

**Reef Fish Committee Report
April 8 – 9, 2025
Dr. Thomas Frazer – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) and the minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the January 2025 meeting were approved as written.

Review of Reef Fish and IFQ Program Landings, and State Program Landings for Red Snapper (Tab B, Nos. 4a - e)

SERO staff reviewed the status of reef fish and individual fishing quota (IFQ) program landings relative to catch limits. Council representatives from the five Gulf States also reviewed their 2024 private angling fishing seasons for red snapper and offered projections for the 2025 fishing season. The states also characterized available data for observed mean lengths and weights for red snapper, fishing effort, and other data. A Committee member asked about disruptions in Florida due to the active 2024 hurricane season, which saw three named storms make landfall in the late summer and fall. The State of Florida representative replied that hurricane activity undoubtedly had an impact on the state's fishing effort in 2024. The state representative from Alabama clarified that it would be transitioning to a 7-days-a-week fishing season for 2025, and that its landings do include self-reported dead discards, which account for between 5 – 7.5% of Alabama's landings by weight.

Draft: Reef Fish Amendment 58B: Modifications to Deep-water Grouper Management Measures (Tab B, Nos. 5a - b)

Council staff presented updated management alternatives for modifying the deep-water grouper (DWG) complex, in light of recent stock assessment advice. Management alternatives for DWG include specifying status determination criteria, catch limits, sector allocations, and accountability measures (AMs). This most recent draft reflects changes made by the Council to the document in January 2025. The Committee heard feedback from the Reef Fish Advisory Panel (AP) on the actions and alternatives presented. The Reef Fish AP recommended that the Council select Alternative 2 in Action 1 as preferred and thought the 4% buffer between the commercial quota and commercial annual catch limit (ACL) was no longer necessary. Captain Dylan Hubbard (Reef Fish AP Chair) recalled concern by the Reef Fish AP with reallocating DWG between the sectors using data which are informed by the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES). Given that, the Reef Fish AP preferred Alternative 1 in Action 2, retaining the status quo on allocation. For AMs in Action 3, the Reef Fish AP preferred Alternative 5, which would impose a post-season AM to adjust the recreational fishing season in the event of an ACL overage based on the average landings from the previous three fishing years.

NOAA General Counsel asked why the Reef Fish AP did not select Alternative 2 in Action 2, which performs similarly to Alternative 1 in that action. Captain Hubbard replied that the Reef Fish AP debated the issue heavily, but ultimately was hesitant to recommend any allocation

changes using MRIP-FES data. A Committee member asked about the implications of selecting Alternative 1 in Action 2. NOAA General Counsel replied that applying AMs in Action 3 would be problematic without defining a recreational ACL in Action 2.

Council staff reviewed Action 1, which evaluates changes to status determination criteria, and the setting of the overfishing limit (OFL), acceptable biological catch (ABC), and complex ACL. A Committee member asked about the mechanism for implementing the current AMs, given the undefined recreational ACL. NOAA General Counsel replied that applying the current AMs requires NMFS to assume that the commercial sector will harvest its ACL, although AMs have not been triggered to date. Whether a recreational ACL is specified or not, the recreational sector is managed to the poundage in the remainder of the complex ACL minus the commercial ACL.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to select 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 F40%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 F40%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.

Council staff reviewed the alternatives in Action 2, which considers changes to sector allocations and ACLs. A Committee member thought the only alternative in Action 2 that was less likely to result in recreational ACL overages and closures was Alternative 3, which would set the recreational ACL at 10.21% of the complex ACL, or 56,649 pounds gutted weight. The Committee member also thought the larger recreational ACL in Alternative 3 would reduce the likelihood of recreational fishing season closures and thus might reduce dead discards.

