

Reef Fish Advisory Panel
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
Meeting Summary
December 3, 2024

The meeting of the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf) Fishery Management Council's (Council) Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) was convened at 8:30 AM EDT on December 3, 2024. The agenda for this meeting was approved after adding discussion of lane snapper, red snapper lengths, and of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) Release App under Other Business. The minutes from the April 23, 2024, meeting was approved as written. [Minutes and materials from past meetings can be reviewed here.](#)

Election of Chair and Vice Chair

Captain Dylan Hubbard was elected as the Chair, and Captain Gary Jarvis as the Vice Chair.

Review of Reef Fish and Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Program Landings

Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff reviewed reef fish recreational, commercial, and IFQ landings. SERO clarified that the 2023/2024 overage for recreational greater amberjack cannot be repaid against the 2024/2025 fishing season, since that season has already opened and closed. The 2024 overage of the cubera snapper and lane snapper annual catch limits (ACLs) will trigger the accountability measure for those stocks, with the 2025 fishing seasons closing when the respective ACLs are projected to be met.

Review: Reef Fish Amendment 58A: Shallow-water Grouper Management Measures

Council staff presented management alternatives for modifying the Other Shallow-water Grouper (SWG) complex informed by recent stock assessment advice. Scamp, yellowmouth, black, and yellowfin grouper are currently managed under a single ACL, with a commercial ACL and annual catch target (ACT) specified to allow the SWG component of the commercial Grouper-Tilefish IFQ program to function. Because species-specific overfishing limits (OFLs) and acceptable biological catches (ABCs) were specified by the SSC, these species can no longer be managed under a single complex with one ACL. This is due to the possibility of overfishing occurring on either pair.

The AP asked about the justification for using a proxy for maximum sustainable yield (MSY) of the yield when fishing at a 40% spawning potential ratio ($F_{40\%SPR}$) for the scamp and yellowmouth grouper complex in Alternative 3 of Action 2. Council staff summarized that the SSC's MSY proxy recommendation was based on the biological characteristics of scamp and yellowmouth grouper, and this is expected to achieve long-term yields that are consistent with the MSY while providing conservation benefits to the stock. Another AP member noted that the Council had requested that the SSC review $F_{30\%SPR}$ versus $F_{40\%SPR}$. The AP then asked what effect shifting the

MSY proxy from $F_{30\%SPR}$ versus $F_{40\%SPR}$ would have on discards, which Council staff indicated would be expected to increase.

The AP asked if the positive effects of an increase in the MSY proxy to $F_{40\%SPR}$ would be offset by an increase of dead discards. Council staff replied that there would be a major reduction in harvest, regardless of the $F_{30\%SPR}$ or $F_{40\%SPR}$, coupled with higher discards going forward, assuming fishing behavior remains unchanged. Council staff added that recruitment has been lackluster in recent years, and that the $F_{30\%SPR}$ proxy is what was defined prior to the SEDAR 68 stock assessment. An AP member inquired why there are catch limit reductions if the species are not overfished or undergoing overfishing. Council staff replied that the trajectory of the fishing mortality is in the direction of undergoing overfishing, and combined with poor recruitment, was going to result in a catch limit reduction, regardless of the proxy used for MSY. An AP member thought that landings of scamp and yellowmouth grouper had increased recently due to effort shifting from other species.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP supports the Council's petition to the SSC to see projections for the Scamp complex at 30% SPR.

Motion carried unanimously.

The AP discussed how technology has affected the ability of both sectors to target reef fish. The AP expressed concern that management decisions were being made without full inclusion of technology's influences on fisheries.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the SSC review how changes in available technology have influenced fishing behavior, harvest rates, and dead discards for reef fish over time.

Motion carried unanimously.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the SSC review the difference in discard mortality and overall discards between the 30%SPR and 40%SPR proxy values for scamp and yellowmouth grouper.

Motion carried unanimously.

An AP member asked why the new black grouper and yellowfin grouper complex would use the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey data units, while the scamp and yellowmouth grouper complex would use the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES). Council staff replied that black grouper is co-managed with the SAFMC, and any updates to a new black grouper complex would involve an amendment with both Councils. Further, no updated stock assessment for black grouper exists upon which to inform any changes to its management. An AP member asked why the two species pairings were being proposed, instead of the four species being managed separately. Council staff pointed to the SEDAR 68 stock assessment, which assessed scamp and yellowmouth grouper together, and the similar life histories shared for SWG complex species.

