



20 Fathom Recreational Closure for Shallow-Water Grouper: Review and Potential Modifications

January 2025

Law Enforcement Technical Committee

Background

- April 2024 Council Motions:
 - *Explore the removal of the 20-fathom closure for shallow water grouper for the recreational fishery in the months of February and March in the Gulf of Mexico.*



Shallow-water Grouper Complex

- Defined in Reef Fish Amendment 1 (1990)
 - Black grouper, gag, red grouper, Nassau, yellowfin grouper, yellowmouth grouper, rock hind, red hind, speckled hind, scamp
- Generic ACL/AM Amendment (2011)
 - Nassau transferred to SAFMC
 - Red hind, rock hind misty grouper removed from management unit (low landings)



Shallow-water Grouper Complex

- Defined in Reef Fish Amendment 1 (1990)
 - Black grouper, gag, red grouper, ~~Nassau~~, yellowfin grouper, yellowmouth grouper, ~~rock hind~~, ~~red hind~~, ~~speckled hind~~, scamp
- Reef Fish Amendment 3 (1991)
 - Speckled hind moved to DWG quota category
- Generic ACL/AM Amendment (2011)
 - Nassau transferred to SAFMC
 - Red hind, rock hind misty grouper removed from management unit (low landings)



Shallow-water Grouper Closed Season: How did we get here?

- 1999: Closed commercial harvest of gag, black grouper, red grouper February 15th-March 15th
 - Intended to benefit gag, but other groupers as well
- 2008: Discontinued commercial closed season in anticipation of IFQ program along additional area-closures to protect gag (e.g., the Edges)
 - Recreational closure Feb 1st – March 31st to reduce overfishing of gag while allowing harvest of red grouper



Shallow-water grouper Closed Season

- 2013: Converted recreational fixed season closure into a time-area closure shoreward of 20 fathom boundary. Seaward of 20 fathoms, the Feb 1 – March 31 closure remained in effect



Since that time...

- Recent stock assessments have been completed for
 - Gag
 - Scamp/yellowfin grouper
 - Red grouper (Completed summer 2024)
- Modified ABC:
 - Black/yellowmouth grouper
- Results have (or will) require reductions in harvest for all SWG species



Management Options

Option 1: No Action. The Feb 1 – Mar 31 seasonal closure of the recreational sector for shallow-water grouper will remain in place.

Option 2: Remove the Feb 1 – Mar 31 seasonal closure of the recreational sector for shallow-water grouper, achieve management goals and requirements using existing annual catch limits, seasonal closures, area closures, and accountability measures



Grouper Spawning Period

FMP category	Common name	Family	Scientific name	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Coastal Migratory Pelagics	King Mackerel	Scombridae	<i>Scomberomorus</i>												
Coastal Migratory Pelagics	Spanish Mackerel	Scombridae	<i>Scomberomorus maculatus</i>												
Red Drum	Red Drum	Sciaenidae	<i>Sciaenops ocellatus</i>												
Reef Fish	Gray Triggerfish	Balistidae	<i>Balistes capriscus</i>												
Reef Fish	Greater Amberjack														
Reef Fish	Almaco Jack														
Reef Fish	Speckled Hind	Epinephelidae	<i>Epinephelus drummondhayi</i>												
Reef Fish	Goliath Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Epinephelus itaiara</i>												
Reef Fish	Red Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Epinephelus morio</i>												
Reef Fish	Nassau Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Epinephelus striatus</i>												
Reef Fish	Yellowedge Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Hyporthodus flavolimbatus</i>												
Reef Fish	Warsaw Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Hyporthodus nigritus</i>												
Reef Fish	Snowy Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Hyporthodus niveatus</i>												
Reef Fish	Black Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Mycteroperca bonaci</i>												
Reef Fish	Yellowmouth Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Mycteroperca interstitialis</i>												
Reef Fish	Gag Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Mycteroperca microlepis</i>												
Reef Fish	Scamp	Epinephelidae	<i>Mycteroperca phenax</i>												
Reef Fish	Yellowfin Grouper	Epinephelidae	<i>Mycteroperca venenosa</i>												
Reef Fish	Hogfish	Labridae	<i>Lachnolaimus maximus</i>												
Reef Fish	Mutton Snapper	Lutjanidae	<i>Lutjanus analis</i>												
Reef Fish	Red Snapper	Lutjanidae	<i>Lutjanus campechanus</i>												
Reef Fish	Cubera Snapper	Lutjanidae	<i>Lutjanus cyanopterus</i>												
Reef Fish	Vermilion Snapper	Lutjanidae	<i>Rhomboplites aurorubens</i>												
Reef Fish	Tilefish	Malacanthidae	<i>Lopholatilus chamaeleonticeps</i>												
Not Federally Managed	Southern Flounder	Paralichthyidae	<i>Paralichthys lethostigma</i>												
Not Federally Managed	Spotted Seatrout	Sciaenidae	<i>Cynoscion nebulosus</i>												
Not Federally Managed	Black Drum	Sciaenidae	<i>Pogonias cromis</i>												
Not Federally Managed	Sheepshead	Sparidae	<i>Archosargus probatocephalus</i>												
Stallings et al. 2023															
Number species (all)				11	13	13	19	19	20	16	18	15	9	7	5
Number species (peak)				3	5	10	9	8	8	8	7	4	2	1	3
				Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		

Spawning months



Is the SWG Closure an Effective Management Tool?

- April 2012 Council meeting: Received public inquiry about the utility of this closure
 - Area closure for gag had been enacted (Madison-Swanson, Steamboat Lumps, the Edges seasonal closures)
 - Fixed seasonal closure in place for gag that includes February and March
 - Gag spawning areas > 40 fathoms depth



Is the SWG Closure an Effective Management Tool?

SWG Closure Pros

- May provide conservation benefits for several grouper species during spawning
- Removal may increase harvest rates and require additional season modifications

SWG Closure Cons

- Harvest constrained ACL's and AM's
- Gag is already closed during this period
- Likely requires at-sea enforcement
- Commercial harvest is allowed seaward of 20 fathoms during Feb – Mar



Questions for Enforcement

- How practical is the enforcement of the 20-fathom closure?

