

SAFMC GAG ISSUE: SSC determined overfishing; NMFS determined not overfishing

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February 19, 2016

South Atlantic gag (*Mycteroperca microlepis*) were last assessed in 2013/14 with data through 2012, reviewed by the SSC in April 2014. SSC status recommendation was overfishing/not overfished, with F based on a 3-year average to address terminal uncertainty. This is the standard or 'consistent' approach used by the SSC. The F trajectory in terminal years was downward and it was consensus that management action (closure) in 2012 was instrumental in F being below Flimit in 2012. Nonetheless, the SSC believed the overfishing determination was appropriate after considering uncertainty.

NMFS position was that the acceptable F in 2012, projections showing F would be below Flimit in 2013 if landings were not exceeded and the record from 2012 showing landings could be effectively constrained, together justified a determination that overfishing was not occurring in 2012 and 2013. There was also concern expressed with SSC recommended OFL/ABC, which allowed increases in 2014 and beyond, given the overfishing determination.

SSC raised concerns, mainly since status is part of the ABC control rule uncertainty accounting, so changing status after an ABC recommendation is made could create inconsistencies. In the gag case, the ABC was retained despite the status change, leading some to feel it was just a shell game to avoid an overfishing determination, and a technically involved discussion of why ABC could increase for 2014 even though the status was overfishing in the assessment. The period to which a conclusion applies becomes critical.

Record:

SSC Review, April 2014

Stock Status: Not Overfished but Overfishing is occurring (-5.0%): After considering a plot of F/FMSY with confidence intervals from the MCB runs, the large amount of uncertainty in the values of F coupled with the fact that there is a higher degree of certainty that the F rates are not lower than they are, has caused the SSC to recommend using the geometric mean F over the last 3 years when determining stock status. However, the SSC wants to note that the regulatory closure in 2012 may have prevented overfishing from occurring. Also, FMSY is equivalent to the F that produces SPR of 57%, which may be considered very conservative.

From Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 22:

In 2006, the South Atlantic gag (*Mycteroperca microlepis*) stock was assessed through Southeast Data Assessment and Review (SEDAR) and found to be undergoing overfishing and approaching an overfished condition (SEDAR 10 2006). Measures to end overfishing were

contained in Amendment 16 to the Snapper Grouper FMP (SAFMC 2009a). The assessment was updated in 2014 including data through 2012, to provide new information on stock status and projections (SEDAR 10 Update 2014). The 2014 assessment indicated that the stock is undergoing overfishing based on the average fishing mortality rates from 2010-2012, but is not overfished. The South Atlantic Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) noted that the fishing mortality rate for 2012, and the projected fishing mortality rate in 2013 based on the actual landings, suggested that overfishing did not occur in 2012 and 2013 (SAFMC SSC report, April 2014).

A letter from NMFS to the South Atlantic Council Chairman dated September 8, 2014, stated that gag is neither overfished nor undergoing overfishing (attached).



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SEP 8 2014

F/SER25:JCM

Mr. Ben Hartig, Chairman
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201
North Charleston, South Carolina, 29405

Dear Mr. Hartig:

At their April 2014 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) reviewed recent stock assessments for South Atlantic gag grouper, snowy grouper, and wreckfish, and provided catch level recommendations for each species. At the June 2014 Council meeting, the chair of the SSC presented results of the gag grouper, snowy grouper, and wreckfish stock assessments, and provided catch level recommendations to the Council's Snapper-Grouper Committee. The Council accepted the SSC's catch level recommendations. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has made determinations on the overfished and overfishing status for gag grouper, snowy grouper, and wreckfish based upon review of the 2014 stock assessments of these species, review by the Council's SSC, and advice from the SSC chair.

For gag grouper, the SSC chair indicated that although the average fishing mortality during 2010-2012 was above F_{MSY} , fishing mortality in 2012 was below F_{MSY} . Furthermore, during the Snapper-Grouper Committee meeting, the chair of the SSC reviewed projections from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center that showed 2013 landings were below the current annual catch limit, and 2013 fishing mortality was less than F_{MSY} estimated from the recent stock assessment. The chair of the SSC stated "The best we can tell based on the way that we are projecting, given all the uncertainties that we know exists in projections, it looks like we're not going to be overfishing going into the future." Therefore, NMFS has determined based upon the best available scientific information from the stock assessment, review by the Council's SSC, and advice from the SSC chair, that South Atlantic gag grouper is not undergoing overfishing and is not overfished according to the current definition of the minimum stock size threshold. A final report for the stock assessment can be obtained from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center's Web site at: <http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/>.

For snowy grouper, the chair of the Council's SSC stated that "fishing mortality had been decreasing over time and then jumped up in that 2012 terminal year. Looking at the specific F streams there for the different fleets; it was apparent that recreational landings had caused that big jump." During the Snapper-Grouper Committee meeting, the chair of the SSC reviewed the total 2012 recreational snowy grouper landings, which showed there were 15,200 snowy grouper caught during one, two-month wave in Monroe County. In contrast, in 2013 there were 3,897 snowy grouper caught in the entire South Atlantic including Monroe County. The chair of the SSC agreed that "Examination of recreational data from the Marine Recreational Information Program revealed an elevated spike in one wave of landings that might be an effect of sampling rather than fishing effort." Therefore, NMFS has determined based upon the best available scientific information from the stock assessment, review by the Council's SSC, and advice from



the SSC chair that South Atlantic snowy grouper is not undergoing overfishing, but remains overfished according to the current definition of the minimum stock size threshold, and is rebuilding. A final report for the stock assessment can be obtained from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center's Web site at: <http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/>.

For wreckfish, the SSC review of the stock assessment indicated the stock is healthy. NMFS has determined based upon the best available scientific information from the stock assessment, review by the Council's SSC, and advice from the SSC chair that South Atlantic wreckfish is not undergoing overfishing and is not overfished according to the current definition of the minimum stock size threshold. A final report for the stock assessment can be at:

http://safmc.net/sites/default/files/meetings/pdf/SSC/SSC-042914/A12_Wreckfish_April2014_final.pdf.

Sincerely,



for Roy E. Crabtree, Ph.D.
Regional Administrator

cc: F/SER2 – Phil Steele
F/SEC – Bonnie Ponwith