A Committee member asked about the precision of the recreational data for DWG species. Council staff replied that based on the vessel types required to reach the depths in which DWG species occur, recreational anglers targeting DWG would likely be fishing from private access points and were thus less likely to be intercepted for catch surveys conducted at public ramps. Committee members added that guidance from the NOAA Office of Science and Technology is to not use landings data with a proportional standard error (PSE) exceeding 50%. The annual or wave PSE for recreational landings of DWG often exceeds 50%. Regarding the 4% reduction from the commercial ACL to the commercial quota, the Committee thought it necessary to

determine whether to retain the current flexibility measures between the Other Shallow-water Grouper (SWG) complex and the DWG complex. The 4% buffer between the commercial ACL and quota is in place to allow the current flexibility measures to function. Removal of these flexibility measures is a current consideration in Draft Amendment 58A, which considers modifications to the SWG complex.

Council staff reviewed Action 3, which considers revisions to recreational AMs. Regarding Alternative 4, Council staff noted that NOAA General Counsel thought it was in violation of National Standard 1, which requires annual monitoring of landings against the ACL. NOAA General Counsel further clarified that Alternative 4 would allow for no action for a two-year period, regardless of stock status. A Committee member recalled that the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) presented the approach outlined in Alternative 4 as scientifically viable, and questioned why that would be in violation of National Standard 1.

Recreational Initiative (Tab B, Nos. 6a – d)

Dr. Willy Goldsmith and Mr. Andrew Loftus reviewed the final report on the Council's Recreational Initiative including the recommendations put forth by the working group. Following the summary of working group outcomes, Mr. Robert Hilliard gave an overview of the Recreational Initiative working group's progress and recommended outcomes. Lastly, Council staff provided a summary of the public engagement sessions held to date. Council staff presented a decision flowchart to prompt the Committee to systematically move through the working group recommendations. Points of consideration for the Council in addressing working group recommendations should include the magnitude of the impacts of the recommendation, and prioritization of working group recommendations for action. A Committee member commended the working group participants, consultants and Council staff for the effort put into the working group meetings and noted that the working group was able to capture the complexity in fisheries management and the multi-faceted issues the Council is faced with when managing fisheries. Another Committee member suggested that the working group recommendations be integrated into the Council process but are likely to take a few meetings for the Council to prioritize those recommendations. A Committee member suggested that rationale be included in Council-led decision making to aid in the Council's prioritization of working group recommendations. Additionally, it was suggested that an evaluation of necessary resources for each recommendation be used to inform the prioritization discussion.

A Committee member suggested that Council staff coordinate with the steering committee to expand on working group member recommendations to be presented to the Council at a later meeting. Additionally, it was suggested that in reference to the decision flowchart, the first question should be whether the recommendation is within the Council's purview, as it is likely that a few of the recommendations fall outside of the Council's authority. Another Committee member suggested that for those recommendations that do not fit within the purview of the Council, the appropriate agency to recommend changes should be identified. A Committee member suggested that those recommendations that contain a regulatory component be identified, and those that do not contain regulatory components be prioritized over those that do, due to additional workload associated with regulatory actions.

A Committee member proposed that, based on the discussion, the Committee suggest staff develop the appropriate tool (flowchart, whitepaper, etc.) to bring back to the Council to aid in prioritization. Council staff weighed in that timing for a staff-produced product is unknown, and there should be a larger discussion at full Council to determine if further steering committee involvement is necessary. On the evening of April 8, 2025, the Council held a separate recreational initiative public engagement session, and a summary of that public engagement session will be provided at full Council.

Summary: February 2025 Gulf and South Atlantic Scientific Statistical Committees (SSC) Webinar (Tab B, Nos. 7a – f)

Dr. Mike Allen (Gulf SSC Chair) reviewed recommendations from the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs’ joint meeting in Tampa, Florida, held in February 2025. Dr. Allen began with reviewing the SSCs’ evaluation of the SEDAR 79 stock assessment of southeastern US mutton snapper, including catch limit recommendations. The Council’s Fishermen Feedback tool, and the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (South Atlantic Council) fishery performance report, indicated neutral and positive sentiments for mutton snapper, respectively. SEDAR 79 uses the State of Florida’s State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) in place of MRIP-FES for private vessels, with a terminal data year of 2023. Generally, the mutton snapper stock appears to be experiencing stable landings, increasing recruitment, and increasing fractions of older fish composing the stock’s biomass. The SSCs thought that the increase in the minimum size limit to 18 inches total length, combined with the reduced recreational bag limit, had likely been positive for the stock.

