2024 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-fire 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, a 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 (Amendment 40) 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 the 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-fire 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, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) implemented a framework action at 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 retained 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 2024 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 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 July 2023, a framework action set the federal for-hire ACL to 3,380,574 pounds whole weight (lbs ww) and the ACT to 3,076,322 lbs ww.

Analysis and Projections of the For-hire Component Season Length

The current federal for-hire ACL and ACT 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 the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, NMFS Southeast Region Headboat Survey, and the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Following SEDAR 52, the MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey recreational landings were used instead of the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey recreational landings. Recreational landings were provided from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center on April 29, 2024, and are final through 2023. 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 2019 to 2023 and three different averages generated from specific years.

Table 1. The 2023 Gulf federal for-hire component red snapper ACL and ACT in pounds whole weight.

Management Target	Landings (pounds whole weight)
ACL	3,380,574
ACT	3,076,322

Table 2. Federal for-hire season length in days for the last five years (2019 to 2023).

Year	Days the Federal For-Hire Season was Open
2019	62
2020	63
2021	87
2022	79
2023	85

Table 3. Federal for-hire catch rates (pounds/day) from the last five years (2019 to 2023) for each state and three different averages of these landings. The averages are for 2019 through 2021, 2019 through 2023, and 2021 through 2023. 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
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
2022	6,023	950	97	7,700	21,140	35,910
2023	5,274	1,995	299	8,879	18,608	35,056
Average 2019-2021	7,317	1,516	381	9,098	17,825	36,138
Average 2019-2023	6,650	1,499	308	8,775	18,645	35,876
Average 2021-2023	6,295	1,429	173	7,328	18,589	33,816

*Source: Southeast Fisheries Science Center's Recreational ACL Dataset [April 29, 2024].

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 for 1) 2019-2021, 2) 2019-2023, and 3) 2021-2023, and also a prediction was done using only 2023 landings. The projected federal for-hire season length for the ACT ranged from 85 days using average data from 2019-2021 to 91 days using average data from 2021-2023 (**Table 4**).

Table 4. Projections of season lengths to reach the federal for-hire component ACT (lbs ww) using catch rates (pounds/day) for three different averages, and only the 2023 landings. These calculations used catch rates from all of the Gulf states.

Years	Catch Rate	ACT	Number of Fishing Days
Average 2019-2021	36,138	3,076,322	85
Average 2019-2023	35,876	3,076,322	86
Average 2021-2023	33,816	3,076,322	91
2023 Landings	35,056	3,076,322	88

Source: Southeast Fisheries Science Center's Recreational ACL Dataset [April 29, 2024].