



February 18, 2022

Mr. Peter Hood
Branch Chief
NMFS Southeast Regional Office
263 13th Avenue South
St. Petersburg, FL 33701

RE: NOAA-NMFS-2021-0098
Submitted Electronically via Regulations.gov

Dear Mr. Hood:

On January 19th, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) published in the *Federal Register* a request for comments on a proposed rule to, “implement management measures described in Amendment 53 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf)(FMP), as prepared by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council.”¹ The proposed rule reallocates the division of the Gulf’s red grouper catch shared between the commercial and recreational fishing sectors from 76% and 24%, respectively, to 59.3% and 40.7%, as well as making changes to the annual catch limits (ACL) and annual catch targets (ACT). FMI appreciates the opportunity to be heard on this proposed change and urges the NMFS to reconsider these new allocations.

As the food industry association, FMI works with and on behalf of the entire industry to advance a safer, healthier, and more efficient consumer food supply chain. FMI brings together a wide range of members across the value chain — from retailers that sell to consumers, to producers that supply food and other products, as well as the wide variety of companies providing critical services to retailers, wholesalers, and suppliers — to amplify the collective work of the industry. Additional information about our organization is available at www.FMI.org.

Red grouper is a high-quality protein that faces strong consumer demand under the set of allocations currently prescribed by the Fisheries Management Council. FMI’s members are concerned that the proposed changes to the division of the annual catch will tighten the retail supply of this fish, making it less accessible and more expensive for many shoppers. Since most Americans do not have the means or geographic proximity to the Gulf to participate in recreational fishing, tighter supply and higher prices could limit their ability to include red grouper as part of their diet.

¹ Available at <https://www.regulations.gov/document/NOAA-NMFS-2021-0098-0037>.

One of the changes in Americans' eating patterns brought on by COVID-19 and tightened access to the restaurant and foodservice sector has been massive growth in the consumption of fish and seafood at home. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, retail sales of seafood grew by 28.4%, faster than almost any other section of the supermarket.² Premium, high-value species like red grouper have played an important role in this growth with many shoppers demonstrating a new willingness to prepare these fish at home in a quest for both variety and healthy eating options. In fact, almost 40% of shoppers reported that they purchased premium fish species at least monthly in 2020.³ The fact that red grouper found in grocery stores is produced in the United States is also part of its appeal for many consumers.

The proposed change in allocation to shift more of the annual catch of red grouper into the recreational sector threatens to slow this growth and make it harder for consumers to access this product, especially if they do not live in the Gulf region. Red grouper is always in high demand at both the retail and restaurant level and tightening the supply available to these sectors will mean lower availability and higher prices for a fish that already commands a premium.

FMI respects the role recreational fishing plays as an economic driver in many communities and in our industry; it is a rare fisherman who doesn't preface their time on the water with a visit to the store for snacks, sandwiches, and beverages. The proposed reallocation of the red grouper catch, however, shifts too much of the available supply away from the commercial sector and threatens to impose economic challenges on commercial fishermen, processors, retailers, and consumers. We urge the NMFS to reconsider these changes to the allocation and consult with the impacted communities to establish a more balanced baseline.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,



Andrew S Harig
Vice President – Tax, Trade, Sustainability & Policy Development

² FMI, *The Power of Seafood 2021*.

³ *Ibid.*