The SSCs concluded, based on the SEDAR 79 results, that the mutton snapper stock is not undergoing overfishing nor is it overfished as of 2023. This determination of stock status was based on the currently adopted spawning potential ratio (SPR)-based proxy for the fishing mortality at maximum sustainable yield (F_{MSY}) of $F_{30\%SPR}$. The SSCs selected an alternative approach from the South Atlantic Council’s P* approach in its ABC Control Rule for mutton snapper, because of differences in how the uncertainty in the OFL was characterized. The SSCs used the geometric mean of the most recent five years of recruitment (2019 – 2023) for informing OFL and ABC projections. The OFL is set at $F_{30\%SPR}$, and the ABC is set at 75% of $F_{30\%SPR}$, for the years 2026 – 2028, as derived from the provided projections for 2024 – 2028.

	OFL ($F_{30\%SPR}$)	ABC (75% of $F_{30\%SPR}$)
2024	<i>3,280,143</i>	<i>2,498,073</i>
2025	<i>3,384,760</i>	<i>2,662,320</i>
2026	3,363,706	2,725,359
2027	3,313,030	2,752,377
2028	3,270,355	2,772,615

Captain Hubbard reviewed recommendations from the Reef Fish AP regarding the SEDAR 79 stock assessment for mutton snapper. The Reef Fish AP recommended that the annual catch limit (ACL) be set equal to the ABC for the Gulf, and that other current management measures remain unchanged.

Dr. Allen recalled that, during a period of open discussion, the SSCs noted a clear need to collectively address the required precision to estimate steepness (and thus estimate MSY) for management advice. He noted also that there was a discussion of appropriate SPR proxy values given a broad range of life history characteristics among fish species (e.g., longevity, age at maturity, growth characteristics, vulnerability to environmental perturbations). The SSCs by consensus thought that a follow-up joint meeting to address these topics is essential to the consistent application of an agreed decision-making paradigm for present and future stock assessments. A Committee member pointed out that the estimated stock recruit relationship for mutton snapper was poorly fit, despite allowing the model to estimate MSY. The SEFSC added that NMFS was working on a technical guidance document to inform best practices for estimating steepness.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to form a working group comprised of members of the Gulf and South Atlantic SSCs to collectively address the best practices for estimating steepness (and thus estimate MSY) for management advice, as well as a discussion of SPR proxy values given a range of life history values among fish species.**

Motion carried without opposition.

Dr. Allen continued with the SSCs' evaluation of the SEDAR 96 stock assessment of southeastern US yellowtail snapper, including catch limit recommendations. The Council's Fishermen Feedback tool, and the South Atlantic Council's fishery performance report, indicated positive sentiments for yellowtail snapper, and northward range expansion. SEDAR 96 uses SRFS in place of MRIP-FES for private vessels, with a terminal data year of 2023. Generally, the yellowtail snapper stock appears to be experiencing oscillatory, but, on average, consistent landings, increasing recruitment and catch per unit effort. Like mutton snapper, the estimate of steepness was considered too uncertain to use the estimate of MSY from the model by the SSCs.

The SSCs concluded that yellowtail snapper is estimated to not be overfished and not experiencing overfishing as of 2023. Like mutton snapper, this determination of stock status was based on the currently adopted SPR-based proxy for F_{MSY} of $F_{30\%SPR}$. Also, like mutton snapper, the SSCs selected an alternative approach from the South Atlantic Council's P* approach in its ABC Control Rule for yellowtail snapper, because of differences in how the uncertainty in the OFL was characterized. The SSCs used the arithmetic mean of the most recent five years of recruitment (2019 – 2023) for informing OFL and ABC projections. The yellowtail snapper OFL is set at $F_{30\%SPR}$, and the ABC is set at 75% of $F_{30\%SPR}$, for the years 2026-2028, as derived from the provided projections for 2024-2028.

