

**Red Drum Committee Report
June 22, 2021
Gen. Joe Spraggins – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab J, No. 1**), and the minutes (**Tab J, No. 2**) from the October 2014 meeting were approved as written.

Process to Modify Red Drum Management Out to 9 nm (Tab J, No. 4)

Council staff gave a presentation on the options available to the Council to modify red drum management out to 9 nautical miles (nm), as was requested by the Council in 2020. After reviewing past management measures, including the prohibition of all retention of red drum in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in 1988, staff noted that the Gulf states currently manage red drum based on juvenile escapement rate targets. The calculation of juvenile escapement varies by state in both method and frequency of assessment, and the methods used by the five Gulf states are not directly comparable. Options for extending state management of red drum out to 9 nm for Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana were discussed next. Delegation to the states is not a viable option, since delegation requires the establishment of an annual catch limit (ACL), which in federal waters is currently fixed at zero. Because the data are unavailable to conduct a Gulf-wide stock assessment at this time, the ACL in federal waters cannot currently be updated. Another option discussed was the conservation equivalency plan (CEP). However, this approach requires that the states ensure that management measures are consistent with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), and with the Red Drum Fishery Management Plan (FMP), this approach may also be inhibited by the current federal ACL of zero. Further, the CEP approach would require substantial changes to the manner in which red drum is managed by the three subject Gulf states.

A Committee member asked about the cost requirements for conducting a Gulf-wide stock assessment on red drum. The SEFSC noted that a comprehensive age composition dataset would be necessary to compare to the last assessment, conducted in 2000, to determine the age composition and health of the stock. Sampling proposals have been presented to the Council and its Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) in the past; an estimate using purse seines could also be attempted on a distributed, Gulf-wide scale. Such a study would be expected to cost, at a minimum, \$500,000. During its January 2021 meeting, the Council received a presentation detailing the costs for a Gulf-wide abundance estimation of the red drum stock which, depending on the survey coverage, was estimated at approximately \$5.7 million and \$7.6 million. Committee members discussed research being conducted by Dr. Sean Powers at the University of South Alabama, and Dr. Sue Lowerre-Barbieri with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The SEFSC added that acquiring age composition data off Louisiana, where the majority of the fishery exists, is essential to the completion of a Gulf-wide assessment of the species.

A Committee member asked about the objective of extending management. Other Committee members noted the desire to reduce dead discards offshore, and to provide an opportunity to

harvest red drum out to 9 nm. A Committee member remarked on a recreational perspective from Florida, that being the offshore harvest moratorium protecting the broodstock and the poor table fare represented by the larger, adult red drum. Another Committee member added that federal law enforcement officers enforce federal laws over state laws between 3 and 9 nm off Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, which may create confusion for stakeholders accessing fishery resources in the northern Gulf.

A Committee member asked whether, under the CEP approach, the escapement rates for the three subject Gulf states would need to be comparable. Staff replied that for NMFS to evaluate whether the CEPs are resulting in management that complies with the Red Drum FMP and with the MSA, it is likely that the States would need to provide annual and comparable assessments of juvenile escapement. The Committee questioned the administrative burden described under the CEP approach, and whether that burden was commensurate with the benefits expected from any action on red drum. A Committee member asked whether the data between 3 and 9 nm off Florida and Texas could be used to inform management off Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Staff replied that using the data from Florida and Texas in such a way would require using assumptions which are unlikely to be supportable, given that the stock structure in the EEZ is largely unknown.

A Committee member discussed asking the Council's SSC to evaluate whether the data available at present are sufficient to recommend a non-zero ABC for red drum in federal waters. The Committee noted that establishing a non-zero ACL would be necessary to allow the Council to change management measures in any meaningful way in federal waters. A Committee member supported extending fishery management authority for the three northern Gulf states out to 9 nm, but cautioned against shifting fishing effort to portions of the offshore stock, which could have detrimental effects on the currently prolific inshore red drum fishery. A Committee member from Louisiana indicated that the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries has data on offshore red drum, and asked whether those data could be helpful. The SEFSC stated that a data-limited assessment of red drum was attempted under SEDAR 49, and the species was found to be too data-poor to assess. If the five Gulf states expanded their assessments beyond juvenile escapement rate to include comparable age composition information from the offshore portion of the population, then those data may be contributory to a Gulf-wide assessment.

The Committee agreed to pause further discussion on extending management out to 9 nm for Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana until the January 2022 meeting.

Other Business

No other business was brought before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.