



Public  
Hearing  
Guide



Reef Fish Amendment 58B:

# DEEP-WATER GROUPE MANAGEMENT MEASURES

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## What is a Public Hearing?

A public hearing gives you an opportunity to comment on a fishery management plan or amendment that the Gulf Council is developing. Public hearings are conducted later in the amendment development process, after the Council has begun selecting preferred alternatives for proposed actions, but before taking final action. Suggestions, issues, and concerns expressed during the public hearings will be presented to the Council for review and consideration before final action is taken.



## How does a public hearing affect fisheries management?

Comments provided during the public hearing process are reported to the full Council prior to final action. Your input is considered as the Council deliberates and chooses the most appropriate management measures to address the issue(s) at hand.

## **How else can I get involved?**

There are many ways you can help the Gulf Council identify fishery management needs and develop reasonable management alternatives, each dependent on how actively involved you want to become.

The first step to becoming involved is to educate yourself about the management process by visiting our website at [www.gulfcouncil.org](http://www.gulfcouncil.org), signing up to receive our communications, and contacting Council members and staff to discuss management concerns. You can attend meetings, serve on panels and committees that advise the Council on fishery issues, and even apply to become a Council member.

Focusing your comments on the pros and cons of specific alternatives in each action provides the most useful guidance to the Council. If you are unable to attend a public hearing in person, you are encouraged to submit your comments online. For online comment forms, video presentations, and full amendment documents, visit our Amendments Under Development webpage at [gulfcouncil.org/amendments-under-development/](http://gulfcouncil.org/amendments-under-development/)

## Introduction to Reef Fish Amendment 58B:

The deep-water grouper complex is comprised of warsaw grouper, snowy grouper, yellowedge grouper, and speckled hind. The complex is managed with a single annual catch limit (ACL). However, the commercial sector is apportioned 96.5% of the complex ACL and operates under a commercial quota under the Grouper-Tilefish Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Program. The following table shows current catch limits for the deep-water grouper complex:

Overfishing Limit	ABC (Complex ACL)	Commercial ACL	Commercial Quota	Recreational ACL
1,113,000	1,105,000	1,066,000	1,024,000	undefined

*Catch limits expressed in pounds gutted weight in Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS) data units*



In 2023, the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) reviewed the latest yellowedge grouper stock assessment (SEDAR 85) and recommended updated catch limits and a new proxy for maximum sustainable yield (MSY), which helps determine the stock's status. Based on this, the stock is not considered overfished, but it is undergoing overfishing. The assessment also found that fewer young fish are surviving to adulthood (indicating low recruitment) and that recreational harvest has been increasing. To address these concerns and end overfishing, the SSC recommended reducing the overall allowable harvest for yellowedge grouper and the Council is considering changes to the deep-water grouper complex to integrate these changes into management.





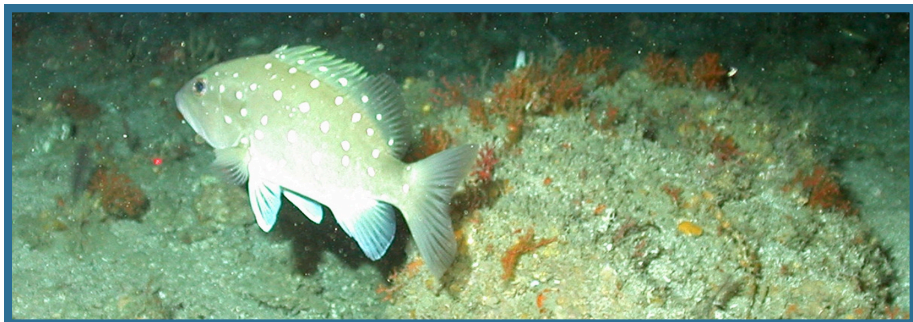
The SSC also recommended updated catch limits for the other deep-water grouper species including warsaw, snowy grouper, and speckled hind based on average historical landings. The SSC combined the catch limits for those species and yellowedge grouper to allow all four species in the complex to continue to be managed together under one acceptable biological catch limit (ABC). These catch limits use a new recreational data unit, which means that the sector allocation, or how much fish the commercial and recreational sectors each get to catch out of the complex ACL, will need to be revisited. The Council is also considering modifying the accountability measures (AM), or the tools it uses to make sure that each sector does not catch more than its allocation of the complex ACL. The proposed change to the AMs is expected to do a much better job of meeting this responsibility.

In summary, the Council is developing this document to:

- Revise the MSY proxy and catch level recommendations for the deep-water grouper complex.
- Establish sector allocations and sector-specific ACLs.
- Modify recreational AMs.

