

**Gulf Council
Reef Fish Advisory Panel
Meeting Summary
March 17, 2025
Council Office
Tampa, Florida**

The meeting of the Gulf Fishery Management Council (Council) Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) was convened at 8:30 AM EDT on March 17, 2025. The agenda for this meeting and the minutes from the December 2024 meeting were approved as written. [Verbatim minutes from past AP meetings can be reviewed here.](#)

Review of Reef Fish and IFQ Program Landings

Mr. Frank Helies (NOAA Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) reviewed recent Gulf of America (Gulf) reef fish and individual fishing quota (IFQ) landings. AP members commented on the landings for the for-hire component for red snapper, noting that the landings from the fishing season reopening late in the year were lower than expected. Some AP members were grateful for the opportunity to run additional trips, and others noted poor weather and difficulty in scheduling for-hire trips once customers had made other plans. The AP thought additional outreach to make captains and customers alike aware of any fishing season reopening was necessary. AP members also asked about the possibility of extending the recreational red grouper fishing season in 2025, given the positive results of the SEDAR 88 stock assessment. In discussing greater amberjack recreational landings, the AP thought the preliminary estimate for the fall portion of the 2024 – 2025 fishing season was unreasonably high, recalling the lack of fishing effort throughout much of the Gulf in the fall of 2024. An exception to this effort was the Florida Panhandle, which some AP members stated can book fishing trips through the end of October. Mr. Helies stated that he can address a request by the AP to review greater amberjack landings by state. In addition, AP members said that targeting of cubera snapper was likely increasing, and that the Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS), which measures the catch component of the landings, may not be capturing the true catch of this species. An AP member added that the meat quality of cubera snapper is inferior to other available snapper species. Regarding the jacks complex, and in an effort to avoid misidentification with greater amberjack, AP members who are for-hire captains said they do not keep any complex species except almaco jack. Captain Ed Walker (Gulf Council representative) asked an AP member who fishes in the species' distribution whether he was seeing any queen snapper, to which the AP member said he was not. The AP member added that he was not seeing many blackfin snapper either.

Review of Reef Fish Amendment 58B: Deep-water Grouper Management Measures

Council staff reviewed updated management alternatives for modifying the deep-water grouper (DWG) complex, including specifying status determination criteria, catch limits, sector allocations, and accountability measures. 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 SSC

recommended managing these four DWG species together because of the use of similar data units and to reduce dead discards. The Council is working towards a public hearing draft for this document, and recent modifications include removing some alternatives and the addition of a recreational fishing season duration analysis.

Council staff reviewed Action 1, which evaluates the DWG MSY proxy, OFL, ABC, and complex annual catch limit (ACL). An AP member asked why modifications to the MSY proxy cannot be moved in a more stepwise fashion, as opposed to in % increments (e.g., going from F_{30%SPR} to F_{40%SPR}). Council staff described the SSC's discussions about the scientific uncertainty in the complex OFL and ABC projections.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends selecting Alternative 2 in Action 1 as the preferred alternative.

Alternative 2: Revise the MSY proxy and catch limits for the DWG complex based on the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommendations. The OFL and ABC for yellowedge grouper would be set based on an MSY proxy of the yield when fishing at F_{40%SPR}, and the yield when fishing at 75% of the FMSY proxy, respectively. The OFL and ABC for the three remaining species would be based on Tier 3b of the Council's ABC Control Rule. The DWG MSY proxy would be the yield when fishing at F_{40%SPR}. The OFL and ABC for yellowedge grouper and the three remaining species would be combined, and all four species would be managed as a single complex with a complex OFL of 731,035 pounds (lb) gw, and an ABC of 555,026 lb gw. The complex ACL would be set equal to the ABC.

Motion carried without opposition.

The AP discussed Action 2, which examines the DWG sector ACLs and allocations. The AP discussed the necessity for the 4% buffer between the commercial ACL and the commercial quota, which exists to allow for flexibility measures between the DWG complex and the Other Shallow-water Grouper (SWG) complex. The AP did not think it necessary to continue the flexibility measures given the reduction in DWG catch limits, and the same expected for scamp and yellowmouth grouper. Council staff added that removing the 4% buffer between the commercial ACL and commercial quota was tantamount to removing the flexibility measures between the DWG and SWG IFQ share categories.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends removal of the 4% buffer between the commercial ACL and commercial quota for the DWG and SWG complexes.

Motion carried without opposition.