	OFL (F _{30%SPR})	ABC (75% of F _{30%SPR})
2024	5,076,490	3,955,300
2025	4,767,230	3,973,088
2026	4,495,187	3,925,031
2027	4,364,600	3,913,426
2028	4,307,856	3,918,634

Likewise, for the SEDAR 96 stock assessment of yellowtail snapper, Capt. Hubbard said that the Reef Fish AP recommended that the Gulf ACL be set equal to the Gulf ABC, and that other current management measures remain unchanged. The Reef Fish AP also noted the northward expansion of the yellowtail snapper stock in the Gulf.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to direct staff to develop a document that updates catch advice and jurisdictional apportionments for mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper in the Gulf and South Atlantic in cooperation with the South Atlantic Council.**

Motion carried without opposition.

Dr. Allen added that the SSCs recommended updating the stock assessments for mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper at least every five years.

Dr. Allen summarized the Gulf SSC’s evaluation of the SEDAR 88 stock assessment of Gulf red grouper, including discussions about status determination criteria and catch limit recommendations. The Council’s Fishermen Feedback tool indicated neutral sentiments for red grouper, while also noting issues with depredation by sharks. SEDAR 88 uses SRFS in place of MRIP-FES for private vessels, with a terminal data year of 2022; there is no shore mode included for red grouper. The estimate of natural mortality was updated for red grouper, resulting in a 31% increase in that parameter, which greatly influenced the stock assessment in terms of red grouper’s productivity and projected biomass. Landings for red grouper are lower in recent years; however, lower catch limits may have biased these recent landings data. The combined video survey indicates an increase in abundance since 2015. Like mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper, steepness was estimable in SEDAR 88; however, the SSC was not confident in the precision of that estimate, and thus did not use the model estimated MSY. Instead, the SSC decided to use a proxy value for MSY of F_{40%SPR}, in keeping with its past decisions on the matter for hermaphroditic groupers (i.e., gag, scamp, yellowmouth grouper, yellowedge grouper). Red tide episodic mortality was modeled as a bycatch fleet for four red tide years (2005, 2014, 2018, 2021), with the selectivity by red tide being variable by age (higher selectivity at lower ages). Recruitment is highly variable, but generally increasing since 2010.

The SSC found the SEDAR 88 stock assessment for Gulf red grouper to be consistent with the best scientific information available, and appropriate for management advice. The SSC set the OFL at F_{40%SPR} for Gulf red grouper based on the SEDAR 88 base model projections and a

Tab B

constant catch scenario for the fishing years 2027 – 2029, at 11.28 million pounds gutted weight (mp gw). The SSC set the ABC at 75% of $F_{40\%SPR}$ for 2027 – 2029, at 8.78 mp gw. A Committee member was concerned about a default approach by the SSC to use an MSY proxy of $F_{40\%SPR}$ for all hermaphroditic groupers. The Committee member thought red grouper were more resilient and productive, and that perhaps a less conservative MSY proxy could be appropriate.

Captain Hubbard said that the Reef Fish AP recommended setting the ACL equal to the ABC for red grouper. The Reef Fish AP also recommended exploring an option for reallocation based on updated red grouper landings in SRFS units as a secondary document to follow catch increases. Regarding the 2025 recreational red grouper fishing season, the Reef Fish AP expressed concern about the continued negative social and economic effects of the recreational fishing season as currently projected, calling attention to the positive stock assessment results from SEDAR 88. Given this, the Reef Fish AP recommended that 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, to address the economic and social needs of the red grouper fishery.

