

2020 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, 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 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 proposed to increase flexibility in managing red snapper landings and minimize 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.

On February 6, 2020, NMFS implemented regulations to allow each Gulf state partial management of private angling for red snapper in federal waters. Each state agency will set its own private angling red snapper season in both state and federal waters off its state, monitor landings, and close fishing when their quota is reached. Each state will also set the private angling bag and size limits. Although the states will set seasons for the red snapper private angling 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 2020 recreational red snapper federal for-hire fishing season length, and to characterize the uncertainty of those projections.

The Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 52 stock assessment 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 (mp) whole weight (ww), 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 ACT for the 2020 fishing year, which will be effective on March 23, 2020, is the same as the ACT for the 2019 fishing year. Both the ACL and ACT (in pounds whole weight [lbs ww]) are provided in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The 2020 Gulf for-hire component red snapper ACL and ACT in pounds whole weight.

Management Target	Landings (lbs ww)
ACL	3,130,000
ACT	2,848,000

Federal for-hire catch rates were calculated by dividing the annual for-hire landings by the number of days the federal for-hire season was open. Catch rates (lbs/day) are calculated for each state. Federal for-hire catch rates for the previous three years have remained fairly consistent, but there was a decline in 2019 (**Table 2**). Hurricane Barry occurred during July 2019, potentially causing the reduction in catch rates seen in Louisiana and Alabama in the 2019 for-hire season when compared to previous years. Other reasons, such as a reduction in effort compression, could be causing the lower 2019 daily catch rates observed.

Table 2. Federal for-hire catch rates (lbs/day) from the last three years for each state and the total for all states. Catch rates were calculated by dividing the annual for-hire federal landings by the number of days the federal for-hire season was open.

Year(s)	AL	FL	LA	MS	TX	Total
2019	12,498	20,038	2,070	542	7,602	42,751
2018	15,177	22,100	3,088	162	8,233	48,759
2017	16,386	18,047	3,658	829	7,458	46,379
Average 2018-19	13,837	21,069	2,579	352	7,917	45,755
Average 2017-19	14,687	20,062	2,939	511	7,764	45,963

Source: MRIP SEFSC Recreational ACL Database [January 2, 2020]. 2019 landings are preliminary.

Season length projections were determined by cumulatively summing the state-specific catch rates until the ACT was projected to be met. Season lengths were projected using federal for-hire catch rates from the past year, past two years, and past three years. The projected for-hire season length was 67 days using 2019 data and 62 days in the other two scenarios (**Table 3**). Since the reason for the decline in 2019 catch rates is not definitively known, caution should be used when projecting the season length with only 2019 data.

Table 3. Projections of season lengths to reach the federal for-hire component ACT (lbs ww) using catch rates (lbs/day) from the previous year (2019) or an average of either the last two or three years. These calculations used catch rates from all of the Gulf States.

Year(s)	Catch Rate	ACT	Number of Fishing Days
2019	42,751	2,848,000	67
Average 2018-19	45,755	2,848,000	62
Average 2017-19	45,963	2,848,000	62

Source: MRIP SEFSC Recreational ACL Database [January 2, 2020]. 2019 landings are preliminary.