The AP discussed the sector allocation options in Action 2, and their corresponding ACLs, noting that none of the options was expected to result in a recreational fishing season that would be expected to be open year-round on a consistent basis. An AP member thought that the commercial sector would support Alternative 2, followed by Alternative 4, which would be expected to provide

more access for commercial seafood harvest. Another AP member added that the recreational landings are highly uncertain, and the probability of a larger overage of the recreational ACL seemed higher with a larger ACL like in Alternative 3. The AP member thought the commercial landings were more precise and reliable. Some AP members disagreed, noting the importance of being able to target DWG species on for-hire trips during summer months off Louisiana. They did not think it appropriate to ignore the increased targeting of DWG by the recreational fleets and did not want to see the recreational sector pushed out of the DWG fishery as a result. An AP member added that using a reference period for setting the sector allocation from over 20 years ago (2001 – 2004, as in Alternative 2) was doing a disservice to those fishing today.

An AP member recalled the Council’s motion not to modify sector allocations based on data using Marine Recreational Information Program’s Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) until the SSC has reviewed the results of the pilot study, which is evaluating the sampling bias in that data collection program. Capt. Walker thought the AP should use their opportunity to advise the Council on their preferences, under the actions and alternatives currently presented. The AP was most opposed to proceeding with Action 2, given its present use of MRIP-FES, knowing that the recreational data would likely be modified after the completion of the pilot study. Another AP member thought selecting Alternative 2 in Action 1 was in fact recommending some action to end overfishing, which the Council is obligated to do.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends tabling any discussion of modifying sector allocations for the DWG complex at this time.

Motion fails 2 – 8, with 3 abstentions and 1 absent.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends reinforcing the motion from the December 2024 meeting.

“Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends supporting the Council’s October 2023 motion: The Gulf Council will delay any changes in allocation between the commercial and recreational sectors of any Gulf fishery resources that are subject to MRIP-FES until such time as the 2024 pilot study has been completed and deemed consistent with BSIA by the Gulf SSC.”

Motion carried without opposition and 1 absent.

An AP member acknowledged that selecting Alternative 1 in Action 2 essentially required NMFS to assume that the commercial ACL would be landed in a given year and would require NMFS to estimate the recreational fishing season based on a recreational ACL equivalent to 19,426 pounds gutted weight (lb gw). The AP member thought, however, that selecting Alternative 1 in Action 2 avoided the issue of formal reallocation. Another AP member thought that if the Council reallocated based on the current information using MRIP-FES, that it was unlikely that the resulting sector allocations would be readdressed following revised data from the pilot study. Council staff reviewed Louisiana-specific private vessel landings for yellowedge grouper only, for 2021 – 2024, noting that based on an average weight of 15 lb gw, it was possible for the Louisiana private angling fleet alone to land the proposed recreational ACL under Alternative 2, and the

assumed recreational ACL under Alternative 1. Further, if Alternative 1 is selected as preferred in Action 2, it defaults to the selection of Alternative 1 in Action 3 (which evaluates recreational accountability measures), since the rest of the alternatives in Action 3 require a defined recreational ACL.

The AP discussed the difference between the full-time DWG commercial fishermen and seasonal commercial fishing, which peaks in the summer months. An AP member expressed concern with not recognizing the recent increase in recreational landings. Another AP member did not want to proceed without making any recommendation, or with recommending no action in Action 2, as both decisions could result in early fishing season closures for the recreational sector. He thought more information was needed, but also recognized that the data available to make the current decision regarding sector allocations (i.e., MRIP-FES informed catch limits) was all that was presently available. An AP member thought that the commercial sector was likely to endure the most economic harm from the proposed reduction in DWG catch limits.

Substitute Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends selecting Alternative 3 in Action 2 as the preferred alternative.

Motion fails 2 – 8, with 3 abstentions and 1 absent.

Original Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends selecting Alternative 1 in Action 2 as the preferred alternative.

Alternative 1: No Action. Based on the Generic ACL/AM Amendment, the DWG ACL provides 96.50% of the complex ACL for the commercial sector based on landings during 20012004. The recreational sector's ACL is unspecified. The complex ACL is set equal to the ABC. Based on the DWG complex OFL of 731,035 lb gw, and the ABC of 555,026 lb gw, the commercial ACL is 535,600 lb gw. The commercial quota is reduced from the commercial ACL by 4%5 and is set at 514,176 lb gw. These values are shown in the table below in lb gw. As described in the Generic ACL/AM Amendment, the recreational harvest is managed through the current recreational accountability measures.

Motion carried 8 – 2, with 3 abstentions and 1 absent.

