Reef Fish Committee Report
November 5, 2024
Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair

The Committee adopted the agenda **(Tab B, No. 1)** and the minutes **(Tab B, No. 2)** from the August 2024 meeting were approved as written.

Review of Reef Fish and Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Program Landings, and State Program Landings for Red Snapper (Tab B, Nos. 4a - f)

Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff reviewed the status of reef fish and IFQ program landings relative to catch limits. Recreational data were available through Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) wave 3 (May-June) and wave 4 (July-August), depending on the species. SERO indicated that they are considering a reopening for the for-hire component for red snapper, which has caught just over 70% of its ACL in 2024. A Committee member asked about the significant overage in recreational greater amberjack landings in 2024. SERO noted the accountability measures (AMs), which normally require a payback if greater amberjack is overfished, were not immediately implemented because of logistical difficulties experienced by the SERO office staff during two back-to-back hurricanes. SERO acknowledged that the 2024-2025 season opening had passed, and whether to apply any payback in the following fishing year would be based on landings from the current fishing year. SERO added that the 2025 red grouper recreational fishing season will be projected based on 2024 landings, and that the transition of red grouper catch limits to Florida's State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) was pending the review of the recent stock assessment. A Committee member asked about the availability of the 2024 recreational gag landings. SERO and the State of Florida concurred that the data would be available for the January 2025 Council meeting.

Council representatives from the five Gulf States also reviewed their 2024 private angling fishing seasons for red snapper and offered projections for the rest of the 2024 fishing season as appropriate and characterized available data for observed mean lengths and weights. The Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) asked about any hypotheses for why private vessel landings in Florida were so much lower through August 2024 compared to past years. Florida replied that while longer fishing season durations reduce the race to fish, they are looking into it. Louisiana noted an overage of its ACL, which will be paid back in the 2025 fishing year. A Committee member noted that with the exception of Texas, the average weights of red snapper have declined across the Gulf, expressed concern about this trend, and thought there were potential negative repercussions if this trend continues. Another Committee member wondered if fuel and other costs are keeping anglers close to shore and whether that behavior was influencing the observed trends. SERO recalled a request from the commercial sector to not increase their ACL a couple years ago, and this year, the for-hire component did not land its ACL during its initially forecasted fishing season.

Draft: Reef Fish Amendment 58B: Modifications to Deep-water Grouper Management Measures (Tab B, Nos. 5a and b)

Council staff presented updated management alternatives for modifying the deep-water grouper (DWG) complex, in light of recent stock assessment advice. Management alternatives for DWG include specifying status determination criteria, catch limits, sector allocations, and AMs. DWG catch limits were updated by the SSC following its review of the SEDAR 85 stock assessment for yellowedge grouper which, along with snowy grouper, warsaw grouper, and speckled hind, is a component of the DWG complex. The Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommended managing these four DWG species together because of the use of similar data units and to reduce dead discards.

A Committee member asked about the uncertainty around recreational landings estimates. Staff replied that the proportional standard error (PSE) estimates for the DWG species were generally over 50%. Another Committee member asked about using multi-year ACLs for data poor species, and asked why an option for that was not presented. Staff replied that even under a multi-year ACL, catch limits would still need to be specified for each year, and AMs would need to be applied based on annual fishery performance.

SERO expressed concern about applying the AMs while chasing sampling error in the recreational landings. An alternative might be to create a recreational fishing season for DWG, which could reduce fishing mortality despite sampling uncertainty. A Committee member thought that a recreational season would not be without concerns and identified specifically a concern about discard mortality. Another Committee member asked whether it was possible to set the OFL for DWG at one proxy for MSY, like $F_{30\%SPR}$, and the ABC at another, like $F_{40\%SPR}$. Staff replied that it is the combination of the change to a more scientifically robust MSY proxy, increasing recreational harvest in recent years, declining recruitment, and the overfishing status of the yellowedge grouper stock that have all led to the reduction in the DWG catch limits. While changing the MSY proxy is a driver of the proposed reduction, it is not the only factor. The SEFSC echoed that the proposed MSY proxy of $F_{40\%SPR}$ is consistent with the best scientific information available, and likely would have been used during the first yellowedge grouper assessment (SEDAR 22, 2011) had the life history data and analyses available today been available then.

