

# Yellowtail Snapper Fishery Performance Report

SAFMC Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

SEDAR64-RD-04

June 2019



# **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Yellowtail Snapper Fishery Performance Report October 2018**

At their October 2018 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for yellowtail snapper and developed this fishery performance report (FPR). The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR for yellowtail snapper will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in the stock assessment (SEDAR 64) scheduled for completion in late 2019 and to inform future management.

## **Advisory Panel Members:**

David Moss (Chairman; Recreational/FL)	Jim Atack (Recreational/NC)
Jimmy Hull (Vice-Chairman; Commercial/Dealer/Retail/FL)	Red Munden (Conservation/NC)
Rusty Hudson (Commercial/FL)	Robert Lorenz (Recreational/NC)
Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)	Dick Brame (NGO/Recreational/NC)*
James Freeman (Commercial/FL)	Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)*
Greg Mercurio (Charter/FL)*	Andy Piland (Charter/NC)
Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)	Jack Cox (Commercial/Dealer/NC)*
David Snyder (Consumer Rep/GA)*	Todd Kellison (At-large/NOAA)*
Deidra Jeffcoat (Charter/GA)	James Paskiewicz (Commercial/FL)
Gary Manigault Sr. (Charter/SC)	Randy McKinley (Commercial/ NC)
Kerry Marhefka (Commercial/Dealer/SC)	Randy Beardsley (Recreational/FL)
Jim Moring (Recreational/SC)	*not in attendance

## ***Fishery Overview***

Summary information on the yellowtail snapper fishery in the South Atlantic region is available at the following link: <http://data.safmc.net/FPRAll/>. The summary presents an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history of the species, stock status, and trends in landings and fishery economics for both the commercial and recreational (for-hire and private) sectors. The information was provided as background to elicit the discussion presented in this Fishery Performance Report. Yellowtail snapper are targeted commercially and recreationally primarily in south Florida and the Florida Keys, hence most observations in this report pertain to that area.

## ***Observations on Stock Abundance***

A commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys maintains that yellowtail snapper production ramped up in the months following Hurricane Irma in 2017. Subsequently, commercial harvest of yellowtail snapper stabilized at a lower level that has been maintained.

From a recreational standpoint, the yellowtail snapper fishery is robust. Abundance over the past five years has been consistent. In recent years, fishermen claim that mild winters have allowed

yellowtail snapper fishing to continue year-round. However, during the summer of 2018, fishermen observed “a lot of clean water” near Islamorada and noted the yellowtail snapper fishing was tougher than in years past.

This observation was corroborated by a commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys. He maintained that, had the season been open in 2018 during June and July, there would have been historically low catches of yellowtail snapper during that time. He maintains that the yellowtail snapper annual catch limit is being met earlier in the year due to an increase in catch rates.

Fishermen generally agreed that the yellowtail fishery is a strong fishery and abundance has remained stable over the last five years.

### ***Observations on Fish Size***

There has not been much of a change in the overall size of the fish that are harvested commercially. However, fishermen noted that mild winters in recent years have resulted in very good fishing from October through February, all the way through winter, and the fish are big. Mostly, it’s extra-large fish in that timeframe. If winter temperatures remain mild, commercial fishermen continue to harvest yellowtail snapper through the spring and catch more of the biomass that, in years past, would have been caught during spawning months later in the year.

A commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys maintains that large yellowtail snapper are available year-round over a thirty-five-mile stretch of reef (from mile marker 40 to mile marker 75). Another fisherman from the Keys noted that yellowtail snapper are noticeably larger (and hungrier) after every hurricane (including Hurricanes George, Wilma, and Irma). A commercial yellowtail snapper fisherman from the Florida Keys has observed that, “in a typical feeding scenario, the big fish dictate how it’s going to go”. He claims that after an event like a hurricane, there isn’t an abundant food source (natural or artificial, such as from boats fishing), so the fish are hungry. The big fish “dictate who gets to feed first, and obviously, being the bigger fish, they come in and push the small fish out of the way, and they run the school. Now, I have seen those fish do the same thing and come in front of the smaller feeding fish, the ones that want to commit suicide, if you will, and they will get in front, and they will back up, and nobody eats. I mean, call me crazy, but I see this behavior fifty days a year, and so they’re just kind of in charge, and maybe after a hurricane they put themselves first on the feeding list.”