Council staff reviewed Action 3, which considers modifications to DWG complex accountability measures (AMs). The AP recognized that if Alternative 1 is selected as preferred in Action 2, it defaults to the selection of Alternative 1 in Action 3. An AP member acknowledged that sector allocations would be selected at some point, and that the AP should likely consider some other option beyond Alternative 1 in Action 3. The AP recalled its desire to offer the greatest flexibility possible for the recreational sector with regard to the AMs. The AP also did not want any endorsement of an alternative in Action 3 to infer support for sector reallocation.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends selecting Alternative 5 in Action 3 as the preferred alternative.

Alternative 5: For the recreational sector, if the average deep-water grouper landings exceed the average ACL over a three-year moving period, the Regional Administrator would reduce the duration of the recreational season by the amount necessary to ensure that the recreational ACL is not exceeded during the following fishing year unless the best scientific information available suggests no adjustment to the recreational fishing season is necessary.

Motion carried 8 – 2, with 3 abstentions and 1 absent.

Review of Reef Fish Framework Action: Modifications to Other Shallow-water Grouper

Council staff reviewed a draft framework action to modify the catch limits and recreational fishing season for the Other Shallow-Water Grouper (SWG) complex. This measure is being considered as an interim step to reduce fishing mortality on SWG species ahead of the development and implementation of Draft Amendment 58A, which will address broader management changes. The AP discussed the range of season duration alternatives, potential modifications, and preferred recommendations to the Council. One AP member asked whether the split-season alternative could begin in August instead of September and, if so, whether it would remain open through the end of the year. Council staff clarified that this could be analyzed if the AP passed a motion to include it. The AP member noted that adjusting the season could reduce discards and improve access.

There was continued debate on the best timing for the recreational fishing season. AP members from Louisiana expressed concerns that a split season did not align with their fishery and preferred a continuous season that runs until the quota is met. However, members from the eastern Gulf supported a split season to allow for scamp fishing in April and May. Some also supported aligning the opening with Red Snapper season (June 1) to reduce discards, but others felt that a later reopening would provide more fishing opportunities throughout the year.

To refine the split-season approach, an AP member made a motion to create a new alternative—opening from April 1 to May 31 and again from August 1 until closure—and to designate it as the preferred alternative. Some members debated whether the motion should establish this as the preferred alternative or simply recommend adding it for consideration, but the consensus was to vote on it as a package.

Concerns were raised about the feasibility of in-season monitoring under different season structures. Council staff clarified that this framework action is a stopgap measure to slow landings and that the closed seasons will be predetermined based on projections rather than real-time monitoring. They emphasized that quota reductions are significant and that delays in implementing catch reductions will only compound future challenges.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends creating a new Alternative 6 in Action 2 and selecting it as the preferred alternative.

Alternative 6: Open Apr 1 – May 31. Reopening Aug 1 to Dec 31 or when the fishery closes.

Motion carried 8-5 with 1 abstention.

Review: SEDAR 79 Southeastern US Mutton Snapper Stock Assessment and SSC Recommendations for OFL and ABC

Council staff presented SEDAR 79, which is a stock assessment of southeastern U.S. mutton snapper. This stock assessment used the State of Florida’s State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) in place of the Marine Recreational Information Program’s Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) data for recreational private vessel landings. SRFS was considered appropriate for inclusion in this assessment since the vast majority (>95%) of mutton snapper are landed off Florida, and while estimating a lower level of landings, SRFS demonstrates improved precision compared to MRIP-FES for mutton snapper. The mutton snapper assessment estimated increasing trends in fishery-independent and fishery-dependent indices of abundance. As of the terminal year of 2023, the southeastern U.S. mutton snapper stock is estimated to be healthy, with the stock not overfished or experiencing overfishing under a proxy for maximum sustainable yield (MSY) at a fishing mortality rate at 30% spawning potential ratio ($F_{30\%SPR}$).

Council staff also reviewed catch level recommendations by the Gulf and South Atlantic Scientific and Statistical Committees (SSCs), which reviewed the assessment at their joint February 2025 meeting. The SSCs maintained the recommendation of using $F_{30\%SPR}$ as the proxy value for MSY. The SSCs agreed to deviate from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (South Atlantic Council) Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) Control Rule in setting the overfishing limit (OFL) and ABC. The SSCs ultimately recommended the following catch limits for 2026 – 2028, based on recent recruitment trends for mutton snapper stock-wide.