The Committee discussed a request for an emergency rule regarding modification of red grouper catch limits. SERO said that there appeared to be grounds for an emergency rule based on economic circumstances, and that moving forward with such a management measure would need to become the top workload priority for the Council and SERO to implement that change in a timely manner. A Committee member thought not allowing the expansion of the recreational red grouper fishing season would be detrimental to the recreational fleet, especially in June and July when fishing for red snapper off Florida is also open. The Committee member prioritized keeping June open for red grouper. Regarding proposed management changes, the Committee agreed that updated status determination criteria and catch limits would need to be considered. Regarding sector allocations, NOAA General Counsel reminded the Committee that the last time the underlying data units were updated to MRIP-FES, sector allocations were updated; as such, sector allocations should be reconsidered given the use of SRFS units. The Committee noted that it may need to request updated OFL and ABC projections from the SSC which include 2026.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to direct staff to develop a document that provides management advice for red grouper.**

Motion carried without opposition.

Summary of Reef Fish Advisory Panel Discussions and Recommendations (Tab B, No. 5a)

The Reef Fish AP discussed data collection for the headboat fleet in the Gulf and recommended that the Council encourage the SEFSC and NMFS to seek all available means for continued funding of the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS) as to continue and protect this key data stream. Captain Hubbard recalled general discussion about recreational data collection, and strongly recommended that the Council request that NMFS, GSMFC, and the five Gulf States expedite the requirement for a private recreational federal fishing permit to fish in the exclusive

economic zone (states can require similar language to their state fishing licenses in lieu of a federal 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.

The Committee recounted a previous letter to NMFS requesting additional information about the headboat survey, noting its importance to fishery data collection. A Committee member asked about any limitation with including the headboats in question into the newly proposed Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting program. Another Committee member thought doing so would still result in the loss of the current time series for the existing headboat survey. SERO cautioned that continuing funding for one program, considering expected budget reductions, would likely be to the detriment of another program, and that decision would need to be carefully considered. The Committee noted that it is not privy to all programs that are being considered for cuts or elimination in the proposed NMFS budget. A Committee member did not want to imply that funding for another program should be reduced, but rather that funding for the headboat survey should continue.

Draft Framework: Other Shallow-water Grouper Catch Limits (Tab B, No. 9)

Council staff presented on the draft framework action to modify the catch limits and recreational fishing season for the SWG complex. This document is being considered to reduce fishing mortality on SWG species ahead of the development and implementation of Amendment 58A, which considers Modifications to Other Shallow-water Grouper Management Measures.

Captain Hubbard reviewed the Reef Fish AP’s recommendation to create a new Alternative 6 in Action 2 and selecting it as the preferred alternative. This new Alternative 6 would open the fishing season from April 1 – May 31, close the fishing season in June and July, and then reopen to fishing on August 1 through December 31, or when the fishery is projected to close. However, upon hearing Council staff’s review of Figure 2.2.1, Capt. Hubbard noted that reopening in August with a new Alternative 6, that is not currently in the document would likely cause the season to close before the end of the year. A Committee member concurred that Alternative 5 would be preferable to the proposed new alternative proffered by the Reef Fish AP. Another Committee member stated that public comment would be useful before selecting a preferred alternative. He expressed some reservations about a split season with Alternative 5 and noted that Alternative 3 appeared to provide a long single season and would avoid some of the discards during the summer months. A Committee member inquired how long the framework action would be in effect. Council staff responded that it would be in effect for 2026.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 2, to make Alternative 3 the preferred.**

Alternative 3: Establish a recreational fixed closed season for the Other SWG complex. The recreational season would open July 1 and close when the recreational portion of the total ACL is expected to be met under the Preferred Alternative in Action 1.

Action 1, Alternative 2: Closed January 1 – June 30; (Open July 1 – December 31)

Action 1, Alternative 3: Closed January 1 – June 30; Closed August 18 – Dec 31 (Open July 1 – August 17)

Action 1, Alternative 4: Closed January 1 – June 30; August 25 – Dec 31 (Open June 1 – August 24)

Motion carried without opposition.

Committee members recognized that Alternative 4 in Action 2 provided a much shorter season than Preferred Alternative 3 and should not be further considered.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, in Action 2, to move Alternative 4 to Considered but Rejected.**

Alternative 4: Establish a recreational fixed closed season for the Other SWG complex. The recreational season would open September 1 and close when the recreational portion of the total ACL is expected to be met under the Preferred Alternative in Action 1.