### ***Observations on Discards***

There are indications that commercial fishermen also target smaller fish, mainly in the lower Keys, even though they command less money.

A for-hire captain from the Florida Keys claims that too many small yellowtail are now being harvested during certain times of the year, mainly during the spawning months, from May through July. Fishermen can target yellowtail on the reef where they are smaller and easier to catch. A commercial fisherman/dealer from the Keys maintains that this practice is not new. They call the small yellowtail “drone” fish and observe they feed very readily. A substantial portion of the yellowtail annual catch, according to fishermen, is comprised of these small fish. “Yellowtail snapper migrate up and down the Keys, and, when that size range hits the bar, fishermen are there to catch them. Normally that’s an eleven-and-a-half to fourteen-inch fish,

and the majority isn't the eleven-and-a-half variety. You might see a dozen fish out of a hundred that need to be released, and, if you are speed catching fish -- two men can put a hundred fish on the deck in eight minutes -- some of those first fish that hit the deck do not get tended to immediately, resulting in issues with survivability depending on the temperature of the day and how much the fisherman cares.”

However, if current catch rates are maintained, fishermen expect the annual catch limit to be landed before the end of the fishing year (August). They claim that such an in-season closure may be beneficial as it may diminish harvest of undersized fish by part-time commercial fishermen who target smaller yellowtail snapper that are easier to catch than larger fish. Fishermen claim that if yellowtail harvest were to extend through the end of the fishing year and into the spawning season, this would be more of a concern.

As observed above, when the pace of yellowtail fishing is fast, some fishermen may not take proper care handling undersized fish resulting in mortality. While fishermen have discussed a potential increase in the minimum size as a potential measure to alleviate this issue, they are also wary that an increase to 13 inches (the current minimum size is 12 inches) would cause them to have to handle many more undersized fish resulting in high mortality of fish that were previously legal to harvest. They worry that an increase in the minimum size limit would result in more dead fish and less value for their product.

#### ***Observations on Spawning and Recruitment***

Fishermen say yellowtail snapper in the Florida Keys spawn anywhere from late March to the end of August. During winter months, if the weather is mild and the fish have been feeding, fishermen have observed “masses of fish”, which they claim are migrating male fish in spawning condition. A commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys offered that, ten years ago, before yellowtail fishing really evolved to what it is now, yellowtail snapper used to spawn from April to the end of July. Yellowtail snapper begin spawning later after a cold winter.

Fishermen in Florida report seeing small yellowtail snapper “everywhere”. In Florida Bay, fishermen claim throwing a chum bag in the water causes the three- or four-inch yellowtail to swarm the back of the boat. Yellowtail snapper recruitment appears to be strong.

#### ***Observations on Price and Demand***

According to a commercial fisherman and wholesale dealer from the Florida Keys, summer months are typically not the best time to market yellowtail snapper because of the large volume of “three-quarter to one fish” entering the marketplace causing the price to plummet. According to one fisherman, the wholesale price of yellowtail snapper in the past couple of years has not gone below \$2.25 per pound during summer months. On average, for a “one to two” yellowtail the boat price is currently \$4.00 per pound.

In terms of market price, a commercial fisherman and dealer from Ormond Beach offered that large yellowtail snapper command \$4.50 per pound, or \$4.75 per pound. Ex vessel price, according to him, can be as high as \$3.20 per pound. He maintains that yellowtail snapper are a very valuable species to the seafood industry. The end user, in some cases, is paying as much as

\$7.00 per pound for a whole fish at the fish house. The value of the fish increases from there for restaurant consumers.

Fishermen claim there is now more awareness of product quality. If the fish aren't iced and brined properly, they are not going to be of good quality. There is now more awareness at the point of production to improve quality and help boost overall price.

### ***Observations on Community Dependence and Working Waterfronts***

Commercial and recreational fishermen, including for-hire captains, agreed that yellowtail snapper is more important to their communities than ever, and they strive to ensure yellowtail snapper is a viable and healthy resource.

A diminishing working waterfront has been a challenge. Fishermen who fish five or six days a week are doing it out of private property and find it challenging to get all their equipment daily to and from the boat. If there isn't a fish house for them to tie up, fishermen must carry ice, and 400-500 pounds of chum in the back of a truck. High property values in the Florida Keys have worsened the problem and, even though people are interested in seeing a fish house and watching boats unload, the perception of commercial fishing still isn't as favorable as fishermen would like it to be.