The AP discussed the low landings of yellowmouth grouper compared to scamp, in conjunction with the 18% buffer being considered between the recreational ACL and ACT. The Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule, which uses a set of factors to determine a buffer between the ACL and ACT for a sector or stock, increases that buffer when the catch limit is for an assemblage or complex of stocks. Council staff noted that the Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule produces a 14% buffer if the scamp and yellowmouth grouper complex is considered a single stock given the miniscule landings of yellowmouth grouper.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends consideration of a 14% ACL/ACT buffer for the recreational sector of the scamp and yellowmouth grouper complex in Action 5.

Motion carried unanimously.

The AP inquired why a 4% commercial ACL/ACT buffer is being considered for the new black grouper and yellowfin grouper complex. Council staff responded that it was a carryover from the flexibility measures between Deep-water Grouper (DWG) and SWG complexes, and to account for uncertainty at the institution of the IFQ program in 2010. With no flexibility measures being considered and given the high precision in the commercial landings estimates, this buffer may no longer be serving its intended purpose.

On reallocation, the AP reiterated the Council's position taken during its October 2023 meeting regarding any sector allocation discussions for species using MRIP-FES data.

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 unanimously.

The AP discussed how the ABC of 322,000 lb gw in Action 1, Alternative 2 of the Framework Action would provide a more gradual transition to the ABCs proposed in Reef Fish Amendment 58A. An AP member asked if a fixed closed season in Action 2 of the framework action would allow the Council to not implement Reef Fish Amendment 58A. Council staff responded that the framework action would be in place for 2026, and the Council would need to take final action on Reef Fish Amendment 58A by November 2025 for implementation by January 1, 2027. As a result, landings reflecting a fixed closed season from the framework action would not be available in time for a Council decision on Reef Fish Amendment 58A.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends in the Other Shallow-water Grouper Framework Action, in Action 1, to make Alternative 2 the preferred.

Motion carried unanimously.

An AP member mentioned a need for the SWG complex to be open in the summer, to coincide with fishing for red snapper in deeper waters.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends an analysis on what impact a combined fishing season for shallow-water grouper during amberjack and/or red snapper season would have.

Motion carried unanimously.

Review: Draft Amendment 58B: Modifications to Deep-water Grouper Management Measures

Council staff presented updated management alternatives for modifying the DWG complex, informed by recent stock assessment advice. Management alternatives for DWG include 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, make up the DWG complex. The SSC recommended managing DWG as a complex because of the use of similar data units and to reduce dead discards.

An AP member asked why the buffer between the OFL and ABC was so much greater under Alternative 2 than Alternative 1. Council staff replied that the Council's ABC Control Rule produces very narrow buffers, which the SSC has recognized as not appropriately accounting for scientific uncertainty. In response, the SSC has been using guidance from Restrepo et al. (1998)¹, which recommends setting the ABC at 75% of the yield when fishing at the MSY proxy. The AP acknowledged that the recreational landings were highly variable and uncertain.

In discussing Action 2, the AP recalled its motion to not make modifications to the sector allocations under MRIP-FES. Regarding the uncertainty in the recreational data, some AP members expressed reservations about increasing the recreational ACL. AP members thought that the 4% buffer between the commercial ACL and the commercial quota no longer served its intended purpose.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends the removal of the 4% buffer on the deep-water and shallow-water grouper complexes for the commercial sector.

Motion carried unanimously.

An AP member thought that the current sector allocation favored the commercial sector, based on landings from 20 years ago. Technological improvements and the increased prevalence of large center console boats in the recreational sector may be leading to increased potential for recreational harvest. Another AP member noted that the DWG recreational daily bag limit was 4

¹ <https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/12d-Restrepo-et-al.-1998.pdf>

fish per person, and that discard mortality is likely high due to barotrauma. An AP member said that the DWG commercial fishing fleet is getting smaller, which they thought explained the reduction in commercial landings in recent years. Another AP member added that the under-accounting of recreational landings was also a factor and was likely resulting in an underrepresentation of the recreational sector in the sector allocation options. Other AP members agreed that recreational use of the DWG complex has expanded in recent years.