Action 1, Alternative 2: Closed January 1 – August 31 (Open September 1 – December 31)

Action 1, Alternative 3: Closed January 1 – August 31; Closed October 28 – Dec 31 (Open September 1 – October 27)

Action 1, Alternative 4: Closed January 1 – August 31; Closed December 21 – Dec 31 (Open September 1 – December 20)

Motion carried without opposition.

Presentation and Discussion on the 20-Fathom Recreational Seasonal Closure for Shallow-water Grouper (Tab B, No. 10)

Council staff reviewed a presentation on the history and status of the 20-Fathom Recreational Seasonal Closure for Shallow-water Grouper. A Committee member acknowledged the stock status for red grouper and wanted to see what the fishing season projections under the newly proposed SEDAR 88 catch limits were prior to deciding. The Committee member also noted that removing the 20-fathom closure would be a form of deregulation. Another Committee member agreed, but did not want to remove the closure at the expense of fishing season duration. Captain Hubbard recalled that the Reef Fish AP recommended that the Council remove the 20-fathom seaward closure for the recreational sector in February through March. He thought compliance with the regulation was very inconsistent and is often misunderstood by recreational anglers. He added that in his experience, the 20-fathom closure resulted in increased discard mortality for smaller red grouper during February and March. The Committee considered including an action for the removal of the 20-fathom closure in the requested red grouper management measures document. NOAA General Counsel asked about how discards, especially for gag, might change if this regulation is removed. Council staff replied that discard data are not spatially explicit. Captain Hubbard added that he did not think discards of gag would

increase. A Committee member agreed, noting personal experiences with landing gag and red grouper.

FINAL ACTION: *Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limit (Tab B, Nos. 11a - c)*

Council staff reviewed public comments received regarding the proposed modification to the lane snapper minimum size limit. Staff then presented a final action draft of the document, and reviewed changes from the last draft. SERO staff expressed interest in further exploring the economic analyses, which may be overestimating the economic effects of the proposed action, given that lane snapper is not commonly a primary target on reef fish fishing trips. The Committee then reviewed the proposed codified text.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to recommend the Council approve **Framework Action: Modifications to Lane Snapper Minimum Size Limits and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation, and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes in the document. The Council Chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate.**

Motion carried without opposition.

Presentation: Greater Amberjack Flowchart to Identify Decision Points for Regional Management (Tab B, No. 12)

Council staff presented background information and decision points to consider when evaluating options for state or regional management for greater amberjack. Council staff summarized the history of management for greater amberjack and discussed recreational landings by state and by mode. Staff noted that amendments that implemented state management for red snapper would provide valuable information should the Council decide to pursue state or regional management for greater amberjack. Staff discussed the main decision points and issues the Council would have to consider, including:

- sector separation: maintaining the recreational sector as is or establishing separate private angling and federal for-hire components,
- management units: considering state or regional management,
- apportionment method: determining the allocation of greater amberjack between the management units,
- delegation or conservation equivalency, and,
- accountability measures.

Committee members indicated that the Greater Amberjack Count and the next greater amberjack stock assessment would inform future regional management discussions and noted that the upcoming greater amberjack season is expected to be very short.

SERO indicated that before the implementation of state management for red snapper, the federal recreational fishing seasons were getting shorter while state seasons were increasing in duration. He noted that exempted fishing permits could be an option for greater amberjack, provided that their purpose is clearly specified, and the information expected to be gained is valuable. He noted that determining a practicable allocation approach for greater amberjack will be key.

In response to a question on data calibration, the SEFSC indicated that a portion of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) funds is planned to be used to run different data collection systems side by side, which would facilitate landings calibration when needed. A Committee member reiterated that the limited greater amberjack ACL would make allocation decisions challenging. The Committee indicated its intent to move forward with an amendment and asked whether a decision tool could be built. Staff noted that building a decision tool would be feasible. Staff suggested that the Committee discuss some of the decision points presented and start to determine the contours of the regional management approach to consider. A Committee member inquired about the difference between conservation equivalency and delegation. NOAA General Counsel replied that conservation equivalency requires upfront approval by the agency, while delegation can be suspended if the agency determines that the terms of the delegation are not met.

