

**Reef Fish Committee Report
June 3, 2025
Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) and the minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the April 2025 meeting were approved as written.

Discussion of 2025 Recreational Gag Grouper Fishing Season (Tab B, No. 4)

Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff reviewed the landings from the 2024 gag grouper recreational fishing season, which resulted in an annual catch limit (ACL) overage of 88,991 lb gw. This results in a reduced 2025 recreational ACL of 310,009 lb gw, and an annual catch target (ACT) of 230,009 lb gw, with a projected season duration of 14 days based on the 2024 estimated fishing effort, or 20 days based on the average of 2023 and 2024. SERO is still reviewing these data and will announce the 2025 recreational gag fishing season duration as soon as possible. A Committee member asked whether SERO had made any progress on the Council’s emergency rule request to reduce the gag recreational bag limit to 1 fish per person per day for 2025. SERO replied that they had prioritized the red grouper emergency rule and were still reviewing the gag emergency rule request.

FINAL ACTION: Framework Action: Other Shallow-water Grouper Catch Limits (Tab B, No. 5)

Council staff reviewed written public comments received regarding proposed management changes in the draft framework action. Following a Committee member’s question, Council staff will try to gather analytics from pushing public comment noticing through the Fish Rules regulations app by full Council.

Council staff reviewed the actions and current preferred alternatives with the Committee. A Committee member noted the proposed catch limit reductions for the Other Shallow-water Grouper (SWG) complex, and since these reductions stem from proposed reductions for scamp and yellowmouth grouper, asked about the feasibility of the concurrent reduction in the recreational fishing season being applied only to scamp and yellowmouth grouper and not to black grouper and yellowfin grouper. Council staff replied that the complex would need to be divided and managed separately in that way, as is proposed in Reef Fish Amendment 58A. This framework action is intended to be a stop-gap measure until Reef Fish Amendment 58A can be completed and implemented. NOAA General Counsel asked that Council staff update the document with the history of the catch level recommendations from the Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee. SERO staff reviewed the proposed changes to the codified text.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to approve the Framework Action: Other Shallow-water Grouper Complex Management Measures and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation, and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make**

the necessary changes to the document. The Council Chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate.

Motion carried without opposition.

A Committee member reiterated a sentiment of opposition to closing black grouper as a result of this document. Council staff noted that an option to modify the recreational fishing seasons in Reef Fish Amendment 58A will be discussed later.

Summary: May 2025 Gulf SSC Meeting (Tab B, No. 6)

Dr. Allen reviewed the agenda items from the May 8, 2025, SSC meeting associated with shrimp. He noted that there was a request to Council staff for the SSC to further discuss the shrimp bycatch estimation methodology for finfish species at a future meeting. A Committee member noted that a SERO request would be forthcoming for an agenda item on shrimp bycatch of protected resources during the August 2025 Council meeting. Following a question by Council staff, a Committee member from Florida said that it was uncertain at this time if a joint effort by the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils would be needed for smalltooth sawfish.

Discussion on Executive Orders Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness (Tab B, No. 7)

Council staff provided an overview of the Executive Orders (E.O.) ‘Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness’ (E.O. 14276) and ‘Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation’ (E.O. 14192) and reviewed the NOAA Assistant Administrator’s request for each Regional Management Council to provide a prioritized list of recommended actions to reduce regulatory burdens on domestic fishing and increase production, which has a deadline of September 30, 2025. Staff outlined a plan to gather input for prospective actions from the Council’s advisory panels and the public prior to further discussion of the E.O.s at the August 2025 Council meeting. The Committee discussed the need for further clarification on regulatory, deregulatory, and routine Council actions. The Committee also discussed the need to streamline management to align with reductions in capacity for stock assessments and data collection, which would reduce regulatory burdens. A Committee member mentioned that although the E.O.s appear to be aimed toward commercial fisheries, they apply to both commercial and recreational sectors unless otherwise specified, per the May 2025 Council Coordination Committee meeting.

