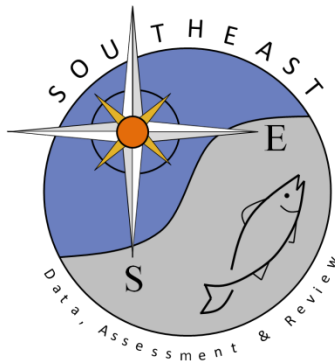


Blueline Tilefish Fishery Performance Report

SAFMC Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

SEDAR 92-WP-03

12 August 2024



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Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Blueline Tilefish Fishery Performance Report October 2023

At their October 2023 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for blueline tilefish and updated this fishery performance report (FPR), which was originally developed in April 2019. 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 blueline tilefish will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in a future blueline tilefish stock assessment and to inform future management.

Advisory Panel Members:

Robert Lorenz (Chair; Recreational/NC)
James Paskiewicz (Vice Chair;
Commercial/FL)
Scott Amick (Charter/GA)*
Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)
Dick Brame (NGO/Recreational/NC)*
Randall Beardsley (Recreational/FL)*
Chris Conklin (Commercial/SC)
Tony Constant
(Charter/Recreational/SC)
Jack Cox, Jr. (Commercial/NC)
Andrew Fish (Commercial/FL)
Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)*
Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)

Fletcher Hallett (Recreational/FL)*
Chris Kimrey (Charter/NC)
Selby Lewis (Comercial/NC)*
Joe Mathews (Recreational/GA)
Randy McKinley (Comercial/NC)
Thomas Meeks (Recreational/GA)
Chris Militello (Recreational/FL)
Harry Morales (Recreational/SC)
Paul Nelson (Commercial/Charter/FL)
Andy Piland (Charter/NC)
John Polston (Commercial/FL)
Cameron Sebastian
(Charter/Commercial/SC)
Todd Kellison (NOAA)
*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the blueline tilefish 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.

Observations on Stock Abundance

A charter fisherman from Hatteras, North Carolina stated that the abundance of blueline tilefish off Cape Hatteras has remained the same for the last 20 years. "Older captains" go to the same areas to look for blueline tilefish as younger generations of fishermen do today. In the summertime, when dolphin are not available, it is not uncommon for as many as ten charter boats to be fishing near each other and for everyone to catch their blueline tilefish limit.

Blueline tilefish are also abundant off Virginia, around Norfolk Canyon, and off Maryland and New Jersey, according to anecdotal information from bottom-fishermen in those areas who recount having interacted with blueline tilefish for the past 10 years.

According to the same charter fisherman from Hatteras, North Carolina, the popularity of blueline tilefish has increased, and so has the effort to find them. He stated that when commercial fishermen from North Carolina had to travel north because of the 240-foot closure (implemented in 2011 and subsequently removed), it became obvious to other fishermen that there was an abundance of blueline tilefish out there, and he thinks that caused an effort shift. The perception was that if commercial fishermen could load the boat with blueline tilefish in a couple of days, then anyone could go out there with hand-held tackle and do the same thing.

A commercial fisherman from Morehead City, North Carolina, maintained that “bigger catches” of blueline tilefish occur about 100 miles north of the area where he fishes. However, commercial fishermen in his area have not changed their gear nor the way they fish for them. Mostly, blueline tilefish are bycatch in the snowy grouper fishery. He reported catching “quite a few more” blueline tilefish in thirty fathoms (off Oregon Inlet) than he used to, stating he usually caught them in forty or fifty-fathoms. While blueline tilefish are not targeted commercially in this area, he claimed that there has been a “tremendous increase in the recreational sector fishing the deeper water” and he attributed this to the advancement of electronics and fishing tackle.

A charter captain from Atlantic Beach, North Carolina concurred that blueline have seemingly been in the same places over a long period of time except for “the one hump north of Big Rock”. He claimed catching snowy grouper in this area twenty or twenty-five years ago. Nowadays, however, the same area yields mostly three or four-pound blueline tilefish. He recounted that in most of the places where he fishes off North Carolina, usually deeper than sixty fathoms, a fisherman can drop a hook down, or drop two hooks down on a bottom rig, and catch a snowy grouper and a tilefish with the same rod and reel, indicating that the two species inhabit the same areas. He described a significant drop-off in forty fathoms -- over hard, rough bottom -- that also yields numerous large vermilion snapper and occasionally scamp.

A commercial fisherman from Daytona Beach, Florida, maintained that the availability of blueline tilefish off the east coast of Florida is the same now as it has been historically. Blueline tilefish are found in the same areas as in the past, co-occurring with snowy grouper (he estimated a 1:10 ratio). He characterized the blueline tilefish population as “extensive up and down the coast” and claimed it has been that way for a long time. Off east Florida, however, blueline tilefish are not a targeted species commercially as they are off North Carolina and Virginia.