	OFL ($F_{30\%SPR}$)	ABC (75% of $F_{30\%SPR}$)
2026	3,363,706	2,725,359
2027	3,313,030	2,752,377
2028	3,270,355	2,772,615

AP members acknowledged seeing more mutton snapper in the Gulf and did not want to see management of the species change in the Gulf such that current fishing practices would be affected.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the mutton snapper ACL be set equal to the ABC for the Gulf, and that other current management measures remain unchanged.

Motion carried without opposition.

Review: SEDAR 96 Southeastern US Yellowtail Snapper Stock Assessment and SSC Recommendations for OFL and ABC

Council staff present SEDAR 96, which is a stock assessment of southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper. This stock assessment uses SRFS in place of MRIP-FES data for private recreational angler landings. SRFS was considered appropriate for inclusion in this assessment since the vast majority (>95%) of yellowtail snapper are landed off Florida, and while estimating a lower level of landings, SRFS demonstrates improved precision compared to MRIP-FES for yellowtail snapper. Many indices of abundance for yellowtail snapper showed stable or positive trends. As of the terminal year of 2023, the southeastern U.S. yellowtail snapper stock is estimated to be healthy, with the stock not overfished or experiencing overfishing under an MSY proxy of $F_{30\%SPR}$.

Council staff also reviewed catch level recommendations by the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs, which reviewed the assessment at their joint February 2025 meeting. The SSCs maintained the recommendation of using $F_{30\%SPR}$ as the proxy value for MSY. The SSCs agreed to deviate from the South Atlantic Council's ABC Control Rule in setting the OFL and ABC. The SSCs ultimately recommended the following catch limits for 2026 – 2028, based on recent recruitment trends for yellowtail snapper stock-wide.

	OFL ($F_{30\%SPR}$)	ABC (75% of $F_{30\%SPR}$)
2026	4,495,187	3,925,031
2027	4,364,600	3,913,426
2028	4,307,856	3,918,634

AP members acknowledged seeing more yellowtail snapper in the Gulf and did not want to see management of the species change in the Gulf such that current fishing practices would be affected.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the yellowtail snapper ACL be set equal to the ABC for the Gulf, and that other current management measures remain unchanged.

Motion carried without opposition.

Review: SEDAR 88 Gulf of Mexico Red Grouper Stock Assessment and SSC Recommendations for OFL and ABC

Council staff presented SEDAR 88, which is a stock assessment for Gulf of Mexico red grouper. This stock assessment uses Florida's State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) for recreational private vessel landings and discards, a notable change from the previous assessment (SEDAR 61) which used MRIP-FES data. Trends in landings and discards remained similar when comparing SRFS to MRIP-FES, however the magnitude of SRFS estimates were lower. The estimate of natural mortality was also increased from the previous assessment, resulting in an increase in spawning

output, fraction of unfished population, and age-0 recruits relative to SEDAR 61. Overall, SEDAR 88 was found to use the best available data and resulted in improvements in model fits and diagnostics, but still displayed uncertainty around recruitment and red tide episodic mortality estimates in recent years. As of the terminal year of 2022, the red grouper stock was not overfished or undergoing overfishing relative to three benchmarks - $F_{30\%SPR}$, $F_{40\%SPR}$, or F_{MSY} estimated at $F_{46.6\%SPR}$.

Council staff also reviewed red grouper catch level recommendations provided by the SSC following their February 2025 meeting. The SSC set the OFL at $F_{40\%SPR}$ and the ABC at 75% of $F_{40\%SPR}$ based on projections for 2027-2029. AP members questioned why $F_{40\%SPR}$ was recommended when $F_{30\%SPR}$ appears to be sufficient to prevent overfishing and recalled the debates during the joint SSC meetings between the two values. Council staff responded that the decision to use $F_{40\%SPR}$ was consistent with the SSC's history of applying $F_{40\%SPR}$ for protogynous hermaphroditic grouper species in the Gulf (i.e., gag, scamp and yellowmouth, and yellowedge grouper), which helps to account for the uncertainty around the timing of transition and its influence on population dynamics. The AP also requested clarification for the use of a 3-year versus 5-year constant catch scenario. Council staff replied that 3 years was selected to avoid setting catch levels too far away from the terminal year of the stock assessment.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends setting the ACL equal to the ABC for red grouper.

Motion carried with 1 in opposition.