The Committee expressed concern about setting catch limits and applying AMs based on landings data which, for the recreational sector, are highly uncertain. Staff said that an option could be to use additional buffers, but it would be at the expense of overall harvest. A Committee member asked whether the lack of an established sector allocation for DWG would lead the Council to have to go against its motion to not use MRIP-FES data to change sector allocations. NOAA General Counsel stated that there is an existing allocation even though there is no recreational catch limit. When the current management regime was established, there was no concern for overfishing, which is now estimated to be occurring for yellowedge grouper. If the Council decided not to change anything, the Council would need to justify why that decision would not continue to lead to overfishing. The Committee discussed the buffer between the DWG complex OFL and ABC, and asked if it was possible to reduce that buffer. Staff replied

that the OFL and ABC are legally binding recommendations set by the SSC, and that the Council would need to request that the SSC reconsider that buffer. Some Committee members were skeptical that there would be justification, based on the data, to reduce that buffer.

The Committee discussed Action 2, and favored removing Alternative 4, and replacing it with an alternative which would apply a proportional reduction in landings to both sectors.

> The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, **to move Alternative 4 to the Considered but Rejected Appendix.**
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> **Alternative 4:** The complex ACL is set equal to the complex ABC. Establish a recreational ACL and sector allocation based on the average of the highest (2014) and lowest (2000) annual recorded recreational landings from 2000 – 2023 (see Table 1.1.2.). This results in a recreational ACL of 83,809 lb gw, or 15.10% of the complex ACL. The commercial sector is allocated 84.90% of the complex ACL, or 471,217 lb gw. The commercial quota is reduced from the commercial ACL by 4% and is set at 452,368 lb gw. The recreational and commercial ACLs sum to equal the DWG complex ACL. These values are shown in the table below in lb gw.

Complex	Year	OFL	ABC (Complex ACL)	Comm ACL	Comm Quota	Rec ACL
DWG	2025-2029+	731,035	555,026	471,217	452,368	83,809

> *Motion carried without opposition*.

The Committee discussed the recreational AMs, and staff thought the practical implementation of Alternative 3 was questionable based on the unreliability of the recreational landings data. SERO discussed using the PSE estimates as a way to determine the confidence in whether an overage had actually occurred. The Committee also discussed the possibility of not applying an AM unless both the sector and complex ACL had been exceeded in a fishing year. The Committee decided to further discuss multi-year ACLs and AMs at Full Council.

Presentation: Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size and Recreational Bag Limits (Tab B. No. 6)

Council staff presented an update on the analysis for modifying lane snapper minimum size and recreational bag limits, aimed at extending the fishing season duration and addressing the overfishing status in recent years. Council staff noted that the analysis was not able to be completed for this meeting, but will be presented in January 2025, and suggested the Committee provide feedback on the draft Purpose and Need and Action alternatives.

A Committee member noted that the alternatives with the greatest impact may be Alternatives 3 and 4 in Action 2. Another Committee member highlighted that action may be taken separately on Actions 1 and 2, dependent on the outcome of the analysis. Consideration of the potential impacts of including lane snapper within the snapper aggregate bag limit rather than the reef fish aggregate bag limit for the next iteration of the analysis was requested by a Committee member.

NOAA General Counsel noted that the purpose and need statement may need re-wording to better align with Council's intent. Council staff responded that the current draft Purpose and Need aims to achieve the goals outlined under National Standard 1 to meet optimum yield and prevent overfishing but could be more appropriately worded in advance of the next Council meeting.

Council staff asked NOAA General Counsel about the implications of incorporating lane snapper within the snapper aggregate bag limit. NOAA General Counsel replied that there are no foreseen legal complications, but management implications should be explored. It may be worthwhile to investigate the rationale for including lane snapper in the reef fish aggregate bag limit rather than the snapper aggregate bag limit. A Committee member inquired as to whether a decision tool would be worthwhile for this action. Council staff replied that it may be feasible to create a tool for this action if there are enough contrast in the data.

