

**Reef Fish Committee Report
October 26-27, 2020
Ms. Martha Guyas – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) after adding a discussion item under Other Business, and the minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the September 2020 meeting were approved as written.

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 status of reef fish landings in the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf), focusing on commercial landings. Although some data remain outstanding, all species remain below their respective commercial ACLs thus far into 2020. In 2019, only lane snapper and gray triggerfish (recreational sector) exceeded the ACL. Gaps in the collection of catch data from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) exist due to the effects of COVID-19 beginning in wave 2 (March and April 2020).

Approaches for Estimating Recreational Landings in 2020 (Tab B, No. 4b)

Dr. Richard Cody from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Office of Science and Technology (OST) reviewed the effects of COVID-19 on the collection of recreational fisheries data through MRIP, and NOAA OST’s plan for producing catch estimates for 2020. Dockside surveying has been affected by social distancing requirements beginning in March 2020. Decisions to suspend or modify sampling procedures are made at the state level, and vary by state. The MRIP Fishing Effort Survey (FES) is a mail-based effort survey, which has been largely uninterrupted by COVID-19; however, difficulty sampling out-of-state fishermen via dockside sampling exists.

Preliminary estimates of fishing effort for waves 2-4 (March – August 2020) have been published to the MRIP website; however, off-frame (non-resident) effort is unaccounted. These data are likely to be continually updated as more information becomes available. Preliminary estimates of catch are absent and will not be published by wave for 2020 due to significant data gaps. NOAA OST will continue to explore methods for estimating catch in 2020 using valid alternative methods.

The Committee asked about the degree to which NOAA OST was coordinating with the states about their intentions for published catch estimates for 2020, since the states use those data for monitoring and assessment of inshore species. Dr. Cody replied that NOAA OST has communicated some with the states about their respective data collection issues, but not directly about its intentions regarding reporting 2020 catch data. The Committee asked that use of any supplementary forms of data available to MRIP and the states to resolve data gaps for 2020 be explored and detailed to the Council.

Review of IFQ Program Landings and Fishing Industry Impacts Due to COVID-19 Pandemic (Tab B, No. 4c)

Dr. Jessica Stephen (SERO) reviewed landings for Gulf species managed under individual fishing quota (IFQ) programs. IFQ landings are within the range typically observed for each species at this point in the year, when accounting for quota changes. Ex-vessel prices in 2020 are somewhat below the prices observed in previous years; however, 2020 prices are within the confidence intervals observed for 2017 – 2019. The price per pound for red snapper allocation has been consistent, if not just slightly higher, in 2020 compared to 2019. Price per pound observations are slightly lower for red grouper, gag, shallow- and deep-water groupers, and tilefish.

If the Council decides to move forward with carrying over any unused allocation in the IFQ program, it would need to be calculated on December 31, 2020 and potentially reviewed by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). Allocation will continue to be dispersed to shareholder accounts based on shareholdings on January 1, 2021. Committee members discussed the disparity in the effect of applying a carryover to those who own their shares versus those who lease the allocation associated with their shares.

Draft Framework Action: Adjust State Recreational Red Snapper Catch Limits (Tab B, No. 5)

Council staff presented the draft framework action to adjust the Gulf state recreational red snapper catch limits for the private angling component of the recreational sector. The review included the proposed management alternatives to adjust the catch limits.

The Committee asked about the progress of the Great Red Snapper Count (GRSC). SERO offered that the GRSC may have cascading effects on many facets of red snapper management, as it estimates approximately a three-fold increase in abundance as was previously estimated by the current surveys. The GRSC will be used as appropriate, in the Council's requested interim analysis (IA) for red snapper, which the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) anticipated being able to deliver for review (along with the GRSC) by the SSC in March 2021. However, this delivery date is not solidified and is dependent upon receipt of the data by age class from the GRSC; these data are anticipated to be available with the full report by the end of November. SERO and the SEFSC both anticipate that red snapper catch limits will increase as a result of using the GRSC as the representative index of abundance for the red snapper IA. NOAA OST noted that the MRIP Transition Team Subgroup is planning to convene in late November of 2020 to review the calibration differences between the states, with input from representatives from the states. Mississippi requested additional consideration of their survey as more of a census than a survey, given the unique nature of the data collection process in Mississippi's coastal waters.

Although the anticipated red snapper IA, using the GRSC, is expected to increase catch limits, Committee members noted that adding more fish to the catch limits doesn't address the problem of the data currency differences. Although the GRSC is estimating a three-fold higher amount of red snapper abundance in the Gulf, Committee members should not anticipate a three-fold increase in catch limits. The majority of this increase is attributable to low densities of fish being

found over muddy and low relief bottom habitat, which while expansive in area is not subjected to concentrated fishing effort. The NMFS Bottom Longline Survey has been operating over these muddy bottom and near low-relief habitats for 25 years; however, the technology and methods used in the GRSC have now allowed the abundance over these areas to be estimated. The Committee discussed the documented increase in abundance as a possible explanation for why the red snapper stock recovered more quickly than anticipated by the rebuilding plan, and how these lesser-fished habitats possibly function as a *de facto* marine protected area.

SERO stressed the urgency to work on the framework action, noting that the issue of resolving the data currency differences was necessary to address before the catch limits could be increased following the red snapper IA. The Council currently has the option of considering either the NOAA OST calibration ratios (Alternative 2) or the 23% buffer proposed by NMFS (Alternative 3), which would be equally applied to all states, with the resulting percent reduction in the total private angling ACL (23%). The Committee reiterated its interest in reviewing the results of the GRSC before proceeding further. SERO informed the Committee to not expect changes to the calibration ratios provided in the framework action since ratios would likely be revisited following the SEDAR 74 research track assessment of Gulf red snapper. The red snapper interim analysis will use MRIP-Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) data currency for recreational catch and effort as this is how the stock is currently monitored. The SEDAR 74 research track will explore the recreational catch and effort in MRIP-FES, and will need to explore how to address disparities in how discard data are collected by the recreational state surveys.