Effort has not increased much in the Florida Keys, according to a commercial fisherman from that area. However, he maintained that blueline tilefish are plentiful in the areas where he fishes. He stated that recreational effort has “definitely increased” from Palm Beach through Miami, where recreational fishermen can catch blueline tilefish inside of three miles, in Florida state waters. A scientist on the panel representing the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) (a non-voting member) explained blueline tilefish range from off of New York and New Jersey down to the Keys and into the Gulf, but there is currently not a regional scale or cross-regional scale survey that tracks their abundance. However, data from existing scientific surveys have demonstrated that blueline tilefish occupy a range of habitats, from unstructured bottom to mixed habitats.

Observations on Fish Size and Recruitment

In 2019, a charter captain who fishes off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, commented that small (<12 inches) blueline tilefish co-exist with the other fish (“three-pounders”). However, it is hard to

catch them because of the hook size required for a small-mouthed fish. He claimed that hooks used to fish for triggerfish are effective at catching small blueline tilefish. However, these small fish are in “a little bit deeper” water. Off Cape Hatteras, the “biggest” blueline are found in 110 fathoms of water; however, in 80 to 100 fathoms he has observed a mix of medium-sized fish and “babies” year-round. He has not corroborated that the same mix also occurs off Oregon Inlet, however. Regarding the spawning season for blueline tilefish, the fisherman offered that they “appear to be in the same state of roe throughout the fishing season.”

In 2023, North Carolina fishermen noted that blueline tilefish off North Carolina do not size-segregate. The largest and smallest fish are caught at the same locations.

A commercial fisherman from Daytona, Florida, maintained that blueline tilefish, from juveniles to adults, could be found in a fifteen to twenty-mile area he described as “the rolldown halfway between St. Augustine and Ponce Inlet”. Small snowy grouper are also common in this area. Off South Carolina, larger snowy grouper can be found in the same habitat as blueline tilefish. He suggested that examining the bycatch of the rock shrimp fleet that operates “off the rolldown” and Florida’s east coast might provide some insight into blueline tilefish (and snowy grouper) early life history. The fisherman recounted that the medium-sized blueline tilefish are caught on the same hooks used for small-to-medium and large snowy grouper.

In the Florida Keys and in south Florida, a commercial fisherman offered that “there seems to be plenty of little fish mixed in with all the big fish, and they’re just harder to catch, because of the hooks we’re fishing, and we have put on tinier hooks, 2/0 and 3/0 hooks, to catch pink porgy, and we have caught plenty of little tilefish mixed in with them.”

Observations on Discards

According to a charter captain from Hatteras, North Carolina there are “extremely few” discards in the recreational charter fishery.

On the commercial side, a fisherman from south Florida stated there are “zero discards on the blueline tile.”

Observations on Price and Demand

AP members agreed that demand for tilefish (blueline and golden) has increased both recreationally and commercially over the past decade. Access to tilefish has increased due to fishing advancements, including boating electronics, use of braided line and other gear advancements, more accurate global positioning system (GPS) maps, trolling motors, more precise bathymetry maps, and advancements in electric reels. More effort has been directed toward tilefish due to increased prevalence of red snapper and shark depredation further inshore combined with the prohibition of red snapper harvest for most of the year. This increased demand has also led to increased popularity among anglers and customers, including media coverage of tilefish fishing.

A charter captain from Hatteras, North Carolina, claimed that half his customers inquire specifically about catching blueline tilefish and snowy grouper. He said that, in the summertime, he relies on blueline tilefish being available for his clients to catch when dolphin are not in the area. He agreed that advances in technology that are also affordable have made it easier for people to catch deep-water fish.

Another charter captain from Atlantic Beach, North Carolina shared that many of his clients also request fishing for blueline tilefish and many bring their own deep-water gear.

Blueline tilefish makes up a small portion of the commercial catch in North Carolina, according to a commercial fisherman from Hampstead, North Carolina. The price per pound was previously reported in 2019 as steady for about 15 years at \$4.00 per pound (ex-vessel), even though blueline tilefish is not as desirable as golden tilefish. The price per pound for fresh, delivered blueline tilefish has increased since then. The current retail price for filets in North Carolina is \$28-30 per pound.

Demand for tilefish in restaurants has increased as customers recognize the fish more and more. A restaurant-owner from St. Simons Island, Georgia, stated that when tilefish is included in the menu along with grouper and snapper, the tilefish sells just as well.