These actions are being considered in response to the most recent yellowedge grouper stock assessment and are intended to end overfishing on yellowedge grouper and prevent overfishing in the future.





## **Action 1: Modification of Deep-Water Grouper (DWG) Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) Proxy, Overfishing Limit (OFL), Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC), and Complex Annual Catch Limit (ACL)**

The Council is considering updating the deep-water grouper complex catch limits based on the results of the most recent stock assessment, which found the stock was undergoing overfishing. Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Council is obligated to end overfishing. The new catch advice from the SSC will end overfishing using the best scientific information available.

The MSY proxy is the largest long-term average harvest that can be taken from a stock each year, on a continuing basis. This value considers the characteristics of the fish and environmental and ecological conditions. A proxy that represents a sustainable level of harvest is typically used because MSY can rarely be accurately calculated.

Currently the default MSY proxy used for the deep-water grouper complex is the yield when fishing at 30% spawning potential ratio ( $F_{30\%SPR}$ ). Meaning, allowable harvest is set to allow the population to produce 30% of the juveniles that it could if there were no fishing at all. The Council's SSC recommended using a higher spawning potential ratio of 40% for the complex. Deep-water groupers transition from female to male as they age, reach sexual maturity at older ages relative to other Gulf groupers, live longer, and demonstrate less reproductive resiliency relative to other reef fish. Using  $F_{40\%SPR}$  instead of  $F_{30\%SPR}$  increases the resiliency of the stock by leaving more fish in the water to spawn, but this does result in less allowable annual harvest.

Newly recommended catch limits for deep-water grouper complex species represent approximately a 50% reduction in allowable harvest. Very little of this reduction comes from the change in the recreational data units used in the assessment. Most of this change is to end overfishing of yellowedge grouper, which make up over 80% of DWG landed, and in response to very poor recruitment over the last 15 or so years. Combined with the change in the MSY proxy, the overall health of the complex is expected to improve.



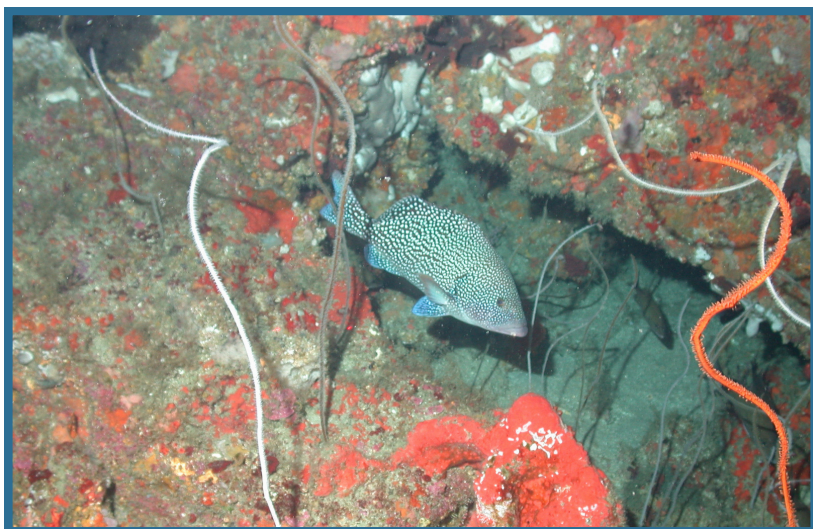
**Alternative 1:** No Action.

*Note: This is not a legally viable alternative because it is not consistent with the best scientific information available, and it would allow overfishing and keep catch levels above those recommended by the SSC.*

**Preferred Alternative 2:** Revise the MSY proxy and catch limits for the complex based on the SSC's recommendations. 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 the following catch limits:

OFL	ABC	ACL
731,035	555,026	555,026

*Catch limits expressed in pounds gutted weight in MRIP-FES data units.*





## **A Comparison of Alternatives in Action 1:**

Preferred Alternative 2 represents a substantial reduction in total catch from Alternative 1. However, Preferred Alternative 2 is expected to end overfishing of yellowedge grouper and grow the complex to a more robust and sustainable size. Reduced catch limits are expected to increase the chances of shorter recreational seasons and reduce the amount of quota available to commercial fishing.

## Action 2: Modification of Deep-Water Grouper Sector ACLs and Sector Allocations

The deep-water grouper complex is managed with a single ACL. Within that, the commercial sector is currently apportioned 96.50% of the complex ACL and operates under a commercial quota under the Grouper-Tilefish IFQ Program. There is not a specified deep-water grouper ACL for the recreational sector.