The AP then discussed other management measures for red grouper, beginning with removal of the 20-fathom recreational seasonal closure, currently in effect from Feb 1 – Mar 31 annually. The AP suggested that previously shortened red grouper seasons reduced the urgency for seeking removal of the 20-fathom closure but given the optimistic outlook of the stock assessment (SEDAR 88) some AP members felt it was appropriate to reconsider the issue. Some AP members highlighted issues with compliance and enforcement and thought that the closure was no longer necessary due to the health of the red grouper stock. An AP member expressed an opposing viewpoint, suggesting that stock status can be cyclical and urged caution in preemptively removing protective measures. Another AP member suggested that projections exploring the removal of the closure would aid in decision making. Capt. Ed Walker (Council representative) pointed out that removal of the 20-fathom closure has been tabled by the Council, but requested information from northern Gulf AP members about species other than red grouper that are affected by the 20-fathom closure. An AP member replied that scamp was impacted by the closure.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends the Council to explore the removal the 20-fathom closure Feb 1-Mar 31 immediately after the implementation of catch levels from SEDAR 88.

Motion carried with 1 in opposition.

The AP then discussed whether sector allocation changes were necessary following SEDAR 88. AP members voiced concern about considering allocation changes while MRIP-FES issues remain

unresolved. Council staff clarified that SEDAR 88 only uses SRFS, so MRIP-FES calibration is no longer a concern. Council staff added that OFL and ABC recommendations following SEDAR 88 are based in SRFS units, but that the current sector allocation will remain in MRIP-FES units unless reallocation is sought. AP members discussed the opportunity to move away from MRIP-FES completely and to potentially have more favorable recreational allocation with SRFS data. Council staff outlined the difference in timeline between a document updating catch limits, which would be relatively straightforward versus a document that also considered reallocation, which would be much more time consuming. However, staff suggested that the Council was already likely to request a document considering actions and alternatives for reallocation. The AP discussed the desire for timely updates to catch limits in addition to exploring the more challenging task of reallocation.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends exploring the option for reallocation based on updated red grouper landings in SRFS units as a secondary document to follow catch increases.

Motion carried, with 1 in opposition and 1 absent.

Discussion: Headboat Data Collection

Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) staff reported to the Council in January that the funding for the dockside component of the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS) had been terminated for the states of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The AP acknowledged that this report was concerning considering that every stock assessment presented during this AP meeting used SRHS information. Council staff also reminded the AP that the lane snapper assessment relies heavily on SRHS data. An AP member asked where the funding for the SRHS dockside originated, and the AP chair indicated that staff from SEFSC would need to answer that question. An AP member asked how many headboats were in the SRHS and Council staff indicated that 68 vessels participated in the program in 2023. An AP member added that the number of vessels in the survey has been largely consistent in the recent past. The AP agreed that preservation of this long-term data collection program was essential for stock assessments and fisheries management in the Gulf.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends the Council encourage the SEFSC and NMFS to seek all available means for continued funding of the Headboat Survey as to continue and protect an imperative source of data collection.

Motion carried without opposition.

Discussion: SSC Recommendations on Return 'em Right Research

In February 2025, the SSC reviewed research conducted under the Return 'Em Right program, which focused on the effects of using descending devices in Gulf reef fish fisheries. The SSC provided general recommendations on how the research findings could be used to better inform discard practices and associated mortality rates for federally managed species. The AP was asked to consider the SSC's discussion and provide recommendations to the Council.

Council staff summarized the SSC's recommendations before opening the floor for discussion. Some AP members expressed concerns about the adoption and effectiveness of descending devices. One member suggested that funding could be better spent on the headboat survey, noting that while he owns a descender device, it remains unused. Others acknowledged that while these devices can be difficult to adopt, they are effective when used correctly.

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None received during the meeting.

Other Business

Discussion of Federal For-hire Red Snapper Start Date

An AP member recalled discussions from the for-hire fleet in the Florida Panhandle, and Council discussions about opening the for-hire red snapper season earlier in the calendar year. Council staff noted that the Council's current preferred alternative in a framework action to modify the for-hire red snapper season was for it to open on the Friday before the federal Memorial Day holiday. Dr. Kesley Banks (Council member) said discussion about avoiding the fishing season being open earlier than May or later than August was related to weather and the ease of booking trips. An AP member thought that opening the for-hire season before a state's private angling season may cause strife for the private angling component. Another AP member agreed and thought the states may try to match the for-hire season to the extent practical. An AP member added that the states can set their private angling seasons at their discretion. Capt. Walker recalled Council discussion about extending the fishing season when there is sentiment that the quota is not being caught because the stock has been fished down.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP supports the Council's current preferred alternative to open the federal for-hire fishing season for red snapper on the Friday before the federal Memorial Day holiday.