In discussing Action 3, the AP asked about the potential for consecutive overages of the recreational ACL under Alternative 5. Council staff reviewed the recreational landings and showed the frequency of potential ACL overages in relation to the ACLs in each of the alternatives under Action 2. Council staff also reviewed the data quality control procedures followed prior to the finalization of the landings estimate for a given fishing year. An AP member asked if it was possible for the recreational sector to get credit for instances when the recreational harvest was under its ACL. Council staff replied that the SSC is in the process of revamping the ABC Control Rule and may consider such measures. An AP member thought that Alternative 5 was preferable to Alternative 4 by insulating the recreational sector from being unduly penalized by the uncertainty in the recreational landings data. Another AP member agreed, noting how the weather plays such an important role in determining recreational access when having to travel far offshore.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends, in Action 3, to make Alternative 5 the preferred.

Motion carried unanimously.

Review: Framework Action: Removal of the Recreational 20-fathom Shallow-water Grouper Closure

Council staff reviewed the history of management and available data sources used to inform the analysis to remove the 20-fathom recreational SWG closure. Staff requested the AP comment on desired outcomes and future development of the document. An AP member advocated for removal of the closure citing that the expansiveness of the area makes enforcement of the law unfeasible. He continued that many anglers ignore the rule given the lack of enforcement. Additional comments were made to emphasize that any catch limit reduction in an already shortened season, like with red grouper, should be avoided. Several members stated the document should be postponed until the red grouper stock assessment (SEDAR 88) is completed. An AP member highlighted that additional problems may arise if the 20-fathom closure is eliminated given the uncertainty in the red grouper stock condition. An AP member reiterated that access to the fishery is a high priority, but the current closure is not effective for the recreational sector.

General consensus within the AP was to re-visit the document following the completion of the red grouper assessment (SEDAR 88) and a future catch limit discussion to better inform decision-making. An AP member was concerned about other SWG groupers, and discussion reiterated that postponing the analysis until after a review of the red grouper assessment would likely be the best option given the status of other SWG species. Another AP member commented on this analysis not being solely intended for red grouper, as this closure also impacts scamp, particularly in the Florida panhandle. Capt. Ed Walker (Council representative) responded that his intent for this

document was for better management of red grouper and increased access for the recreational sector seaward of 20 fathoms.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends revisiting work on the 20-fathom Shallow-water Grouper Closure after the red grouper stock assessment is complete and catch level increases are being discussed.

Motion carried unanimously.

Presentation: Modifications to Federal For-hire Red Snapper Fishing Season

In April 2024, the Council directed staff to re-evaluate the for-hire buffer for red snapper, and consider modifying the season opening date. 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 this time, and to proceed only with considering changes to the for-hire fishing season. Council staff presented draft options for this action including a season duration analysis. Capt. Walker recounted differing preferences from public testimony received at the Council's November 2024 meeting. Ultimately, the Council selected Alternative 2 as its preferred alternative. AP members discussed their individual and regional preferences. Generally, private recreational fishermen were opposed to the for-hire fishing season opening before the private angling season. An AP member noted that the individual Gulf states could modify their opening dates for their respective private angling seasons as they saw fit. Regarding the idea of a split season, the Council decided not to explore that option due to the difficulty in collecting the data in time to determine the duration for the second half of the fishing season in any given year.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends Alternative 2 in Action 1 be the Council's preferred alternative.

Motion carried 11-3, with one abstention.

Presentation: Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size and Recreational Bag Limits

Council staff provided an update on the Gulf lane snapper management measures analysis to modify the minimum size limit and recreational daily bag limits. The presentation included an updated purpose and need statement, action alternatives, and a preliminary analysis on retained size frequency distribution. Several AP members commented that a 10-inch total length minimum size limit would achieve the Council's intended goal to reduce landings to stay within the ACL. An AP member noted that additional management measures would likely not be necessary if the minimum size limit is increased. Another AP member responded that retaining so many lane snapper in a trip may not be necessary, and a bag limit may be worthwhile. Based on the data presented for minimum size limits, the AP reached consensus that an increase in size limit would likely constrain harvest a sufficient amount without further adjusting recreational bag limits.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that in Action 1, to make Alternative 2 the preferred.