The current commercial apportionment is based on average commercial landings from 2001-2004. The commercial quota is set 4% lower to accommodate flexibility measures that exist in the IFQ program between the Other Shallow-Water Grouper and Deep-Water Grouper share categories. Those flexibility measures are being reconsidered in Reef Fish Amendment 58A and if they are not continued, the commercial deep-water grouper quota would be set equal to the commercial ACL, with no buffer.



In recent years, recreational sector landings have been increasing and have exceeded the portion of the deep-water grouper stock ACL available to the recreational sector for harvest. Without separate ACLs, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) may only close the recreational sector if the sum of both commercial and recreational landings reaches or is projected to reach the complex ACL. This could allow for overfishing because the commercial IFQ system allows commercial landings year-round, and once the allocation is distributed at the beginning of the year it cannot be taken back. Thus, this AM is unlikely to effectively constrain recreational landings to the remainder of the complex ACL, since NMFS can't know what was landed until the year is over. The Council is considering establishing sector allocations and a recreational ACL to prevent overfishing and allow for more effective sector-specific AMs.



**Note:** This action assumes that Alternative 2 in Action 1 is selected as the Preferred Alternative. All of the alternatives would account for the change in the recreational data from MRFSS to MRIP-FES.



**Alternative 1:** No Action. Apportion 96.50% of the deep-water grouper complex ACL to the commercial sector based on landings during 2001-2004. The commercial quota is set 4% below the commercial ACL. The recreational sector's ACL is unspecified.

OFL	ABC (Complex ACL)	Rec ACL	Comm ACL	Comm Quota
731,035	555,026	Unspecified	535,600	514,176

*Catch limits expressed in pounds gutted weight in MRIP-FES data units.*

**Alternative 2:** Establish a recreational ACL and sector allocation based on the average recreational landings as used in the Generic ACL/AM Amendment (2001 – 2004). This allocates 3.50% of the complex ACL to the recreational sector and 96.50% to the commercial sector.

OFL	ABC (Complex ACL)	Rec ACL	Comm ACL	Comm Quota
731,035	555,026	19,426	535,600	514,176

*Catch limits expressed in pounds gutted weight in MRIP-FES data units.*

**Preferred Alternative 3:** Establish a recreational ACL and sector allocation based on the average recreational landings from the most recent 5 years (2019 – 2023). This allocates 10.21% of the complex ACL to the recreational sector and 89.79% to the commercial sector.

OFL	ABC (Complex ACL)	Rec ACL	Comm ACL	Comm Quota
731,035	555,026	56,649	498,377	478,441

*Catch limits expressed in pounds gutted weight in MRIP-FES data units.*

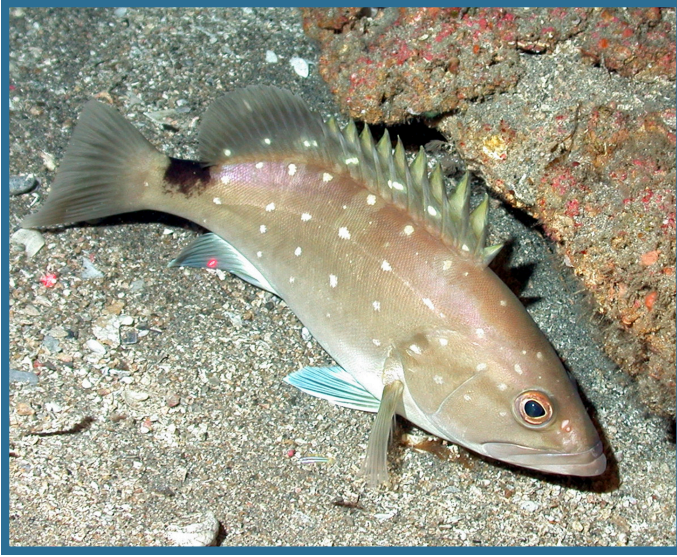




**Alternative 4:** Establish a recreational ACL and sector allocation based on an equal reduction in the landings from the recreational and commercial sectors from the most recent 5 years (2019 – 2023). This allocates 6.84% of the complex ACL to the recreational sector and 93.16% to the commercial sector.

OFL	ABC (Complex ACL)	Rec ACL	Comm ACL	Comm Quota
731,035	555,026	37,964	517,062	496,380

*Catch limits expressed in pounds gutted weight in MRIP-FES data units.*



## **A Comparison of Alternatives in Action 2:**

### Impact on allocations:

Allocation scenarios in Alternatives 1 and 2 are based on recreational landings in old data units and Alternatives 3 and 4 are based on current data. Since the new data estimate greater historical recreational landings, not using the new data to determine the sector allocation would increase the portion of allocation going to the commercial sector.