The Committee provided the following initial list of recommended actions for further discussion and prioritization:

- Remove low priority species from fishery management units (e.g., cubera snapper, species in the jacks complex other than greater amberjack, species in the midwater snapper complex other than queen snapper, and spiny lobster)
- Multi-year ACLs and accountability measures
- Carryover options for unharvested quota

- Allowing shark harvest to alleviate depredation
- Streamlining stock assessments
- Revisiting the shark fin ban
- Commercial and for-hire requirements for turtle gear
- Crew size limits on dual permitted vessels
- Reporting requirements when not fishing
- Allowing red snapper quota to move between states with a gulf-wide quota
- Commercial weight estimate requirement prior to landing fish
- Marine mammal deterrents
- Regional management
- Sector separation
- Ability to land species that experience depredation

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 58A: Shallow-water Grouper Complex Management Considerations (Tab B, No. 8)

Dr. Allen reviewed the Council’s motion for the SSC to review projections for $F_{30\%SPR}$ and $F_{40\%SPR}$ for scamp and yellowmouth grouper. The SSC made two motions for 2027-2031: one for the resulting OFL and ABC at $F_{40\%SPR}$ and recommending it for management; and another recognizing the resulting OFL and ABC with $F_{30\%SPR}$ and not recommending it for management.

A Committee member inquired if Alternative 2 in Action 2 is viable, given the SSC’s motion at its May 2025 meeting. Another Committee member recommended getting legal advice on the viability of Alternative 2 and using a MSY proxy not supported by the SSC as not being consistent with the best scientific information available, and whether the alternative should be removed. Council staff noted that the catch limits recommended by the SSC were informed by the 54% reduction in landings assumed to take place in 2026 under the Other SWG Framework Action and based on $F_{Rebuild}$ as estimated in the updated scamp and yellowmouth grouper projections reviewed by the SSC. These updated projections were made at $F_{Rebuild}$ because continued higher than sustainable harvest of scamp and yellowmouth grouper has continued since the terminal year of the stock assessment, which is estimated to have drawn the complex’s biomass to continually lower levels. A Committee member inquired if the new status determination criteria (SDC) would translate to a status of overfishing for the proposed scamp complex. NOAA General Counsel responded that the proposed catch limits account for that.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to recommend the Council accept the SSC’s recommendations as it relates to catch limits based on the MSY proxy based on $F_{40\%SPR}$ for scamp and yellowmouth grouper.**

Motion carried without opposition.

A Committee member inquired if a phased-in approach for a shift in allocation over time is feasible. SERO staff responded that a record would need to be built for justification, but that it

was feasible. Another Committee member noted that Alternatives 2 and 3 in Action 4 shift a large fraction of allocation from the commercial sector to the recreational sector and encouraged stakeholders to speak during Public Testimony as to this shift. The Committee member also inquired if other alternatives could be considered, which would inform an allocation change using a longer time period.

A Committee member recommended removing the commercial sector's 4% ACL/ACT buffer for the proposed scamp complex and black grouper complex, since the flexibility measures between Other SWG and DWG would no longer exist. The Committee discussed the Reef Fish Advisory Panel's motion from its December 2024 meeting to consider a 14% ACL/ACT buffer for the recreational sector. A Committee member suggested having separate actions for the ACL/ACT buffers for the recreational and commercial sectors.

A Committee member inquired how removal of the flexibility measures would impact the commercial sector and requested input from the commercial sector during Public Testimony. Another Committee member thought landings of speckled hind through flexibility measures were driven by allocation prices. SERO staff noted, in 2023 and 2024, that roughly 71% of speckled hind landings (about 24,000 lb gw) were landed under Other SWG.

Council staff noted that alternatives in Action 7 could consider different fishing seasons for the scamp complex and the black grouper complex. Based on discussions during the Other SWG Framework Action, Council staff stated that no closure for the black grouper complex would be considered, along with the start date within the preferred alternative from the Other SWG Framework Action for the scamp complex. A Committee member recommended reviewing projected season durations for scamp and yellowmouth grouper based on the proposed catch limits when the Council reviews the next draft of the document.