Motion carried without opposition.

Discussion of 2025 Recreational Red Grouper Fishing Season

An AP member thought that the early closures of red grouper were harmful to the recreational and for-hire fleets in the Gulf, especially given the improvement in the stock condition since the last stock assessment. The AP member thought that, combined with the current gag recreational fishing season, the early red grouper recreational closure, closing prior to June 1 for 2025, constituted an economic emergency. Council staff recalled that emergency and interim rules have typically been used to end overfishing ahead of the implementation of a rebuilding plan, but that is not to say that other circumstances may not meet the threshold for such rules.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends the Council explore every possible avenue for extending the recreational fishing season for red grouper for 2025, based on the results and catch projections from the SEDAR 88 stock assessment.

Motion carried without opposition.

Discussion of 2025 Commercial Red Grouper IFQ Allocation

An AP member thought, given the positive results of the SEDAR 88 stock assessment, that the IFQ allocation for red grouper should be increased based on the catch projections. Another AP member asked whether the addition of a significant amount of pounds to the red grouper share category would negatively affect the business side of the IFQ program. A commercial IFQ fisherman was called to the podium and indicated that it was unlikely that the additional fish would all be able to be landed, and that it was likely that the price for red grouper would decrease substantially. Another commercial IFQ fisherman added that a positive effect would be that the lease price for red grouper would be expected to decrease, which could get more commercial fishermen on the water and fishing. Generally, the AP did not think that the commercial sector would be able to land the expected increase in commercial quota on short notice. An AP member encouraged the Council to closely monitor what happens with red grouper following the expected catch limit increases.

Discussion of Gag Recreational Bag Limit Reduction for 2025

An AP member noted that due to the recreational overage for gag in 2024, which is estimated to be about 100,000 lb gw over the recreational ACL, a payback provision is expected to be applied for the 2025 fishing season. The AP member recalled an idea to temporarily reduce the recreational bag limit for the 2025 fishing season to only one fish per person. This measure would sunset, or end, at the end of the 2025 fishing season and go back to two fish per person for the 2026 fishing season and beyond. The rationale behind this idea would be to stop the cycle of overages experienced by the recreational sector over the last two fishing seasons. The expectation from the AP member was that in 2026, without an overage to pay back from the 2025 fishing season, that the recreational sector could be open to harvest substantially longer. Another AP member questioned the efficacy of reducing the bag limit and thought that the sunset clause in any proposed regulation should be ironclad to end the measure at the end of the 2025 fishing season. Capt. Walker agreed with the idea of breaking the cycle of paybacks for the recreational sector for gag. He encouraged the AP to provide the Council with options to consider, perhaps instead of or in addition to reducing the recreational bag limit. SERO staff detailed the method of projecting the fishing season, which offers a range of time for which the recreational season may be open based on the available ACL. The AP could recommend that the Council ask the Regional Administrator to use the more conservative end of the estimated season duration. Council staff reminded the AP of the Council's position of not closing a fishery unless left with absolutely no other option. AP members expressed concern about the derby nature of short fishing seasons.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the Council request that NMFS consider various options in the recreational gag grouper fishery for 2025 only, taking the most conservative approach to prevent exceeding the recreational ACL, with the exception

of a complete fishery closure. These options include, but are not limited to, bag limits and fishing season duration.

Motion carried without opposition.

Recreational Data Collection

An AP member discussed the continuing issues with recreational data collection. He thought the federal recreational fishing permit needed to be developed, along with completion and implementation of the replacement program for the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting program. AP members noted that all Gulf states had a permit in place to characterize recreational offshore fishing effort.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP strongly recommends that the Council request that NMFS, GSMFC, and the 5 Gulf States expedite the requirement for a private recreational federal fishing permit to fish in the EEZ (States can require similar language to their state fishing licenses in lieu of a fed permit), expedite implementation of the revised for-hire “SEFHIER” program, and create and implement a similar required electronic data reporting program for the private recreational fishery.

Motion carried without opposition.

The meeting adjourned at 4:45 pm eastern time on March 17, 2025.

Meeting Participants

Standing SSC

Jane Black
Douglass W. Boyd
Josh Ellender
Rachal Hisler
Dylan Hubbard, *Chair*
Gary Jarvis, *Vice Chair*
Mike Jennings
John Marquez, Jr

Alexander McIngvale
Gregory Mercurio
Steve Papen
Alicia Paul
Clarence Seymour
Bob Zales II

Council Representative

Ed Walker

[A list of all meeting participants can be viewed here.](#)