

## **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Mutton Snapper Fishery Performance Report April 2021**

At their April 2021 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for mutton 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 mutton snapper will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in the standard assessment (SEDAR 79) scheduled for completion in spring 2023 and to inform future management.

### **Advisory Panel Members:**

James Hull Jr. (Chair;  
Commercial/Dealer/Retailer/FL)

Robert Lorenz (Vice Chair;  
Recreational/NC)

Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)

Richen "Dick" Brame (NGO/NC)

Randall Beardsley (Recreational/FL)\*

Tony Constant (Charter/Recreational/SC)\*

Jack Cox Jr. (Commercial/NC)

Andrew Fish (Commercial/FL)

Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)

Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)\*

Lawton Howard (Recreational/GA)

Rusty Hudson (Commercial/FL)

Deidra Jeffcoat (Charter/GA)\*

Chris Kimrey (Charter/NC)

Andrew Mahoney (Commercial/SC)

Randy McKinley (Commercial/NC)

Chris Militello (Recreational/FL)

Harry Morales (Recreational/SC)\*

David Moss (Recreational/FL)

Fentress "Red" Munden

(Conservation/NC)\*

James Paskiewicz (Commercial/FL)

Andy Piland (Charter/NC)\*

Cameron Sebastian

(Charter/Commercial/SC)

David Snyder (Consumer Rep/GA)

Todd Kellison (At-Large/NOAA)

\*not in attendance

### ***Fishery Overview***

Summary information on the mutton snapper fishery in the South Atlantic region is available at the following link: <https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/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.

The total annual catch limit is allocated 17.02% to the commercial fishery and 82.98% to the recreational fishery. A minimum size limit of 18 inches total length is in effect for both sectors. The commercial trip limit is 500 pounds whole weight, except during April-July when the commercial fishery is limited to 5 mutton snapper per person per day or per person per trip (whichever is more restrictive). The recreational bag limit is 5 mutton snapper per person per day, with mutton snapper counting toward the 10 fish snapper aggregate bag limit.

### ***Observations on Potential Spawning Behavior***

#### Florida

Catches can be sporadic in shallower reefs, with consistent catches for a couple weeks followed by none, then followed by very aggressive eating. This behavior was noted as similar to spawning behavior.

Males have been observed milting in typical non-spawning months.

Fish seem to move between the shallow reefs and the middle shelf, so spawning aggregations may be occurring during and outside of typical spawning months.

Mutton snapper are notably caught on amberjack and grouper trips in the spring at 100-350 foot depths.

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

#### Florida

Off Southern Florida and the Florida Keys, since implementation of the 18-inch minimum size limit (2018), there seem to be more fish in the 16- to 18-inch size range. Fish in this size range seem prevalent off the Keys during the winter in depths of 15 to 40 feet.

More small fish are being encountered in recent years and seem to be occurring in deeper water than in the past.

Mutton snapper of various sizes can be found in the same location.

### ***Observations on Shifts in Effort or Stock Abundance***

There has been a general rise in recreational effort. While this may not be specifically targeted at mutton snapper, mutton snapper would be included in species that could experience increased fishing pressure from the increased overall effort.

#### North Carolina

Few mutton snapper are encountered off North Carolina, though last summer (2020) multiple larger mutton snapper were reported caught on some trips.

#### Florida

There seems to be a shift toward fishing for mutton snapper because they are a reliable “rod bender”, relatively closer to shore on shallower reefs, and very good table fare.

Commercial fishing techniques seem similar to past efforts. Recreational fishing techniques have shifted from bottom fishing with dead or live bait towards slow pitch jigging.

In the Keys, fishing is primarily done during the day. Near Broward, Dade, and Palm Beach counties, there is some recreational fishing at night for mutton and yellowtail snapper.

Near Cape Canaveral, the commercial fishery doesn't typically target mutton snapper, and recreational party boats seem to have been catching more mutton snapper as bycatch over the last 5 years.

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

#### Florida

Discards are typically undersized fish. They are typically caught in less than one hundred feet of water and seem to swim away well when released.

There seem to be more discards occurring recently. Part of this was attributed to the change in minimum length (2018) and increase in recruitment.

