

**Reef Fish Advisory Panel**  
**Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council**  
**Meeting Summary**  
**April 23, 2024**

The meeting of the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) was convened at 8:30 AM EDT on April 23, 2024. The agenda for this meeting, and the minutes from the October 2, 2023, meeting were approved as written. [Minutes and materials from past meetings can be reviewed here.](#)

*Review of Reef Fish and IFQ Program Landings*

Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff reviewed reef fish recreational, commercial, and individual fishing quota (IFQ) landings. An AP member asked about the proportion of speckled hind landings occurring under the Other Shallow-water Grouper (SWG) portion of the IFQ quota. This information was sourced and discussed later in the meeting.

Council staff reviewed the respective Gulf States' 2023 private recreational fishing seasons for red snapper. An AP member asked about the validity of the State of Alabama's landings data for state charter vessels in 2023, and the increase in mean length and weight observed in that year. Another AP member asked if the Council needed to investigate the change in trend here. An AP member replied that strong trends in any direction should be investigated. Another AP member reiterated that the state charter vessels are supposed to be constrained to state waters, but it is suspected that some may be fishing illegally in federal waters. Dr. Tom Frazer (Council Member/Liaison) replied that the Council was told that different fishing practices, like chumming away from the reef, may explain the difference in trend in 2023 for those landings.

**Motion: To request that the Council request the State of Alabama to provide documentation to specifically delineate between physically observed data collection and angler-reported data collection.**

*Motion carried unanimously.*

An AP member asked if there had been any discussion on the increased fishing season duration in Louisiana, and whether that would be expected to result in an overage. Council staff recounted recent research<sup>12</sup> describing lower effort per unit time with longer fishing season durations. Another AP member added that offshore fishing in Louisiana drops off in September as hunting season opens. The AP again discussed the issues with vessels fishing in federal waters under state charter permits instead of federal for-hire permits. SERO staff replied that those data could be reviewed as part of the work on the new for-hire reporting program. An AP member thought that funding for enforcement was lacking and should be increased to better enforce permitting requirements for for-hire vessels.

<sup>1</sup> [https://jagworks.southalabama.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1081&context=usa\\_faculty\\_staff\\_pubs](https://jagworks.southalabama.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1081&context=usa_faculty_staff_pubs)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.1201/9781351242776-12/management-strategies-influencing-recreational-red-snapper-lutjanus-campechanus-effort-gulf-mexico-agree-carrie-simmons-ryan-rindone-michael-larkin>

### *Review: SEDAR 74 Research Track Review of Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper*

Council staff summarized the proceedings from the SEDAR 74 review of the red snapper research track assessment, including reviewer comments and responses from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC). The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) discussed the SEDAR 74 model, the reviewers' reports, and provided recommendations to the SEFSC. The SSC will develop terms of reference for a benchmark assessment at its May 2024 meeting.

An AP member questioned the number of discards estimated by the model, stating that the bottom longline fleet has recently been avoiding areas with gag grouper and that red snapper discards are lower than estimated due to the size of fish encountered at the depths fished with that type of gear. Council staff responded that the presented discard data only goes to 2019, so any recent changes in discards attributed to a change in fishing behavior would not be incorporated in SEDAR 74 but could be in the next assessment. Staff added that assessment models often struggle to fit uncertain discard estimates, which can make interpretation of these estimates difficult.

### *Review: SEDAR 85 Gulf of Mexico Yellowedge Grouper and SSC Recommendations for the Deep-water Grouper Complex*

Council staff summarized the SSC's review of SEDAR 85, which assessed yellowedge grouper. The stock assessment determined that, under a revised proxy for the fishing mortality at maximum sustainable yield ( $F_{MSY}$ ), the stock is not overfished but is undergoing overfishing. The SSC also provided catch limit recommendations for the other three species in the Council's deep-water grouper complex (DWG: snowy grouper, warsaw grouper, and speckled hind), using Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) data units. The SSC recommended combining the overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch recommendations for yellowedge grouper and the other DWG species, managing them together. Council staff reviewed the results of the Fisherman Feedback tool on yellowedge grouper.