Committee members and staff noted that more guidance to staff was needed to develop an amendment. Committee members discussed and concluded that sector separation would be included. Committee members indicated that, in no particular order, the amendment should include actions addressing sector separation, management units, apportionment method, delegation or conservation equivalency management, and accountability measures. A Committee member suggested that rather than a document, staff could provide an extended outline/presentation to support the next Committee discussion on this issue.

Review of Return 'Em Right Science (Tab B, Nos. 13a – d)

Mr. Charlie Robertson (Return 'Em Right [RER] Coordinator, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission [GSMFC]) presented a programmatic overview of science and monitoring funded by Return 'Em Right. A Committee member inquired about the RER funding toward the SRHS. Mr. Robertson replied that RER provided funding to the SRHS to aid in inclusion of RER-specific questions and has contributed funding each year to continue that support. Another Committee member followed up asking if RER would have additional funding to support the ongoing efforts of the SRHS given the potential for cancellation of the survey. Mr. Robertson replied that it is possible, but allocation of funding would require alignment with the programs' ongoing goals and outcomes. A Committee member asked about the estimate of depredation rates while using descending devices. Mr. Robertson replied that those estimates were not included in the presentation, but it is likely that they could be acquired. He noted also that the rate of depredation is challenging to calculate given the need to directly observe depredation to derive an estimate.

Dr. Allen reviewed recommendations from the SSC regarding research conducted with funding from the RER program. The SSC recommended continued efforts to quantify the effects of

angler education on fish survival following release, with specific examples found in the SSC report to expand upon additional data sources to reduce dead discards and improve stock assessment data streams. Mr. Nick Haddad (Florida Sea Grant) then provided an education and outreach update to brief the Committee about continuing awareness efforts for RER. A Committee member asked about the cost per release kit, and Mr. Haddad replied that the kit is not commercially available, but if it were, the total cost would be approximately \$100. Lastly, Council staff briefed the Committee on the expiration of the DESCEND Act on December 31, 2025, and possible implications for the Gulf relative to RER and the use of descending devices when fishing for reef fish species in federal waters.

A Committee member proposed requesting staff to develop a document to replace and enhance the DESCEND Act. Another Committee member commented that FL and TX have a requirement to use a descending device if the fish is experiencing barotrauma, and this may be something to consider. A Committee member indicated support of replacing the DESCEND Act but highlighted that there may be some complexities in implementing new regulatory components given executive orders that focus on de-regulation. Another Committee member inquired as to whether the proposed document would include an alternative with an enforcement component and a requirement that a descending device rigged and ready for use on a vessel. A Committee member concurred that the document should explore a suite of reasonable alternatives to include whether venting tools will be required or are to be replaced by descending devices. Council staff suggested that if the DESCEND Act is replaced, it would include a reasonable range of alternatives to include allowing the option for requiring either a venting tool or descending device.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to direct staff develop a document that replaces and enhances the Descend Act.

Motion carried without opposition.

Other Business

LA State Charter and Federal For-Hire Red Snapper 2024 Trips and Landings

This item will be reviewed during full Council.

Gag Grouper Recreational Management Measures for 2025

A Committee member summarized the patterns of recent recreational landings against the ACLs for gag grouper and expressed a concern for control over quota monitoring. The Committee member specifically wanted to avoid a situation like that experienced in the South Atlantic with red snapper, where discards have become a significant issue. The Committee member recommended reducing the recreational bag limit for gag for the 2025 fishing season only, in an effort to prevent an ACL overage and allow the recreational fishery to experience improved fishing season durations in 2026 and beyond. The Reef Fish AP also discussed the 2025 gag grouper recreational fishing season and recommended that the Council request that NMFS

consider options to prevent exceeding the recreational ACL, with the exception of a complete fishery closure. Further discussion on this topic will occur during full Council.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.