

2022 Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Recreational Season Length Estimates
for the Federal For-Hire Component
National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), Southeast Regional Office

Introduction

Red snapper are managed in Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) federal waters from Texas to the west coast of Florida by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council). The recreational sector in the Gulf includes a private angling component and a Federal For-Hire component. The Federal For-Hire component includes charter vessels and headboats with a federal charter/headboat permit for reef fish, allowing these vessels to fish in federal waters. For-Hire vessels without a federal permit are restricted to fishing for red snapper in state waters only. The Gulf federal recreational fishing regulations for red snapper include a 16-inch total length minimum size limit, two-fish per person bag limit (no red snapper may be retained by the captain or crew of a vessel operating as a charter vessel or headboat), and a Federal For-Hire season beginning on June 1 and ending when the component annual catch target (ACT) is projected to be caught. The ACT is set below the component's annual catch limit (ACL) to account for management uncertainty.

Amendment 40 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico increased flexibility in managing red snapper landings and minimized the chance of recreational ACL overages by separating the recreational sector into two components. Prior to implementation of Amendment 40 in 2015, recreational management measures were applied to the recreational sector as a whole, without distinguishing between the private angling and Federal For-Hire components. Amendment 40 defined two distinct components of the recreational sector as 1) a private angling component that includes private anglers fishing from privately owned vessels, as well as operators of state-permitted for-hire vessels that do not have a federal permit, and 2) a Federal For-Hire component that includes operators of federally permitted For-Hire vessels. The amendment allocated the red snapper recreational ACL between the private angling (57.7%) and Federal For-Hire (42.3%) components.

Because the Federal For-Hire component had not exceeded its ACL, NMFS implemented a framework action in the beginning of 2019 that reduced the 20% buffer between the ACL and ACT to 9% percent for the 2019 fishing year. In February 2020, NMFS published a final rule to implement a subsequent framework action that retains the 9% buffer for 2020 and beyond.

In 2018 and 2019, NMFS issued exempted fishing permits to the Gulf States to allow them to test managing private anglers/state charters in state and federal waters. Subsequently, on February 6, 2020, NMFS implemented regulations to allow each Gulf state partial management of private angling/state charters for red snapper in federal waters. Each state agency sets its own private angling/state charter red snapper season in both state and federal waters off its state, monitors landings, and closes fishing when their ACL is reached. Each state also is able to set the private angling/state charter bag and size limits.

Although the states set seasons for the red snapper private angling/state charter component in state and federal waters, NMFS must still set a red snapper season throughout federal waters for the Federal For-Hire component. Prior to June 1 each year, NMFS projects the federal for-hire season closing date and notifies the public of the closing date for the upcoming season. If subsequent data indicate that the ACT has not been reached, NMFS may re-open the season. The purpose of this report is to project the 2022 recreational red snapper Federal For-Hire fishing season length, and to characterize the uncertainty of those projections.

The Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review 52 stock assessment (SEDAR 52) for Gulf red snapper was completed and reviewed by the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) in 2018. The assessment indicated the Gulf red snapper stock is not considered to be overfished or undergoing overfishing, but is still recovering consistent with the plan to rebuild the stock by 2032. The SSC determined that the stock assessment represented the best scientific information available and acknowledged the red snapper acceptable biological catch (ABC) could be increased. In a 2018 framework action, the Council selected the SSC’s constant catch ABC recommendation of 15.1 million pounds whole weight, which is equal to the total ACL. This framework action was implemented on March 5, 2019.

Analysis and Projections of the For-hire Component Season Length

The Federal For-Hire ACT and ACL for the 2022 fishing year are provided in **Table 1**. Federal For-Hire catch rates for each year were calculated by dividing the annual Federal For-Hire landings by the number of days the Federal For-Hire season was open. The Federal For-Hire season length has changed from each year and **Table 2** provides the number of days the Federal For-Hire season was open. Catch rates (pounds/day) are calculated for each state, and include recreational landings from Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, Southeast Region Headboat Survey, and Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Following SEDAR 52, the MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey recreational landings were used. Recreational landings from 2021 are preliminary, however, recreational landings for older years are final. Recreational landings from different years were averaged and used to predict future landings, and capture a range of potential Federal For-Hire season lengths. **Table 3** provides the catch rates for each state from 2017 to 2021 and three different average generated from specific years.

Table 1. The 2022 Gulf Federal For-Hire component red snapper ACL and ACT in pounds whole weight.

Management Target	Landings (pounds whole weight)
ACL	3,130,000
ACT	2,848,000

Table 2. Federal For-Hire season length in days for the last five years (2017 to 2021).

Year	Days the Federal For-Hire Season was Open
2017	49
2018	51
2019	62
2020	63
2021	87

Table 3. Federal For-Hire catch rates (pounds/day) from the last five years (2017 to 2021) for each state and three different averages of these landings. The averages are 2017 through 2019, 2017 through 2021, and 2019 through 2021. Catch rates were calculated by dividing the annual Federal For-Hire landings by the number of days the Federal For-Hire season was open.

Year(s)	TX	LA	MS	AL	West FL	Total
2017	7,455	3,658	607	16,532	19,501	47,753
2018	8,201	3,088	162	14,324	22,100	47,875
2019	7,597	1,827	667	12,135	19,045	41,271
2020	6,766	1,379	352	9,754	18,410	36,661
2021	7,589	1,343	124	5,405	16,020	30,481
Average 2017-2019	7,751	2,858	478	14,330	20,215	45,632
Average 2017-2021	7,522	2,259	382	11,630	19,015	40,808
Average 2019-2021	7,317	1,516	381	9,098	17,825	36,138

*Source: Southeast Fisheries Science Center's Recreational ACL Database [March 17, 2022]. 2021 landings are preliminary.

Season length projections were determined by cumulatively summing the total catch rates until the ACT was projected to be met. Season lengths were projected using Federal For-Hire catch rates from the three averages of 1) 2017-2019, 2) 2017-2021, and 3) 2019-2021. The projected Federal For-Hire season length ranged from 62 days using average data from 2017-2019 to 79 days using average data from 2019-2021 (**Table 4**).

Table 4. Projections of season lengths to reach the Federal For-Hire component ACT (pounds whole weight) using catch rates (pounds/day) for three different averages. These calculations used catch rates from all of the Gulf States.

Years	Catch Rate	ACT	Number of Fishing Days
Average 2017-2019	45,632	2,848,000	62
Average 2017-2021	40,808	2,848,000	70
Average 2019-2021	36,138	2,848,000	79

Source: Southeast Fisheries Science Center's Recreational ACL Database [March 17, 2022]. 2021 landings are preliminary.