Draft: Reef Fish Amendment 58A: Modifications to Shallow-water Grouper Management Measures (Tab B, No. 7)

Council staff presented updated management alternatives for modifying the Other Shallow-water Grouper (SWG) complex in light of recent stock assessment advice. Scamp and yellowmouth grouper, and black and yellowfin grouper, are currently managed under a single annual catch limit (ACL), with a commercial ACL and annual catch target (ACT) specified to allow for the functioning of the SWG component of the commercial Grouper-Tilefish IFQ program. Because OFLs and ABCs were specified explicitly by the SSC for the aforementioned pairs of groupers, these species can no longer be managed under a single complex with one ACL because of the possibility of overfishing occurring on either pair. Council staff presented revised actions for specifying the Other SWG complex structure, IFQ share distribution, status determination criteria, catch limits, sector allocations, and AMs and closed seasons for the recreational sector.

A Committee member referenced an earlier discussion led by SERO staff related to implementation timelines and the unlikely implementation of the management measures in Amendment 58A prior to January 2027. Based on that information, a Committee member suggested that the Council wait on development of the document, which might allow for all four of the Other SWG species being retained in one complex. Another Committee member agreed with delayed development of the document and noted that none of the four species are overfished or undergoing overfishing. Council staff inquired if information from the forthcoming black grouper management strategy evaluation (MSE) would be in SRFS data units. A Committee member responded that it was uncertain at this time in which data units the information would be presented. Another Committee member stated that recent landings are exceeding the ABC recommended by the SSC for scamp and yellowmouth grouper. They recommended exploring a

reduction in catch limits for the Other SWG complex in 2026, which would lower fishing mortality, and to also implement recreational sector AMs. A Committee inquired how the catch limits would be navigated since the four species are in two different data units, MRIP-FES and MRFSS. Council staff commented that one approach could be to find the percent difference in scamp and yellowmouth grouper between landings and the assessment, and then reduce the catch limits for the Other SWG complex by that percentage. NOAA General Counsel expressed concern about delaying further development of this document, since it is unknown when the black grouper MSE will be completed and since black grouper is co-managed with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. Based on recent landings, if the SSC recommendations were adopted, then scamp and yellowmouth grouper would be undergoing overfishing. A Committee member requested clarification from SERO on what is involved, specifically the time involved by the IFQ program to create two new complexes from the Other SWG complex. They added that direction to Council staff would be provided during Full Council.

Presentation: Reef Fish Amendment 60: Individual Fishing Quota Distributional Issues (Tab B, Nos. 8a and b)

Staff gave a presentation on Amendment 60, which addresses the distribution of shares and annual allocations in the red snapper and grouper/tilefish IFQ programs. IFQ shares and annual allocation to be distributed include, shares held by NMFS (from Reef Fish Amendment 36A), shares and annual allocation recovered from inactive IFQ shareholders accounts, shares and allocation reclaimed from shareholders whose accounts who do not comply with commercial reef fish permit and fishing activity requirements to be set in Reef Fish Amendment 59 and, annual allocation from future IFQ quota increases.

In Action 1 (Reclaiming Shares from Inactive Accounts), the Committee noted that defining inactivity by either not landing fish or not transferring allocation is not too restrictive. The Committee indicated that determining inactivity based on a four-year time period was too long and recommended limiting the alternatives to two and three-year durations.

In Action 2 (Distributing Shares Reclaimed from Inactive Accounts and Non-compliant Accounts), the Committee suggested that landings required in Alternative 2-Option c should be considered during a two-year period to account for potential hardship. Committee members noted that similar adjustments should be made to landings-based options in other actions. Committee members noted that quota banks could be onerous to run given the small amount of quota available for distribution and suggested the deletion of Alternative 6, which would establish a NMFS-administered quota bank. Committee members asked whether NMFS could collect fees to cover the costs of running the quota bank. NOAA General Counsel indicated that NMFS can only collect fees as authorized under section 304(d) of the MSA, which include the administrative costs of administering permits and IFQ cost recovery. The Committee also asked about the feasibility of establishing a quota bank administered by a private entity. NOAA General Counsel indicated that the Council would have to fully define all the features of the quota bank. The Committee thought that, to maintain the flexibility to explore different types of quota banks, alternatives should refer to quota banks instead of NMFS-administered quota banks.

In Action 3, Committee members asked from where the quota held by NMFS originated. Staff replied that the quota has been held by NMFS since the implementation of Reef Fish Amendment 36A (Modifications to Commercial Individual Fishing Quota Programs).

