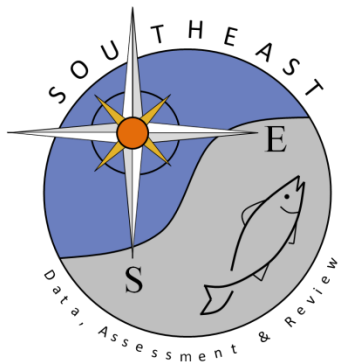


Red Grouper Fishery Performance Report

South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

SEDAR86-RD01

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**South Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel  
Red Grouper Fishery Performance Report  
Updated April 2023**

At their April 2023 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for Red Grouper and updated the 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 updated FPR for red grouper will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) to complement material being used in the SEDAR 86 operational stock assessment and to inform future management.

**Advisory Panel members:**

Robert Lorenz, Chair (Recreational)	Selby Lewis* (Commercial)
James Paskiewicz, Vice Chair (Commercial)	Andrew Mahoney (Commercial)
Vincent Bonura (Commercial)	Randy McKinley (Commercial)
Scott Amick* (Charter)	Thomas Meeks* (Recreational)
Richen "Dick" Brame (NGO)	Chris Militello (Recreational)
Randall Beardsley* (Recreational)	Harry Morales (Recreational)
Tony Constant (Charter/Recreational)	David Moss (Recreational)
Jack Cox, Jr. (Commercial)	Paul Nelson (Commercial/Charter)
Andrew Fish (Commercial)	Andy Piland (Charter)
Robert Freeman (Charter)	Cameron Sebastian (Charter/Commercial)
Richard Gomez (Charter)	David Snyder* (Consumer Representative)
James Hull Jr. (Commercial/Dealer/Retail)	Todd Kellison (non-voting)
Chris Kimrey (Charter)	*not in attendance

***Fishery Overview***

Information on the red grouper fishery in the South Atlantic region is presented in a [Fishery Performance Report application](#) intended to provide an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history of the species, stock status, management overview, 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.

***Stock Observations***

Red Grouper is primarily a regional fishery mostly based in North Carolina. In North Carolina, AP members reported that Red Grouper are caught at depths of 80-100 ft. or 140-180 ft., and the sizes of harvested fish have been consistent in some areas. Generally fewer red grouper are being seen off North Carolina. Off Atlantic Beach, NC, the commercial fishery has observed a longer-term decline in recruitment.

Off South Carolina, red grouper have never been very prevalent, and not much change has been noticed by the headboat fishery. If caught, it is typically at 140 feet or deeper, but they've typically been more prominent further north.

Off the coast of Georgia, charter captains on the AP reported that Red Grouper are incidental catch and are not commonly seen.

For charter vessels off North Florida, red grouper are not a target species. However, fishermen are still seeing the fish and they can catch them in 140-180 ft. near the shelf edge. Size hasn't changed and has been consistent through time.

For commercial day boats working in waters off the Florida east coast, Red Grouper is more of an incidental catch. AP members reported that the availability has not changed in recent years. When commercial vessels were trip boats, they would catch a couple of boxes but because most vessels function as day boats, Red Grouper catch is only a small part of multi-species fishery. Other AP members agreed that Red Grouper is more incidental catch, and can be found on inshore reefs to the big ledge ranging from 7-20 lbs. Generally they do not see small ones like there are in the Gulf, but Red Grouper are available in waters around Volusia County (Daytona, Ormond Beach, Port Orange, Ponce Inlet). One AP member suggested that perhaps there is some "spillover" in the Florida Straits from fish in the Gulf.

In the Florida Keys, Red Grouper are found somewhat abundantly on the shallow end of the reef, especially in the Lower Keys. However, big fish are sometimes caught in the outer reef. In the Lower Keys, there seems to be no issue with abundance. The fish are more abundant when water temperatures are lower, however, but this coincides with the seasonal closure. Smaller fish are found in shallow reef waters. During the time of year when the commercial harvest is open, Red Grouper are in deeper water and not as accessible. Increased spearfishing may also be affecting the stock.

