



Tab B, No. 10

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

April 2025

# Background

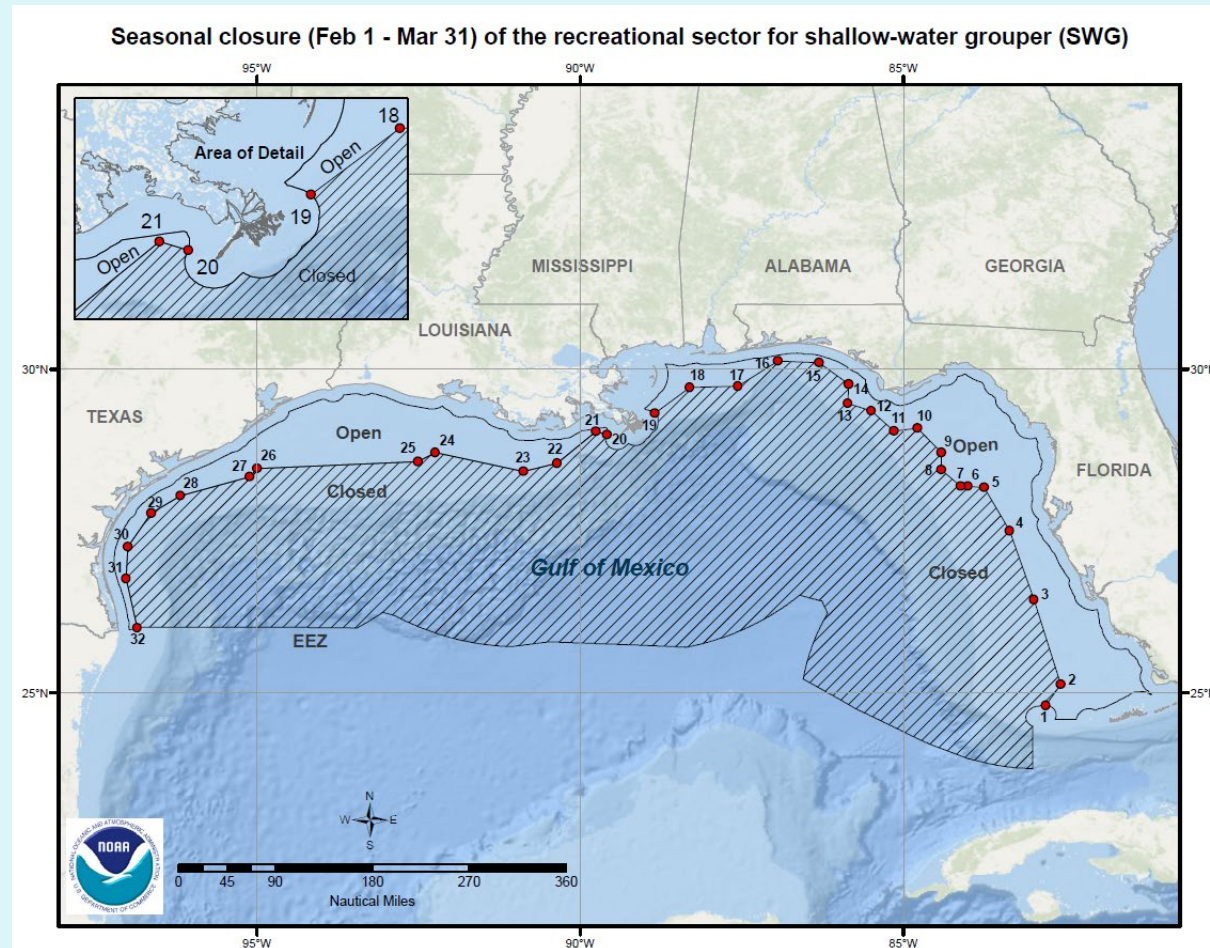
## April 2024 Council Motion:

- *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.*





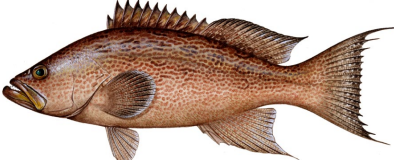



# 20-Fathom Closure

Seasonal closure of the recreational sector for shallow-water grouper (SWG). The recreational sector for SWG in or from the Gulf EEZ is closed each year from February 1 through March 31 in the portion of the Gulf EEZ seaward of rhumb lines connecting the following points in order. During the closure, the bag and possession limits for SWG in or from the Gulf EEZ seaward of the following rhumb lines are zero.



<https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-50/chapter-VI/part-622#622.34>

# Shallow-water Grouper Complex

Stock		Most Recent Management Action
Gag		RF 56: Gag rebuilding plan, allocation, reduce catch levels
Red Grouper		RF 53: Red grouper allocation and catch levels
Scamp		RF 58A: Modify catch levels and shallow-water grouper management measures
Yellowmouth Grouper		RF 58A: Modify catch levels and shallow-water grouper management measures
Black Grouper		RF 58A: Modify catch levels based on recent landings; combined with yellowfin grouper
Yellowfin Grouper		RF 58A: Modify catch levels based on recent landings; combined with black grouper

# 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 capricus</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				11	13	13	19	19	20	16	18	15	9	7	5
Number species (all)				3	5	10	9	8	8	8	7	4	2	1	3
Number species (peak)				Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		

Spawning months

Stallings et al. 2023

# Background and Timeline

Apr 2024

- Council discussed 20-fathom closure. Expressed concern that requirement was no longer needed to achieve management objectives
- Motion to explore removal of 20-fathom closure

June 2024

- Presentation to Reef Fish Committee
- Direct staff to begin work on a document

Dec 2024

- RF AP discussed 20-fathom closure
- Support concept, recommended waiting until red grouper assessment is completed to determine next steps. RF AP was concerned that this could shorten recreational red grouper season

Feb 2025

- SSC reviewed red grouper stock assessment
- Recommended substantial increase in OFL and ABC for red grouper

Apr 2025

- Council will review red grouper stock assessments and begin work on action to modify catch limits and other management measures as appropriate
- Staff requests updated guidance on how/if to proceed with 20-fathom closure removal in a document

# Considerations for the Committee

- Recreational gag harvest is subject to a seasonal closure during the spring spawning season as part of the rebuilding plan.
- Allowable harvest for the remaining SWG species is likely to decrease based on actions to modify SWG catch limits and recreational seasons. Range of alternatives do not consider an open season for SWG prior to Jun 1.
- Red grouper stock assessment results are favorable. Increased catch limits expected to allow for longer season.

# Management Options

**Option 1:** No Action. The Feb 1 – Mar 31 recreational seasonal closure seaward of 20 fathoms for shallow-water grouper will remain in place.

**Option 2:** Remove the Feb 1 – Mar 31 recreational seasonal closure seaward of 20 fathoms for shallow-water grouper. Achieve management goals and requirements using existing annual catch limits, seasonal closures, area closures, and accountability measures.

# Next Steps and Questions?

- Proceed with the development of a document?
- Include as an action in a red grouper document?
  - Red grouper recreational season projections considerate of new catch levels may provide additional insight