In response to the AP's Scope of Work, an AP member commented that, if the Grouper-Tilefish Individual Fishing Quota program (G-T IFQ) flexibility measures might be eliminated, the SWG and DWG species may need to have individual stock assessments. Another AP member advocated for no action in terms of removal of the G-T IFQ flexibility measures. An AP member stated that, with anticipated cuts to scamp and yellowmouth grouper, the current flexibility measures could be used to continue harvesting those species through use of DWG quota. Another AP member inquired what landings are driving the cuts to scamp and yellowmouth grouper catch limits. Council staff responded that this is the first stock assessment for scamp and yellowmouth grouper. The SSC also recommended a more conservative  $F_{MSY}$  proxy. Staff added that although recreational landings have increased in recent history, the overall annual catch levels for the complex are 50-60% of the allowable harvest. All these factors combined indicate the current harvest levels are not sustainable.

Dr. Frazer said that the Council wants the AP's input on whether the flexibility measures between DWG and SWG are complicating or simplifying the management process. An AP member stated that the flexibility measures prevent discards, especially of speckled hind that is part of the DWG complex. Another AP member added that there are multiple variables for consideration, which

makes it difficult to anticipate what might happen with allocation prices if the flexibility measures are removed. Council staff noted one option is pairing the flexibility measures across SWG and DWG species that share similar habitat. The AP then discussed an option where only black grouper and yellowfin grouper within the SWG complex could be landed with DWG quota. Dr. Jessica Stephen (SERO) explained that one option for the development of SWG sub-complexes would base distribution of shares on landings instead of distribution among the current shareholders. Several AP members opposed basing shares in sub-complexes on landings history. They noted that if an account holder had purchased shares and was leasing the associated annual allocation to another person, the person who had purchased those shares would stand to lose some or all those shares, which would then be given to the person who bought and landed that annual allocation. Dr. Frazer paraphrased the AP's thoughts that redistribution of historical allocation for sub-complexes should not be considered further.

### *Discussion: 2023 Recreational Red Grouper and Gag Grouper Landings and 2024 Season Projections*

Council staff reviewed updated red and gag grouper recreational landings for 2023 and fishing season projections for 2024. The 2023 landings for both species were estimated using MRIP-FES for private recreational vessels and resulted in significantly high landings estimates compared to previous fishing years. Given that the red grouper recreational annual catch limit (ACL) and annual catch target (ACT) have been exceeded in each of the last three years, NMFS plans to set the recreational season from January 1 – June 30, 2024. If the ACT is not met, NMFS may reopen the fishing season later in the year.

An AP member asked how SERO might move forward with reopening red grouper if quota remains at the end of June. SERO replied that preliminary data would be expected in August, and a fishing season extension could be announced thereafter for later in the year. Dr. Frazer asked how SERO had the confidence that the recreational ACT will not be exceeded without using any different data. SERO replied that it expects the recreational ACT to be met in 2024 sometime in July without the planned June 30<sup>th</sup> closure. SERO expects there to be some quota left in 2024 but will need to evaluate the landings after June 30<sup>th</sup> to determine any fall season. SERO does not anticipate closing the fishing season before the announced closure date of June 30<sup>th</sup>.

For gag, the 2023 season ran from September 1 – October 18. Shore landings were not used to calculate the 2023 ACL overage, given the highly uncertain shore mode catch estimates. To transition from MRIP-FES in 2023 to the State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) in 2024, a way to account for the 2023 overage in SRFS units is needed. A multi-step conversion was discussed, which results in an estimated overage of 124,624 lb gutted weight (gw) in SRFS units. The 2024 unadjusted ACL in SRFS units is 288,000 lb gw, which is then adjusted down to 163,376 lb gw to account for the payback<sup>3</sup>. SERO will work with FWC to project the fall 2024 recreational fishing season based on this information.