Other members stated that observations on abundance are very regional and should not be generalized. Fishermen off Florida have not seen a similar decline to some of the reports off North Carolina.

### ***Commercial Observations***

Red Grouper are usually not the primary target commercial species but are commonly caught on multi-species commercial trips. AP members reported that Scamp were the target species on many of these trips with incidental Red Grouper catch.

Commercial fishermen based out of Morehead City, NC, reported that Red Grouper has never been a primary species for them and they do not target Red Grouper. They can be caught in 140-180 ft. of water and are mixed in with triggerfish on the shelf edge.

Off North Carolina, the commercial fishery has changed since the 2020 extension of the annual red grouper closure to include May for waters off North Carolina and South Carolina. Previously, red grouper opened on May 1, similar to other shallow water groupers. A

commercial AP member from Topsail Beach, NC, commented seeing more fish under 20 inches recently, potentially indicative of some improvement in recruitment.

Demand for grouper in southern South Carolina (Beaufort) has decreased greatly and is now minimal due to lack of access. Other areas (e.g. Myrtle Beach) still have high demand for fresh grouper.

Off Cape Canaveral, FL, more red grouper observed in 2022 by commercial divers. Potentially impacted by Hurricane Ian and other Gulf of Mexico storms. Observations of more small lobster and undersized red grouper.

Off the east coast of Florida, Red Grouper is not a key commercial species. AP members noted that while there is a demand for grouper in general, there is not a lot of demand for Red Grouper specifically. The fish does not have a high yield compared to other species due to the large head and not a lot of meat. Restaurants do not prefer Red Grouper and commercial trips marketing to restaurants will try to sell any caught on a multi-species trip, but there is not consumer and restaurant demand.

In the Florida Keys, the ex-vessel price for Gulf Red Grouper can be up to \$6/lb but due to seasonal access issues for South Atlantic Red Grouper, the Keys fishermen cannot take advantage of this price. This is especially relevant now that Mexico has a closure as well and dealers in the Florida Keys can fetch up to \$10.99 per pound during that time. In general, when demand is high, the price can be \$5-10 per pound.

Mexico (the nation, not the Gulf of Mexico) has a conservation closure for red grouper in February and March. Implementation of this closure (which was extended from only February in 2016) can affect the availability of red grouper and price per pound of Gulf of Mexico red grouper caught during that time.

Some recent market prices for “grouper” fillets are \$35-38 per pound in Palm Beach, FL, and \$32 per pound in Wilmington, NC. Domestic red grouper sell for about \$7-\$9 per pound ex-vessel.

### ***Recreational Observations***

In the private recreational sector, Red Grouper have previously been reported (in the 2017 FPR) as a rare encounter. In 2012, Red Grouper were biting but not large, maybe 5-12 lbs. One AP member reported that older fishermen have observed a 7-9 year cycle of Red Grouper abundance, and this may be a period of lower availability. However, AP members observed that there have been less Red Grouper available overall in North Carolina waters since about 2008. In 2017, there were posts of Red Grouper on social media from the recreational sector in the Morehead City, NC, area.

In South Florida, recreational fishermen catch Red Grouper in about 60 feet of water and shallower. In 2017, one AP member reported that there is more targeting of Red Grouper in the spearfishing sector off the Florida east coast, possibly due to upcoming at the time, but now implemented, restrictions on hogfish. Popularity of Red Grouper for spearfishing has grown

because the fish can be found in shallow waters and are easy to shoot. There has also been an overall increase in the number of recreational boats on the Florida east coast and a significant increase in the popularity of spearfishing.

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

In 2017, an AP member commented that there has definitely been a decline in abundance since the 4-month (January-April) closure went in to place. He stated that because there was a delay in implementing the closure, fishermen off North Carolina (Cape Fear area) increased their effort on red grouper immediately prior to the closure. The AP member stated that he was able to harvest 900 pounds of red grouper in three days that winter.