In Action 4.1. (Determining Baseline Quotas for Setting Aside Future Quota Increases), Committee members asked whether baselines other than 2024 could be considered to account for the diversity of stocks included in the IFQ programs. Staff replied that other baselines could be explored and that separate baselines for each share category may be considered. In Actions 4.2 and 4.3 (Setting Aside and Distributing Future Quota Increases), Committee members noted that the redistribution of future quota increases would prevent some fishermen from benefiting from recovering stocks. Committee members suggested that intergenerational transfers of IFQ privileges should be addressed in Reef Fish Amendment 60. The Committee noted that these considerations could be addressed elsewhere. The Committee concurred with staff in that it may be time to prioritize the development of Reef Fish Amendment 59, which would modify criteria for participation in the IFQ programs.

Draft Options: Federal For-hire Fishing Season for Red Snapper (Tab B, No. 9)

In April 2024, the Council directed staff to re-evaluate the for-hire buffer for red snapper, and the for-hire fishing season. In August 2024, after reviewing the first options draft, the Council decided not to modify the for-hire buffer between the component's ACL and ACT at that time, and to proceed only with evaluating modifying the for- hire fishing season. Council staff presented draft alternatives for this action, including a season duration analysis. A Committee member thought that the last week of August was not a great time for booking fishing charters, whereas any time in May was more preferable. A Committee member favored having a fixed opening date in May, to make booking trips easier for charter operators. Staff clarified for the Committee that it was unlikely that the proposed regulations could be in place for the 2025 fishing year and would more likely be able to be implemented in 2026. The Committee ultimately decided to hear additional public testimony before considering a preferred alternative.

Discussion: Updated NMFS Bottom Longline Index for Gulf Red Snapper (Tab B, Nos. 10a and b)

SEFSC staff discussed an update to the NMFS Bottom Longline index for Gulf red snapper. This fishery-independent index of abundance has historically been used to evaluate trends in the relative abundance of the spawning stock biomass of red snapper and has also been used previously to inform interim catch advice. This information is provided in response to a Council request to view updated fishery-independent indices for red snapper. Many of the fishery-independent indices will be updated for the SEDAR 98 Data Workshop in Mobile, AL, in early December; however, this index is the only one which could be updated through 2024 in time for this Council meeting. Other survey data provided include the SEAMAP summer and fall groundfish surveys (through 2023), the SEAMAP plankton survey (through 2022), and G-FISHER composite video survey (through 2022). Generally speaking, the presented indices showed static to positive trends in the surveyed components of the stock. The average length of

fish in the eastern Gulf appears to be increasing, while the distribution of lengths in the western Gulf have concentrated more around the mean, which has been consistent over time. The SEFSC also directed the Committee to a website where it intends to host these data.

A Committee member asked to see a map of the GIS-spatial extent of the bottom longline survey to better understand where the survey data are coming from in the Gulf. The SEFSC referenced its website, noting that those data should be available there. Another Committee member noted the decline in mean lengths observed by many of the state surveys and asked about the difference between those data and the fishery-independent data presented here. The SEFSC thought that the differences might have more to do with location and gear used in the fishery versus the survey. The SEFSC also clarified for the Committee that the plankton survey collects eggs and young larvae, the groundfish surveys collect age-1 and younger juveniles, and the bottom longline survey collects older, mature fish in the spawning stock biomass.

Request for an Update on the Greater Amberjack Count

A Committee member discussed a request for an update to the Council regarding the Greater Amberjack Count, a regional study designed to generate spatially explicit estimates of absolute abundance of greater amberjack in the Gulf. Another Committee member familiar with the project said that quality-checked data were being submitted, and to their knowledge, the project was on track. A Committee member expressed interest in seeing ay available preliminary data.

> The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, **to request an update on the Great Amberjack Count for the January 2025 meeting, including the projected timeline for completion.**
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> *Motion carried without opposition*.

A Committee member discussed beginning work on a decision tool for state management for greater amberjack, including consideration of sector separation. Another Committee member recalled feedback about a regional management approach that was not constrained to state boundaries explicitly and thought this should also be evaluated.

> The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, **to direct staff to begin work on a flowchart to explore decision points for state and/or regional management of greater amberjack, including a comparison with and without sector separation.**

Other Business

No other business was brought before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.