Mutton snapper are caught as bycatch while targeting yellowtail snapper. Both undersized and legal-size mutton snapper are caught while fishing for yellowtail snapper.

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

#### Florida

Mutton snapper are not typically caught in great enough amounts to make commercial targeting of this species worthwhile, but they are caught as bycatch. The low volume and quality as table fare allow for a nice profit and a reliable market to sell fish when caught. Mutton snapper landings are also spread throughout the year in low volumes. When high volumes could be caught (e.g., spawning season in April-June), commercial landings are restricted by regulations.

Mutton snapper can be a good fish to use for restaurant specials, when available.

Mutton snapper are fairly important to the commercial fishery. While they don't comprise a large portion of landings, they are considered a nice bonus to have available for use when encountered and would be missed if access or availability were reduced.

### ***Observations on Demand for For-Hire Trips***

#### Florida

Mutton snapper are not typically a target species for tourists and visiting anglers, but there is some local demand due to their physical appearance, infrequency of encounters, and edibility.

### ***Observations on Community Dependence***

Generally, loss of dock space for large charter and head boats due to coastal infrastructure has hurt the fishing population and led to increases in trip costs and prices. AP members expressed concern with the loss of working waterfront and the potential of fishing to end up being a "rich man's hobby". There were concerns with equity of fishing opportunities for lower income individuals.

#### Florida

In the Keys, mutton snapper are a fairly important species for communities that share the resource. In the recreational fishery, mutton snapper are not recognized as a species that communities depend on greatly. However, as species with local demand, coastal communities would miss them if they became less available.

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

The fishery has taken the minimum size limit increase from 16 to 18 inches (2018) in stride and fishermen are happy to potentially be seeing positive effects from that action in the form of increased recruitment. If the mutton snapper stock continues in the current direction, this could

be a good example of positive impacts of management on a nearshore species that many people can encounter. It was noted that the change in the minimum size limit was proactive, occurring without any overfishing or depletion of the population.

One AP member brought up concern about commercial lobster traps being used to catch mutton snapper as bycatch. This had not been heard of previously by the Council's Snapper Grouper Committee Chair, Jessica McCawley, and was noted as something to be followed up on after the AP meeting.

The AP discussed the number of fish per person limit in effect for the commercial fishery during the spawning months (April-July). Especially in recent times (affected by the COVID-19 pandemic), commercial fishermen have had to find ways to be more efficient, and some have made more solo trips. Consideration of a poundage trip limit rather than a number of fish limit may be useful in this effort. A commercial number of fish per person limit for spawning months in Amendment 41 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region was noted to have been selected rather than a poundage limit to be compatible with recreational regulations.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission recently passed a spawning season closure in state waters at Western Dry Rocks, off Key West, that affects mutton snapper, along with other species.

### ***Environmental Observations***

One AP member noted that as general policy, the Council should look more towards connecting management measures with environmental and habitat conditions. Proactive measures to improve habitats, such as improvements to water quality for estuaries, can be a tool used to help improve stocks rather than simply lowering catch when population sizes get too low.

### **North Carolina**

North Carolina seems to be experiencing more windy days, making fishable days less frequent and trip efficiency more important.

### **Florida**

In the Keys, changes to infrastructure, docks, and marinas, do not seem to have strongly impacted the opportunity to harvest mutton snapper.

Water quality does not currently seem to be strongly affecting mutton snapper in the Keys, with plenty of juvenile fish being observed.

While it is not specifically affecting mutton snapper in the Keys right now, water quality is an issue of general concern throughout Florida that could affect species that spend juvenile life stages in estuaries as well as the forage fish they feed on. In Broward, Palm Beach, and Martin counties, reduced seagrass estuary habitat could lead to issues for juvenile mutton snapper or forage fish in the future.

Runoff after a lot of rain can lead to mutton snapper being further offshore. When disturbances happen that make the water muddy, mutton snapper are typically one of the first fish found on

the shallow hard bottom areas. In Palm Beach Inlet and Lake Worth Inlet, when a hurricane is offshore or the pressure is low, mutton snapper are sometimes caught off of piers.