Fishermen claim there is no longer commercial dockage north of the Keys and some are having to trailer boats to and from various areas, sometimes selling fish in a parking lot to distributors and suppliers because there is nowhere else for commercial fishermen to conduct their business. Any potential docking area for commercial boats in east Florida is "gobbled up and sold to the highest bidder".

### ***Environmental Observations***

One commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys recounted that, ten years ago or so, yellowtail snapper used to prefer to feed in the clear Gulf Stream water. He claims the clear water allowed them to detect predators more easily and the fish would consequently feed more readily.

According to this fisherman, as more and more people have adopted the current yellowtail snapper fishing method, the fish's movements have changed. He claims they no longer feed as readily in the "clear water" but rather seek out the "dirty water". These shifts occur where the water changes over the Florida Keys; that is where yellowtail snapper have learned to feed. He claims that fishermen nowadays know that if there is clear water, there will be a slower yellowtail snapper commercial harvest. A for-hire captain who operates in the lower Keys agreed that when there is "a hard east current" recreational fishermen know not to expect to catch yellowtail snapper.

Fishermen agreed that shark populations and shark interactions have skyrocketed in recent years. However, commercial fishing for yellowtail snapper using chum has not been impacted that much by the sharks. In fact, fishermen maintain that yellowtail snapper are not frightened by the sharks; they actually "go wild" when the sharks are close. However, problems do arise when fishermen catch bigger fish that "are out of pluck range". The fish "dig down and the sharks eat every single one of them." Bull sharks and lemon sharks are primarily what fishermen report seeing on Florida Keys reefs.

A recreational fisherman from south Florida agreed that sharks have become a “huge problem” for saltwater fishing in general but acknowledges that it is an issue that may be difficult to quantify since fish that are lost to shark predation cannot be reported as caught nor released. The fish are being removed from the populations but are not being accounted for.

When asked whether fishermen are seeing yellowtail shift away from the reefs that have coral disease in the Florida Keys and going to deeper areas, a charter captain observed that, even though the reef system looks to be in bad shape, fish continue to populate the degraded areas. He maintains that fish won’t leave the “skeleton of the coral reef, but it’s quickly becoming skeletal”. However, a commercial yellowtail snapper fisherman offered that one of his “yellowtail spots” that he has been fishing for a very long time is thriving and growing. He called the reef bottom in this area “pristine” and observed that he would not have expected the habitat to be so healthy given the amount of fishing that has taken place in the area over the years.

### ***Observations on Management Measures***

While commercial fishermen have advocated for an increase in the minimum size limit to increase the marketability of their product, they are wary of the effect this would have on the number of discards. The sentiment was echoed by recreational fishermen, especially as it might affect the level of yellowtail snapper discards on headboats.

As far as potential changes to management measures, a commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys suggested that data be collected on the number of historic trips targeting gray snapper (also known as mangrove snapper) during June and July. He claims yellowtail snapper are being discarded after the commercial fishery closes and harvest switches to gray snapper. Having information on the level of gray snapper harvest might allow managers to pinpoint when a bycatch trip limit of yellowtail snapper would be most effective to prevent discarding of yellowtail snapper. Other fishermen agreed that it would be beneficial to adjust management measures for yellowtail snapper once fishermen begin targeting gray snapper even though the yellowtail catch during this time tends to be low since fishermen claim “the grays have taken over the area.”

According to a commercial yellowtail snapper fisherman, the gray snapper fishery has been much stronger in recent years in the lower Keys. In the middle Keys, between Mile Markers 40 and 75, he reports seeing a mix of legal-sized gray snappers and 12-inch and under yellowtail snappers, complicating “putting a catch together” and causing frustration among fishermen who have to “measure every fish that comes on board” and discard undersized yellowtail snapper. However, a charter captain from the Lower Keys maintains that gray snapper fishing in his area is strong. Moreover, gray snapper can easily be caught in the daytime nowadays and large fish are not hard to find. A recreational fisherman from south Florida agreed that gray snapper were plentiful during summer 2018; “almost like the yellowtail bite turned into a mangrove bite.”

Based on these observations, it was offered that a bycatch trip limit for yellowtail snapper should not come into play if the yellowtail season was expected to extend through July so that the entire yellowtail snapper ACL could be harvested.