Similarly, a restaurant-owner from Charleston, South Carolina, stated that he has seen an increase in the demand for tilefish since customers have learned to recognize the fish. However, a wholesale dealer, also from the Charleston area, claims that blueline tilefish is not as desirable as golden tilefish and it is not “interchangeable”. That is, chefs prefer golden tilefish over blueline and so do seafood consumers in the area. She estimates that blueline tilefish is sold to restaurants by about \$4.00 less per pound than the price of golden tilefish. Dockside price for blueline tilefish is from \$3.00 to \$3.50 per pound.

A commercial fisherman and dealer from south Florida agreed that golden tilefish commands a higher price than blueline tilefish. In the Florida Keys, the price per pound to the boat is about \$1.50 to \$2.00 per pound.

Observations on Community Dependence and Working Waterfronts

Blueline tilefish are a very important fish in the Outer Banks of North Carolina (notably, Oregon Inlet) for the charter/headboat and commercial fisheries. If dolphin are unavailable, for-hire captains rely on blueline tilefish as a backup to satisfy their customers and keep them coming back. Shark depredation on species nearer to shore increases the importance of blueline tilefish being available for harvest.

Environmental Observations

A commercial fisherman from Morehead City, North Carolina, recounts that “there’s a lot more rougher days and the current runs a lot more” than what he remembers from the 1980s. Also, since the snowy grouper commercial annual catch limit increased a few years back, commercial fishermen are interacting more with blueline tilefish since they are spending more time targeting snowy grouper.

Off east Florida, according to a commercial fisherman from Daytona, cold water events may be having an impact on fishing. He recounted that fishermen called it “lockjaw current” for decades. He claimed that, under these conditions, fishermen (commercial or for-hire) must move from inshore to the western edge of the Gulf Stream, where the water is warmer, to make a fishing trip. He added that sea conditions are changing, and he acknowledged it may be partly cyclical, but he expressed concern over melting ice in polar regions affecting ocean currents and having an impact on fishing. He also shared that further south along Florida’s east coast, rock shrimp fishermen have observed algae coming up in their nets in areas where it did not use to be a problem

historically. He claimed algae is “laying all around that big ledge and offshore areas” and could have negative effects on fish stocks. In addition, recent expansion of the Oculina Bank “closed area” has placed additional restrictions on anchoring to protect *Oculina* coral and associated habitat. He claims these restrictions have resulted in some fishermen fitting a valve anchor or additional weight on their anchor to “slowly drag through that depth to catch these blueline and snowy and tiles in that rolldown region.” He acknowledged that these restrictions have caused “a lot of shifts” that may result in negative impacts to an area that is intended to be protected from fishing activity.

Freshwater releases from lake Okeechobee were also mentioned as a cause of concern by another commercial fisherman from the Daytona, Florida area. He has observed that during these events fish stop biting from “shallow or all the way out to a thousand foot.”

Another fisherman added that hammerhead sharks prey on tilefish (golden and blueline) and increasing shark populations may have an effect on managed species such as blueline tilefish (this comment was from the 2019 report). In 2023, the AP indicated that shark depredation, particularly by sandbar sharks, has continued to increase.

Observations on Management Measures

AP members agreed that the annual catch limit for blueline tilefish is currently too low as they believe blueline tilefish are plentiful and they are skeptical about the results of the recent stock assessment. They acknowledged that catch levels and management measures cannot be adjusted until “the science is updated and corrected” but insisted that the blueline tilefish population in the South Atlantic is in good shape.

Amendment 52 will soon go into effect (December 2023) and change the bag limit to 2 blueline tilefish per person per day. NMFS will project and specify the recreational season each year, starting on May 1.

Management changes to blueline tilefish need to consider effects on snowy grouper (and vice versa) due to co-habitation south of Cape Hatteras, NC. The two species are more separated further north.

Other Observations

The NMFS representative on the panel indicated that a regional scale longline survey has been discussed in the South Atlantic region to track the abundance of blueline tilefish and other deep-water fish species, but the National Marine Fisheries Service lacks the resources to implement such a survey at this time. However, funding was secured for a one-year cooperative research project to gather data on deeper-water species, mainly blueline and golden tilefish. Sampling is scheduled to begin later in 2019. The project is in the very early stages, essentially a pilot project, to explore its feasibility and potentially apply for additional funding in the future.

AP members agreed that more information is needed on recruitment and there are no fishery-independent studies that are currently investigating this. Several commercial fishermen on the panel expressed eagerness to participate in cooperative research projects aimed at filling data gaps on economically important species such as blueline tilefish.

A charter captain from Hatteras, North Carolina, offered that vertical gear would be most

appropriate to sample juveniles, as opposed to longline gear.

For studying effects of barotrauma, the AP suggested simulation of real fishing practices in terms of gear (hand reels and electric reels) as well as ascent rate. The AP commented that it would be useful to have some study and advice on visual signs when descending would no longer be useful because chances of mortality would be too high.