Impact on accountability measures: Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 would allow the recreational AM to be triggered, or not, by measuring recreational landings against a defined catch limit, without requiring NMFS to assume what the commercial sector was going to catch.

Impact on recreational season duration:

For the recreational sector, the number of fishing days needed to harvest the ACL is directly related to the size of the recreational ACL. This table shows the predicted recreational closure dates assuming that a closure is required when the ACL is projected to be met:

Alternatives	Proposed Recreational ACL (lb gw)	3-year Average (2021-2023)	Upper 95% 3-year Average (2021-2023)
<b>Alternative 1: No Action</b>	undefined	<b>Jun 10</b>	<b>May 12</b>
<b>Alternative 2</b>	19,426	<b>Jun 10</b>	<b>May 12</b>
<b>Preferred Alternative 3</b>	56,649	No Closure	<b>Jul 1</b>
<b>Alternative 4</b>	37,964	<b>Sep 14</b>	<b>Jun 5</b>

*Catch limits expressed in MRIP-FES data units.*



## Action 3: Modification of Deep-Water Grouper Recreational Accountability Measures

Accountability measures (AM) are intended to prevent harvest from exceeding the ACL, and if exceeded, mitigate for the overage. The current AM for the recreational sector is triggered if the total complex ACL is exceeded in a fishing year. Then, in the following fishing year, NMFS will close the recreational sector for the remainder of the fishing year if the sum of commercial and recreational landings reaches or is projected to reach the total complex ACL. Since the IFQ system allows commercial landings year-round, it is unlikely that this AM will effectively constrain recreational landings unless NMFS assumes at the beginning of the fishing year that 100% of the commercial quota will be landed. The Council is currently considering three AMs that would all be triggered post-fishing season instead of projecting and monitoring landings in-season.



**Alternative 1:** No Action. If the total complex ACL is exceeded in a fishing year, then in the following fishing year, NMFS will close the recreational sector for the remainder of the fishing year if the sum of commercial and recreational landings reaches or is projected to reach the total complex ACL.

**Alternative 2:** If the recreational ACL is exceeded in a fishing year, then in the following fishing year, NMFS would close the recreational sector for the DWG complex for the remainder of that fishing year when the recreational ACL is projected to be met.

**Alternative 3:** If the recreational ACL is exceeded in a fishing year and the total complex ACL for DWG is exceeded, then in the following fishing year, NMFS would close the recreational sector for the DWG complex for the remainder of the fishing year when the recreational ACL is projected to be met.

**Preferred Alternative 4:** If the average recreational DWG landings exceed the average recreational ACL, and the average DWG complex ACL is exceeded over a three-year moving period, NMFS would reduce the duration of the recreational season by the amount projected such 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.

## A Comparison of Alternatives in Action 3:

### Impacts on preventing overfishing and the recreational season:

Alternative 1 is unlikely to constrain landings to the stock ACL. Both Alternatives 2 and 3 would trigger in-season monitoring in the year after an overage, but will still require forecasting using imprecise data. Alternatives 2 and 3 may result in substantial changes in the recreational fishing season duration without much benefit to the stock. Preferred Alternative 4 uses averaging over a 3-year period, allowing for variations in landings without triggering AMs annually. Preferred Alternative 4 is less reactive but is expected to do the best job of constraining landings over time, and without the negative effect of constant recreational fishing season changes.



## Public Meeting Information:

Public hearing meetings will be hosted in-person beginning at 6:00 PM local time at the following dates and locations:

Madeira Beach, Florida

**Monday, August 11, 2025**

City of Madeira Beach Recreation Civic Center, 200 Rex Place, Madeira Beach, FL 33708, (727) 392-0665

Panama City, Florida

**Thursday, August 14, 2025**

Hilton Garden Inn, 1101 US Hwy 231, Panama City, FL 32405, (850) 392-1093

Ft. Myers, Florida

**Monday, August 18, 2025**

Doubletree by Hilton, 13051 Bell Tower Drive, Ft. Myers, FL 33907, (239) 482-2900

Webinar

**Tuesday, August 19, 2025**

<https://tinyurl.com/yc3jrcc8>

## Send Us Your Comments:

Scan the QR code to submit your comment or:

- Comment online at <https://tinyurl.com/jsfd2vwh>
- Email us at [gulfcouncil@gulfcouncil.org](mailto:gulfcouncil@gulfcouncil.org)





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