

Public Hearing Summary
Reef Fish Amendment 58B
Modifications to Deep-water Grouper Management Measures

Madeira Beach, Florida

August 11, 2025

Council/Staff

Kesley Banks
Carrie Simmons
John Froeschke
Ryan Rindone
Sarah Gardiner
Emily Muehlstein
Matt Freeman

4 members of the public attended.

3 members of the public spoke.

Jason DeLaCruz - Commercial Fisherman / Dealer

He supports Action 2, Alternative 4. It's fair to give both sectors an even haircut. The commercial sector has been constrained to its portion of the landings because of management under the IFQ system and because of the 1000 hook limit on longline vessels, while the recreational sector has been able to grow. For Action 3, it's difficult to wait three years to constrain overages. However, if we're not going to initiate a data collection system for the recreational sector it's better to keep them out of a payback cycle like we're seeing with other species. He also mentioned that once the price of red grouper shares tanks, the deep-water quota will be used as leverage. Meaning, buyers will be forced to buy red grouper in order to get deep-water grouper quota. Jason also expressed concern about shareholders that don't fish or aren't involved in the industry.

RJ Schwab – Commercial Vessel Owner

He owns three commercial boats and says fisheries management is the scariest part of his future. Everyone is struggling to stay in the business and the science is too far behind. The red grouper stock isn't good right now. He is concerned that the quota price is going to go

up again. His fleet has shifted to deep-water fishing since red grouper harvest was so low and now the increased cost of the deep-water grouper quota is going to kill him. He never had a chance to earn quota, the IFQ program was put in place before he was old enough to fish. There is no future in this fishery if you can't afford to buy-in.

Eric Schmidt – Commercial and For-Hire Fisherman

The recreational harvest estimates for deep-water grouper are low. There has been a large increase in charters targeting deep-water species.

Panama City, Florida
August 14, 2025

Council/Staff

Billy Broussard
Ryan Rindone
Sarah Gardiner

3 members of the public attended.

2 members of the public spoke.

Mark Tryon – Commercial Owner/Operator

He is a commercial day boat fisherman and has some DWG allocation. He does not participate in the DWG fishery to the same degree as longline vessels. He thinks accountability is needed for recreational fisheries, Gulf-wide. He thinks there is too much resistance to accountability in recreational fisheries, perhaps because the Council does not want to know what the recreational sector is catching. He thinks recreational fishing has negatively affected his day boat fishing, especially for red snapper, and sees the same starting for the DWG deep-drop fishery. The technology available for recreational anglers to fish has increased dramatically and has made a decent fisherman out of someone without much experience. He thinks the Council needs to acknowledge the burgeoning number of recreational DWG vessels.

Bob Zales II – Southeastern Fisheries Association.

He is representing the Southeastern Fisheries Association and is in favor of Alternative 1 for Actions 1 and 2, and not commenting yet on Action 3. He thinks that final action on the amendment should be delayed until more information can be collected and analyzed on the economic effects to the commercial sector, the fishing effort by permit, and the effects from vessels needing to hire foreign crew when domestic crew are unavailable or unwilling.

He also thinks that smaller increments of MSY proxy values need to be analyzed, since they can be the difference between a stock being overfished or undergoing overfishing. He thinks the recent executive orders from the Administration need to be considered before putting new restrictions on the commercial sector. He thinks that there needs to be a special permit for recreational fishing for DWG species, and to maintain that permit, anglers should be required to report their catch and effort per trip. He thinks the technology exists to make recreational mandatory reporting a reality, and that NOAA Fisheries should pursue such measures.

Ft. Myers, Florida
August 18, 2025

Council/Staff

John Sanchez

Matt Freeman

Emily Muehlstein

3 members of the public attended.

3 members of the public spoke.

Sean Beckham - Commercial Fisherman, Owner/Operator

Charter for-hire catch of deep-water grouper species is significant and increasing. The commercial IFQ program doesn't work for him because he owns 100% of his operation (vessels and permit) and only makes a fraction of the profit because he is not a shareholder. All the liability and expense to fish, including the cost recovery fee, falls on him, and he only makes 20% of the profit. He can't make a living. Depredation is a worsening issue; goliath grouper and sharks tear up his gear and take his fish.

Matthew Pless - Commercial Fisherman, Owner/Operator, Seafood Dealer

Management is based on bad science. There are no real counts or math accounting for recreational harvest, and that's a huge issue. Recreational data are non-existent, so it's impossible to make good management decisions. The private anglers that are harvesting tons of deep-water grouper don't land at boat ramps. They all land behind private residences, so they're not even counted by the flawed estimate system. As a commercial harvester, every pound of fish he harvests is accounted for. The private guys have plenty of money to create a reporting platform. He works himself to the bone and doesn't get any breaks, but the private guys can fish unchecked.