Dr. Stunz plans to present the GRSC to the Committee at the next webinar meeting. In the event the Council determines a buffer to be the favored approach to resolve the issue of differences in data currencies, and that buffer is later determined to be too conservative, the Council can revisit that buffer using the best scientific information available at that time.

Public Hearing Draft Amendment 53: Red Grouper Catch Limits and Sector Allocations (Tab B, No. 6)

Council staff reviewed the actions and alternatives in Reef Fish Amendment 53 and discussed potential next steps. The Reef Fish AP was unable to recommend any of the alternatives in Action 1 due to a lack of confidence in the recreational data. Captain Ed Walker, Chair of the Reef Fish AP, noted that there was skepticism from AP members on the MRIP-FES data and that the AP had voted down three of the five alternatives in Action 1 before the resolution was made.

The Committee asked if Action 1 Alternative 3 has the same parameters as Alternative 1. Council staff stated that the same timeframe of average landing, 1986-2005, is used for both alternatives, but Alternative 1 uses MRFSS while Alternative 3 uses MRIP-FES. The Committee noted the difference in private mode landings between the Gulf Reef Fish Survey and MRIP-FES. Dr. Porch stated that the Council should be consistent in using the same landings data source for both assessment and quota monitoring for a species. A Committee member commented that a cautious approach was being taken with red snapper and that a similar approach should be taken with red grouper. Another Committee member noted that several other

species would also need to be re-examined under MRIP-FES landings data. Dr. Crabtree reminded the Committee that the SSC has recognized MRIP-FES as the best available science.

A Committee member noted that there were differences between the landings from the stock assessment model and the SEFSC ACL monitoring landings. Dr. Porch stated that there is more uncertainty with the recreational landings, as opposed to commercial landings, when the stock assessment model fits that data.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to refer the SEDAR 61 Red Grouper stock assessment back to the SSC so that the SSC can provide further discussion and explanation on the differences between historical recreational landings time series and what the stock assessment model has estimated as recreational landings.

Motion carried without opposition.

Dr. Crabtree noted that if preferred alternatives were not selected and if further progress was not made on the document, then it would not be possible to withhold distributing allocation to the commercial sector for 2021.

Draft Framework Action: Modification of the Gulf of Mexico Lane Snapper Annual Catch Limit (Tab B, No. 7)

This agenda item was waived due to approaching Hurricane Zeta, and will be reviewed by the Committee at a later date.

Gray Triggerfish Interim Analysis (Tab B, No. 8)

Dr. Joe Powers (SSC Chair) reviewed the principles of an IA, and how the IA uses data to generate catch advice. Dr. Powers also reviewed the progression of stock assessments of gray triggerfish, and the changes in both stock status determination criteria and stock status of the species over time. The IA for gray triggerfish used the Southeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program (SEAMAP) Combined Video Index, which combines the NMFS Panama City Laboratory, NMFS Pascagoula Laboratory, and Florida Fish and Wildlife Research Institute's Trap Camera Surveys, as its representative index of abundance. Spawning stock biomass for gray triggerfish was observed to be lowest in the early 2000s and has increased since, especially in the eastern Gulf. The current acceptable biological catch (ABC) dates back to the SEDAR 9 Update assessment from 2011, using data through 2009 (305,300 lbs whole weight [ww]). The overfishing limit (OFL) is based on the more recent SEDAR 43 (2015) stock assessment. The IA showed that the ABC could be increased by a factor of approximately 1.5 when compared to the increasing trend observed in the SEAMAP Combined Video Index, or 456,900 lbs ww. This catch limit remains in the MRIP-CHTS data currency, and the SSC recommended the ABC be increased to 456,900 lbs ww without adjusting the current OFL established using SEDAR 43. Further, the SSC recommended using this revised ABC only for 2021 – 2023, with another IA being conducted for 2024 and subsequent years. Previous recruitment uncertainties from SEDAR 43 were not reviewed for the IA, since these data were not updated for the IA.

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The Committee discussed the appropriate path forward to use the new information from the IA, and the ABC recommendation from the SSC. The Committee also reviewed the recommendation of the Reef Fish AP, which was to set the ACL equal to the ABC, and to continue using the sector-specific annual catch targets as they are currently used. The Committee discussed how to move forward with changes in catch level recommendations from IAs. Staff recommended exploring changes to the framework procedures for the Reef Fish and Coastal Migratory Pelagics fishery management plans to better automate that process for the greatest gains in timeliness.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, **to direct staff to combine Gray Triggerfish with the Vermillion Snapper framework action for the purpose of adjusting catch levels to utilize the information from the interim analysis.**

Motion carried with one in opposition.

Public Hearing Draft Amendment 36B: Modifications to Commercial IFQ Programs (Tab B, No. 9)

This agenda item was waived due to approaching Hurricane Zeta, and will be reviewed by the Committee at a later date.

Remaining Reef Fish AP Recommendations (Tab B, No. 10)

This agenda item was waived due to approaching Hurricane Zeta, and will be reviewed by the Committee at a later date.

Other Business

Discussion of the Treatment of Dead Discards by the SEFSC in Stock Assessments

The Committee requested additional information from the SEFSC on the process by which discards are recorded and incorporated into harvest, and how those data are used in the assessment. These data were requested to be described by sector. The SEFSC will prepare a response for the November 30 – December 1, 2020, Council meeting.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.