

**Sustainable Fisheries Committee Report
August 12, 2019
Mr. Dale Diaz, Chair**

The agenda and minutes of the June 2019 meeting were approved.

Draft Framework Action to Modify Federal For-hire Trip Limits (Tab E, No. 4)

This draft framework action addresses the rules for possessing a second daily bag limit for reef fish and coastal migratory pelagic species on for-hire vessels making trips greater than 24 hours in duration. Under Reef Fish Amendment 1, no explicit direction was given to when a second bag limit could be retained on a trip longer than 24 hours. After the regulations were consolidated in 1996, retaining the second daily bag limit before 24 hours had elapsed *was* prohibited. Staff reviewed data from 2009 through 2018 from the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS) for headboats making trips in excess of 24 hours in duration, and described the nature and general proportion of those trips compared to headboat effort in the Gulf in general. Conversely, the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) survey, which covers charter for-hire and private vessels, does not record trip duration, but rather hours fished. A Committee member noted that the For-hire Survey data from 2015-2017 recorded trip duration for Mississippi, Alabama, and west Florida, and may be informative in identifying the universe of effort for trips exceeding 24 hours in duration by charter for-hire vessels.

Committee members asked for clarification with respect to the U.S. Coast Guard regulations and what is still required of vessel operators making trips greater than 24 hours. Staff will look for ways to reference this information in the appropriate way. The Committee asked how changing the regulations would affect enforcement. The U.S. Coast Guard noted that passengers on the vessel will still need to possess a receipt detailing trip duration for enforcement purposes. Safety at sea was also discussed, with concerns about how vessels would deal with weather and passenger illness. Public comments previously given by for-hire operators demonstrated ways by which these operators have addressed these concerns while still abiding by harvest regulations.

Without opposition, the Committee recommends, and I so move, **in Action 1, to make Alternative 2, Option 2b the preferred.**

Alternative 2: The on-board possession limit for federal for-hire trips in the Gulf exceeding a given trip duration (Options 2a-2c) will be two daily bag limits per angler (or vessel for speckled hind and Warsaw grouper), excluding captain and crew. The second daily bag limit can be retained anytime during a trip with a minimum trip duration of:

Option 2b: Greater than 30 hours

Draft Amendment Reef Fish 48/Red Drum 5: Status Determination Criteria and Optimum Yield for Reef Fish and Red Drum (Tab E, No. 5)

Action 1: Sub-action 1.1 Defining Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) proxies for assessed stocks

Sub-action 1.1 allows for the definition of MSY for four assessed species (black grouper, yellowedge grouper, mutton snapper, and yellowtail snapper) in the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan (FMP). The Committee agreed with the Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommendation for this action.

Without opposition, the Committee recommends, and I so move , **to accept the revised language from the SSC in Action 1, Sub-action 1.1, Alternative 3.**

SSC Motion:

Alternative 3: set MSY proxy as yield at $F_{30\%SPR}$

SSC Motion: For future assessments of reef fish stocks and red drum, the MSY or MSY proxy equals the yield produced by F_{MSY} or F_{PROXY} recommended by the Council's SSC and subject to approval by the Council through a plan amendment

Action 1: Sub-action 1.2 Defining MSY proxies for stock complexes and unassessed stocks

Dr. Crabtree stated that the latest black grouper assessment was not completed because of species identification issues with the historical landings data. He stated that black grouper would not be appropriate as an indicator species for the shallow-water grouper complex and recommended using the most recently assessed species in the shallow-water grouper complex be used as the indicator species. Dr. Froeschke cautioned using this approach as this could result in multiple changes to status determination for the complex in a short time period. The Committee recognized that most reef fish species, with a few exceptions such as goliath grouper, use a MSY proxy of yield at $F_{30\%SPR}$. After discussion, the Committee recommended combining sub-actions 1.1 and 1.2 to more efficiently organize the document.

Action 1: Sub-action 1.3 Defining MSY proxy for red drum

Dr. Barbieri reported that the SSC had made no recommendation for sub-action 1.3 since the relationship between juvenile red drum escapement and MSY is not well understood. The Committee suggested that MSY definition alternatives for red drum be consolidated along with sub-actions 1.1 and 1.2 and reviewed again at the next Council meeting.