Nick Ruland - Commercial Fisherman, Fish House Owner, Seafood Restaurant Owner

The harvest numbers have been bogus from day one, and we're building management off of false data. That started even before the IFQ program was initiated. NOAA is using pounds to track harvest happens in the commercial sector, but the recreational sector is based on number of fish which is inaccurate to further extrapolate. The discards in the recreational sector need to be accounted for; deep water species don't survive catch and release. People high-grade; they swap out smaller fish for bigger fish when they catch them. More deep-water grouper are thrown away dead than are kept by recreational fishermen, and it's an issue. Allocations should be created for both sectors. He doesn't want the increasing recreational sector to wipe out the commercial industry. He could live with any of the alternatives that establish a recreational allocation but, it's moot until the data is collected properly from the recreational sector. The Council should create a mandatory reporting program for the recreational sector. Ideally, it should collect information on all species, but it can start with the deep-water grouper species since they're more of a niche fishery accessible only by private fishermen with technology. There are lots of good scientists that take otoliths from his fish house, and he would love to see how that information is used. He suggests that a data report be tied to the trip tickets and reported back to the captains, so they can better understand their impact and be better stewards.

**Virtual Public Hearing
August 19, 2025**

Council/Staff

Chris Schieble

Emily Muehlstein

Bernadine Roy

Sarah Gardiner

5 members of the public attended.

1 member of the public spoke.

Ashford Rosenberg – Reef Fish Shareholders' Alliance

The Alliance requests the Council change the preferred alternative in Action 2 to Alternative 2. Alternative 2 would reduce discards and promote fairness and equity. There is extreme management uncertainty in the recreational sector and the stock is undergoing overfishing. There is no justification for increasing allocation for the recreational sector without effective accountability measures. It is inequitable to commercial fishermen who are constrained to their quota when there has been no way to constrain recreational landings.

When the PSE of estimates is greater than 50%, it is not suitable for management and increasing the allocation to the recreational sector would increase uncertainty further. Most private vessels accessing deep-water grouper are not surveyed by APAIS because they are leaving from private docks. It is biologically irresponsible to increase their portion of the harvest and it increases the risk of overages and undermines rebuilding.

In Action 3 , the Council should modify alternatives to allow NMFS to set the length of the recreational season based on the best available science. The Council should also consider creating a buffer to account for management uncertainty. Finally, the Council should add a payback provision to the recreational sector. There is a huge amount of uncertainty around recreational landings. We're cutting the quota in half and accountability measures need to be more robust to rebuild the stock. The sector does have some flexibility in accountability measures, but the 3-year moving average is less responsive and not effective for a stock that may be in trouble.

She suggests that the Council initiate work on a document that explores a recreational deep-water grouper permit with a mandatory reporting requirement to address uncertainty. The program could be comparable to the Louisiana Offshore permit. Recreational reporting ties into the Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness Executive Order and is supported directly in the recommendations from the Recreational Initiative. Starting with these deep-water species is a good way to dip our toes in the water with recreational reporting.

16 comments received

Written Public Comment

Comments received between November 2024 and August 19, 2025

- Data currency for the new quotas should be clarified and the ACLs for the recreational sector should not be additive since they're calculated with a different currency.
- Reallocation alternatives (Action 2, Alternatives 2-4) should be put on hold until the MRIP-FES pilot study is complete.
- A larger ACL for the recreational sector will not necessarily reduce the likelihood of an ACL overage.
- Better analysis of how actions will affect discards should be included in the document.
- Support for creating separate allocations for the sectors.

- The recreational sector, with no accountability, should not be given a greater portion of the allowable harvest.
- For-hire charter vessels need better accountability immediately especially since they harvest so many deep-water groupers.
- Cutting the deep-water grouper quota is going to drive up the price of allocation and increase the cost of red grouper.
- Cutting the quota will force longliners to fish closer to shore using bandit gear.
- Electric reels in deep-water fishing should be eliminated or limited so that the vessels with electric reels onboard may only keep one person's bag limit.
- The 4% commercial buffer should be eliminated because the sector is highly accountable.
- Electric monitoring data from commercial vessels should be considered because preliminarily, it shows fewer dead discards in the commercial fishery than assumed.
- Incorporate broader economic data from the IFQ programs into the economic analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of allocations.
- An interim assessment on yellowedge grouper should be added to the SEDAR schedule.
- Stakeholder feedback from a yellowedge grouper Fishery Ecosystem Issue should be collected and reviewed. This could be used to evaluate ecosystem-wide factors that are influencing poor recruitment.
- Consider using multi-year ACLs to address the high errors in recreational data.
- Address allocations in a separate amendment.
- New deep-water grouper regulations should not unfairly burden the recreational sector.
- Effort in the commercial sector is not increasing while the number and quality of recreational boats grows.
- Recreational data collection efforts need to improve.
- Action 2, Alternative 4 is the best way to reduce recreational overages.
- Action 3, Alternative 4 fails to constrain recreational catch.
- A year-round recreational season is not justified with the catch reductions.
- Headboats should not be part of the recreational quota.