Public Hearing Draft – Reef Fish Amendment 58B: Modifications to Deep-water Grouper Management Measures (Tab B, No. 9)

Council staff reviewed the actions and alternatives in the draft document, paying specific attention to the Council's current preferred alternatives. Council staff noted that language would be added in the next draft which would clarify that the current 4% buffer between the commercial ACL and commercial quota, which is in place to facilitate the flexibility measures present between the SWG and DWG complexes, would cease to exist if those flexibility measures are not carried forward in Reef Fish Amendment 58A. A Committee member recalled a more generic definition for maximum sustainable yield (MSY) proxies, using the language of, "or a more reasonable alternative that is consistent with National Standard 2." The Committee member thought that such a definition would remain in compliance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, while offering flexibility to future modifications of the MSY proxy, should they occur. The Committee thought it best to consider such a modification in a generic amendment, since it would also be applicable to species in other Council-managed fishery management plans. Committee members considered allocation options in Action 2 and discussed how the fisheries for DWG have changed with time.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 2, to make Alternative 3 the preferred alternative.**

Alternative 3: The DWG complex ACL is set equal to the DWG complex ABC. Establish a recreational ACL and sector allocation based on the average recreational landings from the most recent 5 years (2019 – 2023). This results in a recreational ACL of 56,649 lb gw, or approximately 10.21% of the complex ACL. The commercial sector is allocated approximately 89.79% of the complex ACL, or 498,377 lb gw. The commercial quota is reduced from the commercial ACL by 4% and is set at 478,441 lb gw. The recreational and commercial ACLs sum to equal the DWG complex ACL.

Year	OFL	ABC (Complex ACL)	Comm ACL	Comm Quota	Rec ACL
2025- 2029+	731,035	555,026	498,377	478,441	56,649

Motion carried 10-2, with 4 abstentions and 1 absent.

Discussion: Red Grouper Documents (Tab B, No. 10)

Red Grouper Updated Projections

Dr. Allen reviewed the updated 2025-2027 catch projections for Gulf red grouper. The SSC-recommended OFL was 10.64 million pounds gutted weight (mp gw), and the ABC was 8.28 mp gw. The SSC also recommended annual interim analyses to monitor the health of the stock. The Committee discussed the life-history of red grouper and how differences in the biology of the stock may determine catch limits. SERO staff noted that the Council has the latitude to set the ACL below the ABC to the degree to which the Council thinks it appropriate to account for management or other uncertainty, and application of a stepped buffer over time could be considered if desired. The Committee discussed some of the SSC dialogue regarding the effect of large increases in commercial quota in an IFQ program. The Committee also noted the possible effects of ex-vessel prices, and the timing of when the increase might take effect (i.e., mid-year versus at the beginning of the year).

Red Grouper Emergency Rule Update

SERO staff recounted the requested emergency rule for red grouper for the 2025 fishing year, which will affect the commercial and recreational sectors. The emergency rule is currently anticipated to take effect on July 2, 2025. Based on the projected catch limit increase from the SSC’s updated OFL and ABC recommendations and setting the recreational ACT at 90% of the recreational ACL, no closure of the recreational red grouper fishery is anticipated in 2025. This projection is pending implementation of the emergency rule.

Proposed Red Grouper Management Modifications

Council staff presented draft options for modifications to red grouper management following the SEDAR 88 stock assessment, which staff intend to develop into a document for the August 2025

Council meeting. The first proposed action would modify sector allocations and catch limits from those previously set in Reef Fish Amendment 53. This would follow updated catch advice, which uses the State of Florida's State Reef Fish Survey landings data for private vessels; the current management criteria use data informed by the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey. Proposed alternatives follow those previously considered in Reef Fish Amendment 53, and generally, resulted in sector allocations of about 67 – 68% commercial and 32 – 33% recreational, regardless of time series used to inform the allocation option. The second proposed action would reconsider the current recreational shallow-water grouper closure in February and March, which the Reef Fish AP has recommended be removed. Another proposed action could consider recreational fishing seasons as appropriate. Council staff suggested a draft timeline for document development that would see the Council consider final action in January 2026. Given the broader scope of scientific uncertainty, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center indicated that the current projections were suitable across allocation alternatives. While the OFL and ABC projections would change based on different allocation options, the differences are estimated to be minimal and within the range of management error. As such, and contrary to prior similar management changes, the SSC will not be asked to provide OFL and ABC recommendations for each allocation scenario.

Other Business

No other business was brought before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.