Action 2 Defining Maximum Fishing Mortality Threshold (MFMT)

The Committee discussed whether MFMT should be related to MSY or $F_{Rebuild}$ when stocks are in a rebuilding program. Dr. Cass-Calay stated that this alternative is more conservative than what is required by law. As overfishing occurs when the fishing level exceeds F_{MSY} but that it is possible to exceed $F_{Rebuild}$ without overfishing. She also indicated that $F_{Rebuild}$ is subject to change based on the length of the rebuilding period or model projections; thus, the acceptable biological catch (ABC) yield stream is often set to this level. The Committee decided to keep the

action alternatives as written but indicated that revisions to this action may occur in future meetings.

Action 3 Defining minimum stock size threshold (MSST)

Dr. Barbieri reported that the SSC had recommended that the Committee not consider alternatives 4 or 5 for defining MSST. This recommendation was based on simulation analyses conducted by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) that indicated that fish populations do not fall below 50% BMSY due to environmental conditions or due to natural mortality alone. Removal due to fishing harvest is responsible for driving populations below 50% BMSY and therefore may not be recommended as an alternative.

Action 4 Defining optimum yield (OY)

The Committee agreed with the SSC that more discussion was necessary before considering the presented action alternatives on how to best define OY. Council staff indicated that they would hold another meeting with the IPT to more clearly outline the goals for this action.

Discussion of Council Research and Monitoring Priorities for 2020 – 2024 (Tab E, No. 6)

Staff and Dr. Barbieri recounted the SSC's efforts to make changes and new recommendations to the Council's research and monitoring priorities for 2020 – 2024. These priorities are generally used to inform the Council's collaborators in academia, government and elsewhere of key needs which would improve the Council's ability to meet its resource management obligations. The SSC recommended emphasis on characterizing the efficacy of improvements in recreational discard mortality resulting from the use of descending devices, and their adoption by the recreational angling community. Funds were made available by the Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration program (NRDA) to explore this priority as it was not yet a regulatory requirement; it was the availability of these funds which led the Council to tentatively abstain from making the use of descending devices mandatory in the Gulf. The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council is working on its best practices for fleet-specific fishing activity, which considers the mandatory possession of descending devices and venting tools by the components of the recreational fishing fleets. Dr. Stunz noted that all red snapper tagged and released as part of the Great Red Snapper Count research initiative in the Gulf were released using descending devices and these tagged fish (approximately 4,000 individuals) have a tag return rate approaching 20%, which is an exceptional return rate.

Presentation: NMFS Southeast Regional Strategic Plan (Tab E, No. 7)

Andy Strelcheck from NOAA Fisheries noted that the National Strategic Plan was released July 25, 2019 and provided an overview of the Southeast Geographic Strategic Plan. Mr. Strelcheck discussed the strategic landscape and noted that the regional plan unifies planning between the regional office and the science center. He discussed the strategic goals, strategies, and approaches included in the plan. Finally, Mr. Strelcheck discussed the proposed schedule and indicated that the Southeast regional plan is expected to be finalized by October 1. Committee members noted that the Southeast region could discuss issues related to the hypoxic zone in the

Gulf of Mexico in various settings because the Southeast region covers several states along the Mississippi river.

Presentation: Endangered Species Act Listing of Bryde's Whale (Tab E, No. 8)

Ms. Zoodsma from NOAA Fisheries presented information on the biology, distribution, and potential threats to the Gulf of Mexico Bryde's Whale. The Bryde's Whale was listed on the Endangered Species Act in April 2019 and basic life history information is still being collected. Ms. Zoodsma indicated that the population of fewer than 100 individuals is generally constrained to the eastern Gulf of Mexico in water depths primarily ranging from 100 – 400 meters. Fishing effort with several different gears types does overlap within the Bryde's Whale distribution and could result in entanglements. The Committee inquired what specific man-made factors had been identified as potentially high hazards to Bryde's Whales. Ms. Zoodsma indicated those factors were offshore energy exploration and development. The Committee asked how this recent listing would affect current fishing regulations. Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff indicated that consultation re-initiation would be included in the affected environment section of policy documents.

Committee Discussion on Allocation Issues

The Committee discussed that not all desired information that could be used to support allocation decisions will be easily measurable or available for many stocks. When information that would support allocation decisions is not available, the Committee should consider what a metric would look like for items that cannot be easily quantified. The Committee noted the need to recognize information gaps and develop a process that will incorporate these issues. In addition, recognition of these information gaps can impact research priorities and data needs. Staff updated the Committee that two conference calls have taken place with the Allocation Review Group, with personnel from Council staff, SERO, and the Southeast Science Center, and that allocation and reallocation is on the agenda for the Southeast Social Scientists meeting scheduled for early September. The Committee proposed having a presentation on natural resource valuation at a future Council meeting.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.