AP members discussed the minimum size limit. Some AP members noted that the minimum size limit may not have any effect because of the depth, and that discard mortality may be high anyway. Contrary to a previous idea presented for Red Grouper in Florida Keys, the AP agreed in 2023 that Red Grouper seem just as likely to suffer barotrauma as any other bottom-dwelling species. Barotrauma effects can be reduced or reversed using Best Fishing Practices, including descending device. In the Florida Keys, barotrauma may be observed less due to shallower water catch depths, but the AP has no reason to believe that Red Grouper off the Keys would be less likely to suffer barotrauma effects if caught from deeper depths.

The seasonal closure is important to keep in place. AP members reported that the current management measures do not significantly limit their ability to catch and keep Red Grouper. In 2020, the closure was extended from January-April throughout the region to January-May for waters off North and South Carolina and January-April for waters off Georgia and Florida.

The AP discussed potential measures to rebuild the stock and improve spawning and recruitment, including a lower commercial trip limit and an increased minimum size limit. Protection of highly fecund, spawning females should be prioritized.

### ***Environmental/Ecological Observations***

Smaller Red Grouper are found in depths of 80-100 ft. in North Carolina. AP members noted that they may not be seeing as many older fish because they are getting taken as younger fish in shallower water. Observations from a commercial diver from North Carolina on the AP do indicate a decline in abundance of red grouper since the late 2000s (from about 2008-2009). This member used to see them in 80-110 ft.

In waters off Charleston, SC, Red Grouper can be found in low relief bottom (“porgy bottom”) and there would be a lot of fish in compacted areas. There may be an impact on availability due to habitat damage by use of roller trawls in the past. Since mid-1980s, it’s been a bycatch species in South Carolina.

In waters off the Florida east coast, smaller fish around 5-6 inches are sometimes caught in the estuaries. Red Grouper that are under 20 inches can be found in patches in shallow waters up and down the coast.

In winter off south Florida (Palm Beach south to the Keys), small red grouper are typically seen in inshore patches, at depths ranging 30-40 ft. Red grouper are also frequently observed in this area shortly after hurricanes, then will seemingly progress northward. In the weeks that follow storm events red grouper will be observed in nearshore areas further and further north, up the Florida coast.

In the Florida Keys, fewer small red grouper are being seen. This could be the result of recent high red snapper abundance (through predation or habitat competition) and fishing pressure that has been put on other, less available species.

AP members reported that the increasing abundance of lionfish (all areas) may be negatively affecting Red Grouper, along with the increase in the Goliath Grouper population in Florida. AP members maintain that Goliath Groupers prey extensively on red grouper (“probably their favorite fish to eat”).

The AP expressed concern about increasing coastal development and human population growth. Nearshore areas are especially important habitats for juvenile red grouper. Increased development of coastal areas has degraded estuarine habitats that many snapper grouper species use as nurseries. Despite reduced harvests of spawning fish via the January-April (now January-May for the Carolinas) spawning closure since 2009 (first affecting the 2010 fishing year), there doesn't seem to be an increase in shallow water groupers, including Red Grouper. Drastic environmental changes from coastal development may prevent grouper populations from ever getting back to historical higher levels.

### ***Research Recommendations***

Research recommendations from the 2017 FPR included life history studies (especially on inshore juveniles), effects of marine protected areas on local abundances, effects of lionfish populations on red grouper recruitment, and effects of potential increases in spearfishing effort. In 2023, the AP maintained its previous recommendations.

The AP also provided additional recommendations. The AP recommended investigation of potential benefits of vegetative aquaculture that could replenish vegetative structure and improve water quality in nearshore and estuarine juvenile habitats. The AP also recommended use of Citizen Science applications to improve data collected on spawning fish.