Motion carried unanimously.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that any bag limit changes be removed from the document pending a size limit increase.

Motion carried unanimously.

Other Business

Lane Snapper

The AP discussed the data currently used in the interim analyses for lane snapper, which have been used by the SSC and Council in recent years to modify lane snapper catch limits. The interim analyses have to date been using the recreational headboat catch-per-unit-effort data, in tandem with the landings against the ACLs, to adjust catch limits. The AP thought better data were available, and recommended use of the G-FISHER composite video index, and of Tier 3a of the Council's ABC Control Rule, to evaluate future catch limit modifications for lane snapper.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP recommends that the SSC and the Council evaluate catch limits for lane snapper using Tier 3a of the ABC Control Rule and use the G-FISHER data to monitor the lane snapper stock for changes in length composition.

Motion carried unanimously.

SAFMC Release App

An AP member summarized information about the SAFMC Release app, which was developed to collect supplementary release information and other trip-level recreational fishing data by voluntary reporting from fishermen. However, the lack of validation for the data collected remains an outstanding issue for inclusion in stock assessments.

Red Snapper Sizes

Several AP members discussed their desire to see more information about the declining length composition of the red snapper harvested by private anglers, and the discards from that fleet.

Motion: The Reef Fish AP asks that the states and Gulf Council staff work together to:

- 1. Include numeric values of average sizes in their private recreational angler season updates.**
- 2. Analyze the Gulf-wide trend of red snapper averages sizes, publicizing both the trends figure and numeric values.**
- 3. Conduct an analysis of number of in- and out-of- season discards of red snapper, both in each state and Gulf-wide.**

Motion carried unanimously.

Public Comment

Eric Schmidt: For-Hire and Commercial Fisherman, Southwest Florida

The fishery is imperiled, we have a lot of problems. He has spent 40-years in Southwest Florida, and he isn't confident the industry will survive. He's seen the fleets decline continuously. Southwest Florida has experienced numerous challenges including the worst red tide in memory in 2018, COVID in 2020, Hurricane Ian in 2022, and three hurricanes this year. On top of the outside influences that have impacted the fishing industry, they have had to deal with seasonal closures. It's December, and people aren't booking for-hire trips. Numerous for-hire operators are on the verge of selling out. The Magnuson-Stevens Act manages both fish and people. For-hire fishing used to be a year-round job, but now it's essentially 4-months. He has caught more lane snapper than anyone in the room. We're here cutting size limits, bag limits, etc. to get out from under the issue. We tried this with greater amberjack for 30-years to no avail and did the same with gray triggerfish. He stated something different needs to be considered instead of these constant changes to each individual species. We never had a problem with red snapper, yet it has been declining in the last 2 years. He heard at least 40 fishermen in the last 2 years come to public comment and ask the Council not to increase red snapper catch limits, but the Council did it anyways. It makes him feel like the Council wants to create an issue with the fishery. The new presidential administration has promised to shake things up, and he hopes they start with NOAA.

Buddy Guindon: Commercial Fisherman, Galveston, Texas

He let the AP know that they did a good job getting through the agenda today and thanked everyone for their service.

Ashford Rosenberg: Policy Director for The Reef Fish Shareholders Alliance

She echoes concerns about trends for red snapper, especially size trends as we get further into state management. While we're seeing the individual state trends, she encourages the Council to take a holistic, Gulf-wide look at trends in red snapper size.

The meeting adjourned at 4:10 pm eastern time on December 3, 2024.

Meeting Participants

Reef Fish AP Members

Dylan Hubbard, *Chair*
Gary Jarvis, *Vice Chair*
Jane Black-Lee
Doug Boyd
Josh Ellender

Rachal Hisler
Mike Jennings
Will Langley
John Marquez, Jr
Alex McIngvale
Greg Mercurio

Steve Papen
Alicia Paul
Clarence Seymour

Council Representative
Ed Walker