

Second SEDAR

Minority Report

on the assessments of Vermilion Snapper and
Black Sea Bass from the south east of the U.S.

Respectfully Submitted by Review Panelists:

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April 15, 2003

Conclusion

The Consensus Assessment Report indicates that the data provided for these assessments was not sufficient for a thorough review. The Review Panel could not determine whether samples were representative of the fishery and could not determine if the sampling designs were adequate. Here we agree. However, we also believe that the assessments fail to consider the best available (commercial logbook) data and lead us to disagree with the Review Panel conclusion that the data are appropriate and adequate for the assessment.

General

We were asked to participate in this process as commercial fishermen who are familiar with these fisheries and who have been intimately involved with the Council process as a former member of the Council and as the current chairman of the snapper-grouper AP. We feel it was our responsibility on the Review Panel to provide our knowledge on the status of these stocks and help to corroborate the findings of the assessments. While we hope that we contributed something to the process with our knowledge of the fisheries, we can not agree with the findings.

The Review Panel concluded that these assessments are based on the best available data, and even though there was much discussion on the uncertainty in the data and the model, they are adequate for an assessment. We strongly disagree with these findings. The uncertainty in the data that is well documented in the Reports render these assessments unusable for management purposes. The Review Panel agreed that a tremendous amount of information was needed to better assess these stocks and suggested that future assessments deal with the data problems. How long will it take to generate a meaningful index of abundance? When will we collect information on the commercial fishery in terms of effort indexes, age data, length data? What money is available to increase sampling intensity and research historical landings information?

Vermilion snapper

There was concern expressed over the estimates of the MSY benchmarks for vermilion snapper and much of the data used in the assessment. We are very concerned with the MARMAP and headboat abundance indexes that fail to sample the offshore areas when and where a large portion of the fishery takes place. This is especially concerning in regard to the headboat index that the Review Panel believes is very influential in the assessment.

The assessment fails to use an available data set that commercial, snapper-grouper permit holders have generated for the past 10-12 years. If the logbook data can not be used, the requirement to submit that information should be lifted.

Black Sea Bass

Many concerns have been expressed over the black sea bass data. A study that was used in the data workshop and assessment (McGovern et al. 2002) states that "slight increases in the mean length and catch per unit effort, as well as a decrease in fishing mortality during the 1990s, suggested that the condition of the black sea bass stock had improved, probably due to management actions". This makes sense with the restrictions that have been placed on the fishery since the original FMP in 1983. However, the SEDAR assessment suggests that fishing mortality has continued to increase in spite of management actions.

The use of the MARMAP survey index data as an indicator of abundance for this fishery is a problem. The length frequencies of the black sea bass collected by MARMAP compared with those taken by the commercial fishery show that one is not reflective of the other. One reason for these differences is the inability of the MARMAP survey to sample in the shallower water where the commercial black sea bass fishery operates. We also have concerns with when the MARMAP survey takes place (May through September) versus when the major black sea bass fishery operates (October through April). Additional concerns may have merit over the observation that the MARMAP traps are highly selective towards small fish.

We agree with McGovern et al. (2002), at least for Black Sea Bass, that contrary to the assessment findings, they have likely responded to management measures and are not in the condition suggested in this assessment. Like red porgy, the assessment results contradict what we see and hear on the water as professional fishermen and Council advisors. Both of the SEDAR documents have recommended many research needs. Most, if not all, of these needs are critical to properly assess these stocks but are acknowledged as lacking by their inclusion on this list. How then do we conclude that the current data, with these critical pieces missing, are adequate for an assessment, especially for management purposes? We can't.