



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

December 2024
Reef Fish Advisory Panel

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.*



History of Management

- 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 complex
- Regulatory Amendment (1999): Closed commercial harvest of gag, black grouper, red grouper February 15th-March 15th
 - Intended to benefit gag; benefits other groupers as well



History of Management

- Regulatory Amendment (2006): Established recreational closed season Feb 15 – Mar 15
- Amendment 30B (2008):
 - Discontinued commercial closed season in anticipation of IFQ program along with additional time area-closures to protect gag (e.g., the Edges)
 - Extended recreational closure from Feb 1st – March 31st to reduce overfishing of gag



History of Management

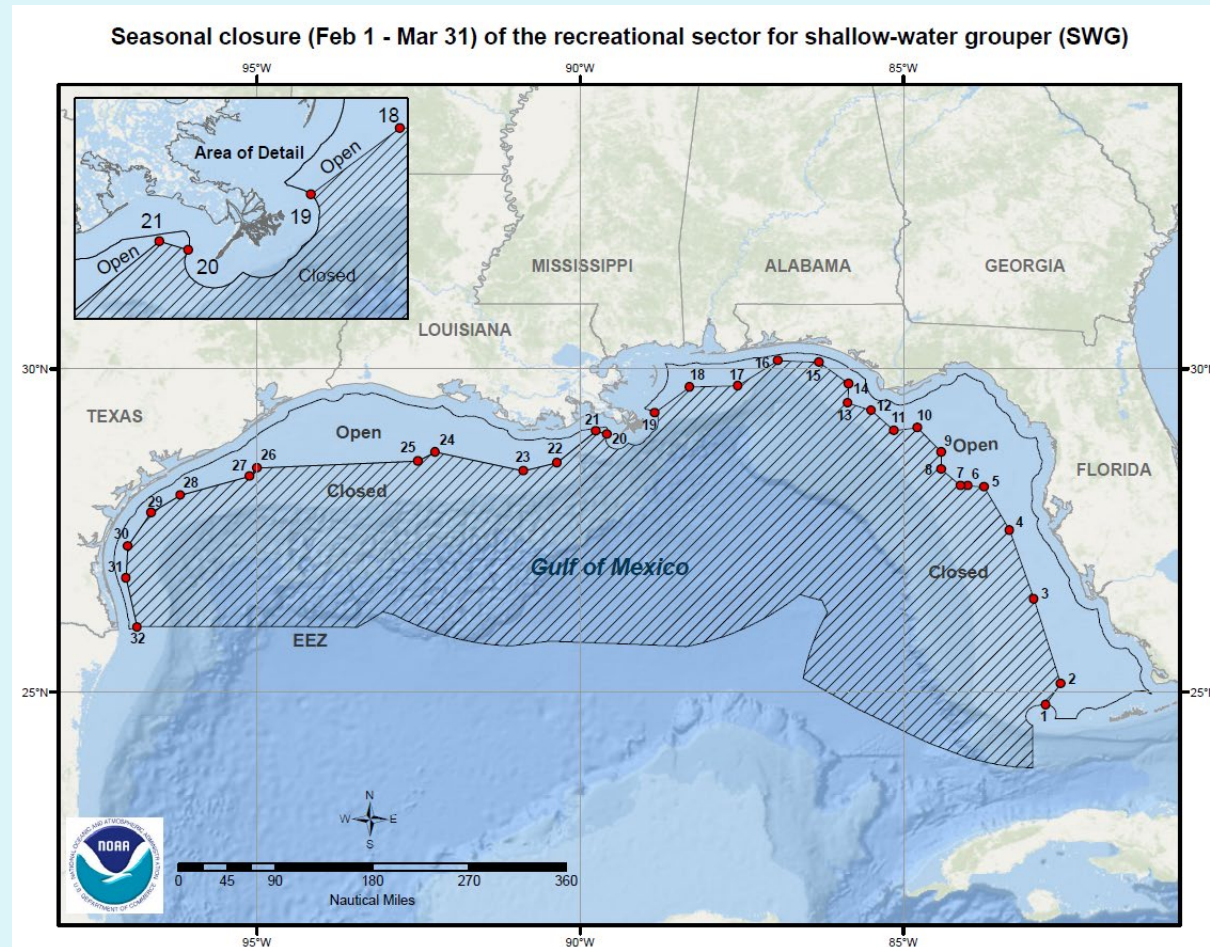
- Generic ACL/AM Amendment (2011)
 - Nassau grouper transferred to SAFMC
 - Red hind, rock hind removed from management unit (low landings)

- Framework Action (2013): Seaward of 20 fathoms, the Feb 1 – March 31 closure remained in effect
 - Shoreward of 20 fathoms, no seasonal closure





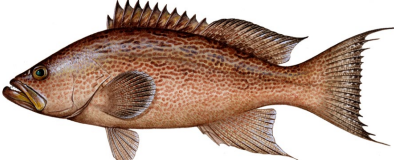



The Fine Print

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 58: Modify catch levels and shallow-water grouper management measures
Yellowmouth Grouper		RF 58: Modify catch levels and shallow-water grouper management measures
Black Grouper		RF 58: Modify catch levels based on recent landings; combined with yellowfin grouper
Yellowfin Grouper		RF 58: 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
				3	5	10	9	8	8	8	7	4	2	1	3
				Q1			Q2			Q3			Q4		

Spawning months

Stallings et al. 2023

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.



Considerations for the Committee

- The Feb – March closure was intended to promote conservation of grouper species; primarily gag and red grouper.
- Recreational gag harvest is subject to a seasonal closure during the spring spawning season as part of the rebuilding plan.
- A red grouper stock assessment is underway, results could affect management preferences. Current quota closures limiting harvest later in the year.
- Allowable harvest for the remaining SWG species is likely to decrease based on the results of the scamp/yellowmouth grouper stock assessment and updated black grouper/yellowfin grouper OFL and ABC recommendations from the SSC.

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

SWG Closure Cons

- Harvest constrained ACLs and AMs
- Gag is already closed during this period
- Likely requires at-sea enforcement
- Commercial harvest is allowed fathoms during Feb – Mar



Next Steps and Questions?

- Proceed with the development of a draft document?
- Are there other management options for consideration?

