

2019 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 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.

In 2018, each Gulf state submitted an Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) application that would allow that state to set the private angler season for red snapper recreationally caught and landed from state and federal waters during 2018 and 2019. The purpose of the EFPs is to allow states to demonstrate the effectiveness of state management of recreationally caught red snapper and data collection methods through a 2-year pilot program. NMFS approved the EFPs and issued them to the states on April 16, 2018.

Although the EFPs allow the states to 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 2019 recreational red snapper federal for-hire fishing season length, and to characterize the uncertainty of those projections.

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 overruns. 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 has not exceeded its ACL or ACT in recent years, the Council approved a framework action in 2018 that would reduce the federal for-hire component buffer between the ACL and ACT to 9% from 20% for 2019. The framework action used the Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule to determine the 9% buffer. The reduction in the

buffer between the ACL and ACT for the federal for-hire component is only proposed to be in effect for 2019 because of temporary changes in how the private angling component is managed.

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, acknowledged the red snapper acceptable biological catch (ABC) could be increased, and recommended two different options to the Council for ABC: a declining yield stream and a constant catch scenario. The Council selected the constant catch scenario and used the SSC's overfishing limit (OFL) and ABC recommendations of 15.5 million pounds (mp) whole weight (ww) and 15.1 mp ww, respectively. The ACL changes were specified by the Council in 2018 through a second framework action.

Analysis and Projections of the For-hire Component Season Length

The new ACLs and ACTs resulting from the Council's two 2018 framework actions are expected to be implemented before the 2019 fishing season. Therefore, the analysis and projections for the federal for-hire component red snapper season length are based on the proposed ACT. Both the ACL and ACT (in pounds whole weight [lbs ww]) are provided in **Table 1**.

Table 1. The 2019 Gulf proposed 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 (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Federal for-hire sector 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
2018	13,641	21,313	3,088	185	7,850	46,077
2017	16,386	18,047	3,658	829	7,458	46,379
2016	16,464	17,883	3,904	407	7,791	46,449
Average 2017-18	15,014	19,680	3,373	507	7,654	46,228
Average 2016-18	15,497	19,081	3,550	474	7,700	46,302

Source: MRIP SEFSC Recreational ACL Database [February 15, 2019]. 2018 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 62 days in all three scenarios (**Table 3**).

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 (2018) 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 Days
2018	46,077	2,848,000	62
Average 2017-18	46,228	2,848,000	62
Average 2016-18	46,302	2,848,000	62

Source: MRIP SEFSC Recreational ACL Database [February 15, 2019]. 2018 landings are preliminary.