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<sup>3</sup> Slide 11: [https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/B-5-Gulf\\_gag\\_red\\_grouper\\_Apr\\_GMFMC\\_2024.pdf](https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/B-5-Gulf_gag_red_grouper_Apr_GMFMC_2024.pdf)

## *Discussion: Ad Hoc Charter For-Hire Data Collection Advisory Panel's January 2024 Meeting*

In April 2023, the Council passed a motion to begin work on a federal charter for-hire data collection program to replace the Southeast For-hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEHFIER) program which was set aside by a court ruling in February 2023. The Council created an Ad hoc Charter For-hire Data Collection Advisory Panel (Ad Hoc Data AP). The Ad Hoc Data AP met January 10-11, 2024, and provided suggestions to the Council for a new program based on lessons learned from SEHFIER. Informed by the Ad Hoc Data AP's recommendations, the Council began development of an amendment and reviewed the initial version at its April 2024 meeting. The Council has directed staff to incorporate some considerations for economic data collection in the new program, and those additions will be presented at the June 2024 Council meeting. Council staff noted that a larger suite of economic reporting considerations will be discussed, including validation measures.

### *Other Business*

#### Discussion of Removing the 20-Fathom Closure for Red Grouper

In April 2024, the Council approved starting a document to consider removing the 20-fathom closure for SWG. An AP member thought the measure was originally designed to protect spawning aggregations of gag, which is now closed seasonally from January through August. Thus, the protection for gag exists already, and the 20-fathom measure is not performing as intended. The AP thought that, if anything, the 20-fathom closure was resulting in increased discard mortality, since fishing was occurring at and beyond 20-fathoms already.

**Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the Council remove the 20-fathom shallow-water grouper closure for the recreational sector.**

*Motion carried unanimously.*

#### Discussion of the Charter For-hire Buffer and Fishing Season for Red Snapper

Council staff noted that SERO has constrained the for-hire component of the red snapper fishery to its ACT for several years now, and the Council requested staff develop a document that would examine reducing that buffer. Council staff noted that the Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule would allow for a 5% buffer between the ACL and ACT, since there have been no recent overages. An AP member acknowledged that the current AMs require a payback of any ACL overage in the following year and thought the current season projections method was working well.

The Council also requested staff begin a document to evaluate changing the for-hire red snapper fishing season, including consideration of timing to allow for fishing in March for spring break, and/or November for Thanksgiving. AP members thought a regional approach to a for-hire fishing season might be helpful but acknowledged a lack of consensus even within regions for when that season should occur. The Council requested feedback from the AP of dates when the for-hire component would like to see the fishing season open for development of an appropriate range of

alternatives for consideration. An AP member mentioned that the average weight of red snapper landed has been decreasing over time and proposed considering a management approach to maintain catches above a minimum average weight. Dr. Frazer recalled that fishermen in Louisiana, as an example, were not as compelled to go further offshore to harvest larger fish, due to abundance of fish closer to shore. He conceded that circumstances may differ between states. The AP member noted that the average weight in Alabama has decreased with time, which they attributed to intense fishing pressure. Dr. Frazer replied that one of the major hurdles at present for management is the imprecision of in-season management, and in the case of this proposal, the average weight landed would not be known until the end of the fishing season. Another AP member commented on the changing overlap of various fishing seasons with red snapper, which they thought might affect where and how people fish.

Regarding specific dates, the AP noted that for-hire fishing in the western Gulf does not typically start until the wind speeds decrease in June, whereas fishing occurs year-round in the eastern Gulf. The AP discussed whether opening before Memorial Day weekend in May would be helpful. An AP member expressed caution about opening too early in May, which might disproportionately affect the Gulf's for-hire operators regionally. Another AP member noted that private anglers may feel disenfranchised by the for-hire component having earlier access to red snapper. Another AP member countered that the private component currently has earlier access than the for-hire component in every Gulf state. Captain Ed Walker (Council member) noted how Council members were reticent to pick others' fishing seasons and sought input on how to move forward.

**Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends the Council explore opening the charter for-hire fishing season for red snapper on the Friday before Memorial Day.**

*Motion carried unanimously.*

**Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the Council explore the removal of, or significantly reduce, the buffer for red snapper for the charter for-hire fishery.**

*Motion carried unanimously.*

Dr. Frazer noted that there was a desire by the Council to reduce the for-hire buffer, but that changing the season in this way might negate the rationale used to reduce the buffer as opening the fishing season earlier would introduce uncertainty in the projections to account for effort in a time during which there are no recent data for red snapper. The AP considered the fishing season modification to be more important than the buffer reduction. The AP then discussed the merits of having a hard closure earlier in the year (prior to the anticipated harvest of the ACT), to allow for additional fishing later in the year. It was acknowledged that the SERO has allowed a fall opening in the past when some quota is left; however, due to the limited amount of time to plan for these re-openings, many small business owners cannot take full advantage of this opportunity.

**Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends exploring setting the charter for-hire red snapper season based on a fixed closure, to allow for the possibility of a second season opening in the fall.**

*Motion carried with one opposed.*

### Discussion of NMFS Letter to Gulf Council about Lane Snapper Overfishing

The Council recently received a letter from NMFS regarding lane snapper landings exceeding the overfishing limit (OFL) for three out of the five most recent years. A framework action to increase the catch limits is currently undergoing the final rule process; however, the landings for 2023 would have exceeded the proposed OFL if it had been implemented. Council staff stated that the stock may be increasing and that the high landings could be attributed to the increase in biomass.

An AP member mentioned that lane snapper is prosecuted largely as a bycatch fishery and that for-hire captains have observed larger lane snapper over a broader geographic area and at deeper water depths than in years past. Dr. Frazer requested that the AP provide management options for the Council to consider, recognizing that the data poor status of the stock makes it difficult to monitor the fishery and that there are limited management measures that are applicable to the stock.

The AP discussed approaches to reducing the rate of catch for lane snapper to reduce the probability of overfishing. The AP discussed a modification to the fishing year and indicated that recreational fishing, the main source of lane snapper harvest, was higher towards the end of the calendar year when many other species in the Gulf are closed to harvest. The AP also discussed the possibility of a minimum size limit. Several AP members reported seeing lane snapper as large as 20 inches with some regularity and suggested that further exploration of a minimum size limit would be beneficial before deciding on whether that approach would be an effective measure.

**Motion: The Reef Fish AP requests that the Council evaluate a minimum size limit for lane snapper.**

*Motion carried unanimously.*

Another AP member cautioned that the public perception of restricting harvest for a healthy fishery is poor and can seed discontent in the Council process. Limited knowledge of the magnitude of the stock biomass results in catch levels that may not be reflective of sustainable harvest. The AP agreed that the SEFSC should work to updating catch advice for lane snapper.

**Motion: The Reef Fish AP requests that the Council request an annual interim analysis on lane snapper.**

*Motion carried unanimously.*

### Commercial Electronic Reporting

Council staff told the AP that the joint amendment with the South Atlantic Council to require commercial electronic reporting of logbooks was transmitted to NMFS in February 2023. SERO is creating the technical specifications to allow vendors to apply for their equipment, collaborating with other partners for storing and managing data, and planning various mechanisms to receive the data. Lessons learned through the implementation of SEFHIER are being used to guide electronic

data collection. NMFS needs to have these measures resolved before issuing the final rule, which is not expected to happen until 2025. An AP member asked if there would be an opportunity for affected fishermen to pilot the new system. SERO recalled previous pilot studies; further piloting is not expected at this time.

### Discussion of Reef Fish Amendment 53

The AP discussed the recent federal court ruling regarding Reef Fish Amendment 53, in which the court remanded the rule back to NMFS for further clarifications.

**Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the Council reconsider Amendment 53 due to accuracy issues identified by NOAA with MRIP-FES and the need for credible and consistent economic analysis for evaluating whether a reallocation to the recreational sector would generate net economic benefits.**

*Motion carried unanimously.*

### *Public Comment*

No public comment was provided to the AP.

**The meeting adjourned at 3:00 pm eastern time on April 23, 2024.**

### *Meeting Participants*

#### **Reef Fish AP Members**

Dylan Hubbard, *Chair*  
Troy Frady, *Vice Chair*  
Brenda Ballard  
Jane Black-Lee  
Harold Dauterive  
Jason DeLaCruz  
Josh Ellender  
Martin Fisher  
Keith “Buddy” Guindon  
John Marquez, Jr  
Mike Prasek, Jr

#### **Council Representative**

Tom Frazer

#### **Council Attendees**

Bob Gill  
Chris Schieble  
CJ Sweetman  
Ed Walker  
Dakus Geeslin