fishing season duration and accountability measures (AM). SERO clarified the methods for conducting the recreational fishing season duration projections. A Committee member asked if the proposed option of a 20% buffer between the recreational ACL and ACT would be sufficient to constrain landings and discards to meet the rebuilding timeline. Another Committee thought the proposed modifications to the AMs were appropriate, but may be worth revisiting once the stock is in better condition. They also preferred a September 1 start date to the recreational fishing season. Further, they clarified that SRFS can be used to estimate the number of directed trips for gag and other SRFS-monitored species, and asked that the language in the document be updated to reflect this capability. NOAA General Counsel noted that as the catch limits increase with time, the recreational fishing season durations predicted for the alternatives in Action 4 are expected to change, and that the Committee should review that information in the document. Another Committee member thought the fishing season duration projections were optimistic, given the discards expected from the recreational sector in the early part of the rebuilding period, and encouraged consideration of additional effort and removal reduction measures in the future. A Committee member asked that NOAA Fisheries describe how data collection and precision on recreational discards might be improved in the future at a subsequent meeting.

A Committee member thought that many factors like recent recruitment and spatial and temporal variability in discards were not adequately captured in the current season duration projections. They thought that a split season, beginning September 1 and ending September 22 and based on the recreational ACL, may allow for constraining the recreational harvest to the ACL without an overage and allow a subsequent fall season. Council staff replied that the for-hire and shore component landings for gag still rely on the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES), for which preliminary September landings would not be available until December 15 at the earliest. This would not allow sufficient time for NMFS to reopen the fishing season before the fishing year ends on December 31. Another Committee member thought that the split season approach necessitated a summer month start date to be operable. A Committee member opposed the idea of a split season due to challenges associated with managing both fishing effort and stakeholder expectations for a fall season that may not happen. They were not opposed to a fixed end date to the recreational fishing season.

A Committee member asked about the possibility of a Friday – to – Sunday recreational fishing season. Another Committee member responded that a weekends-only fishing season may create substantial challenges on Florida's side of the rulemaking. A Committee member thought that a September 1 opening would most likely result in consistency between state and federal regulations. The Committee recognized that SRFS was not designed for in-season quota monitoring, especially for fishing seasons on short time scales.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in Action 4, to select Alternative 3 as the preferred alternative.

**Alternative 3:** The federal recreational fishing season for Gulf gag would open on 12:01 am local time on September 1. Modify the AMs to direct NMFS to prohibit harvest when the recreational ACT is projected to be met. In addition, remove the provision that

requires NMFS to maintain the prior year's ACT if the ACL is exceeded in the previous year.

*Motion 13 to 1 with two abstentions and one absent.*

### *IFQ Objectives (Tab B, No. 7)*

Staff reviewed the goals and objectives of other IFQ programs in the U.S., and asked the Committee about what they want the IFQ programs to look like in the future. Committee members discussed how to move forward with their review of the IFQ programs' goals and objectives that is planned for the June Council meeting. It was suggested for staff to prepare materials for the Committee's discussion that includes a list of potential new goals and objectives pertaining to participation, equity, and access, and how to balance such new goals with reducing capacity. Another suggested approach would be to define the goal as optimizing net benefits, and the Committee could discuss what that looks like. Committee members were encouraged to think about any additions to include in the discussion before full Council.

### *Draft Options: Recalibration of Red Snapper Recreational Catch Limits and Modification of Gray Snapper Catch Limits (Tab B, No. 9)*

Staff reviewed the introduction, purpose and need, and two actions considered in the document. For Action 1, the Committee agreed that updating red snapper private recreational state calibration ratios for Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida with more contemporary landings data was warranted.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 1, to make Alternative 2 the preferred alternative.**

**Alternative 2:** Update state private recreational data calibration ratios of red snapper for Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida; ACLs are modified based on the revised ratios.

The ratios would be applied to the federal state-specific ACLs that are in place. A proposed rule, which if implemented would be effective by June 1, 2023, would change the catch limits as outlined in table 2.1.2 (as provided in the document).

*Motion carried without opposition.*

The Committee discussed a state-by-state allocation review for red snapper in light of the new state calibrations. Currently, this review is scheduled to begin in April 2024 based on the allocation review policy timeline. Several Committee members supported the idea of beginning this review earlier than originally scheduled and developing an associated document.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to direct staff to begin work on a plan amendment to look at updating the states' private recreational red snapper allocation.

*Motion carried with one in opposition and one absent.*

For Action 2, alternatives were presented that would modify gray snapper catch limits based on the results of a recent stock assessment that incorporates MRIP-FES units. A Committee member expressed concern with the transition to MRIP-FES and its presumed effect on the catch limit increase relative to the no action alternative. The Committee decided that any decision about selecting a preferred alternative in Action 2 would be discussed during full Council.

### *SSC Summary Report from the March 2023 Meeting (Tab B, No. 8)*

Dr. Jim Nance (Scientific and Statistical Committee [SSC] Chair) presented the SSC's deliberations and recommendations on several items from its January 2023 meeting in Tampa, FL. Dr. Nance reviewed updated projections for scamp and yellowmouth grouper based on the SEDAR 68 stock assessment. A Committee member asked about the treatment of scamp and yellowmouth grouper compared to black grouper and yellowfin grouper. The SSC had thought it best to treat the pairings of species independent of one another, since the latter two did not have a stock assessment to inform their condition, and it was not appropriate to assume their condition to be the same as scamp and yellowmouth grouper.

Dr. Nance discussed the Great Amberjack Count, including contemporary research on greater amberjack discard mortality. The Great Amberjack Count is a regional collaborative research project between state, federal, academic, and other partners to estimate the absolute abundance of greater amberjack in the Gulf.

Lastly, Dr. Nance discussed the SSC's evaluation of historical wenchman landings in the northern Gulf trawl fisheries. These data have confidentiality issues, and as such the SSC could not recommend catch advice for wenchman. Dr. Nance noted that wenchman is not presently caught along with the other three mid-water snapper species, and that the SSC recommends removing wenchman from the mid-water snapper complex. A Committee member asked about the recent mean landings of the remaining three species in the mid-water snapper complex (blackfin snapper, queen snapper, and silk snapper), and what catch limits for those species might look like. Council staff described the landings in MRIP-FES data units, and noted that the SSC will evaluate these data in May 2023. Another Committee member asked about the merits of continued federal management of wenchman. The Committee discussed the infrequency of wenchman landings, and their co-occurrence with butterfly landings, noting that those landings would still be recorded by the states regardless of federal management. NOAA General Counsel stated that removing wenchman from the mid-water snapper complex would need to be followed by a decision to either manage wenchman separately, or to remove it from the FMP.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to ask staff to bring back an evaluation as to whether wenchman require federal conservation and management.

*Motion carried without opposition and with one absent.*

*Other Business*

Red Grouper

A Committee member thought the recreational season duration projections for red grouper were not doing a sufficient job of constraining the recreational landings to the recreational ACL, and that additional management measures were necessary to better ensure adherence to the recreational ACL in successive fishing seasons. Another Committee member thought that urgency was not necessary at this time, and noted that a stock assessment is expected to be completed in 2024. A Committee member replied that the recreational fishing season for red grouper has gone from a year-round fishery in recent years to one which may close in June or July in 2023, but acknowledged that a stock assessment may provide a better indication of stock health.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, **to direct staff to initiate a document that addresses elimination of recreational red grouper overruns by consideration of changes such as seasons, bag limits, size constraints, and other measures.**

*Motion carried 12 to 2 with two abstentions and one absent.*

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.