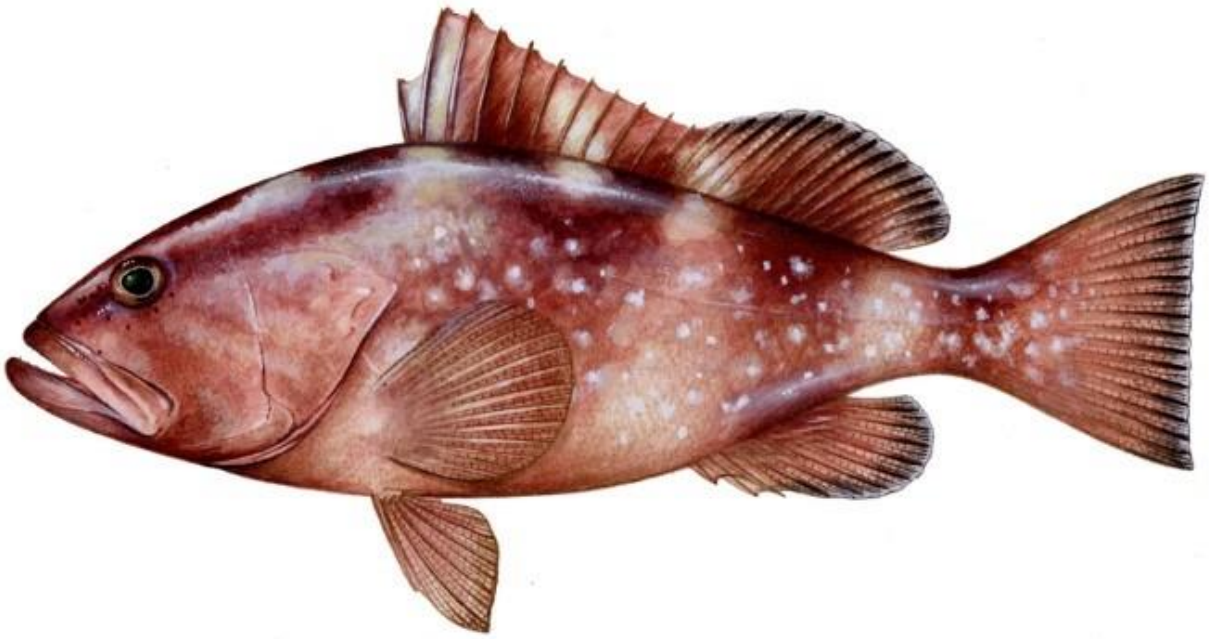
Amendment 62: Modifications to Gulf Red Grouper Management Measures



Amendment to the Fishery Management Plan for Reef Fish Resources in the Gulf

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS DOCUMENT

ABC	acceptable biological catch
ACL	annual catch limit
ACT	annual catch target
AM	accountability measures
AP	Advisory Panel
APAIS	Access Point Angler Intercept Survey
CHTS	Coastal Household Telephone Survey
Council	Gulf Council
E.O.	Executive Order
EA	Environmental Assessment
EEZ	exclusive economic zone
EFH	Essential Fish Habitat
EIS	economic impact statement
FES	Fishing Effort Survey
FMP	Fishery Management Plan
FMSY	maximum sustainable yield
GFMC	Gulf Fishery Management Council
GMFMC	Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council
GRFS	Gulf Reef Fish Survey
Gulf	Gulf of America (Formerly Gulf of Mexico)
IFQ	individual fishing quota
MRFSS	Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey
MRIP	Marine Recreational Information Program
MSY	maximum sustainable yield
Magnuson-Stevens Act	Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NMFS	National Marine Fisheries Service
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
OFL	overfishing limit
OST	Office of Science and Technology
Other SWG	Other Shallow-water Grouper complex
RG	red grouper
Reef Fish FMP	Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources in the Gulf
SEDAR	Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review
SEFSC	Southeast Fisheries Science Center
SERO	Southeast Regional Office
SPR	spawning potential ratio
SRFS	State Reef Fish Survey
SRHS	Southeast Regional Headboat Survey

SSC	Scientific and Statistical Committee
SWG	shallow-water grouper
Secretary	Secretary of Commerce
TAC	total allowable catch
TL	total length
USCG	United States Coast Guard
gw	gutted weight
mp	million pounds
ww	whole weight

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Amendment 62 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf (Reef Fish FMP) is being developed by the Gulf Council (Council) to address the results of the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 88 (2025) stock assessment and subsequent overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations from the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). Amendment 62 considers revising the red grouper allocation between the commercial and recreational sectors, the OFL, ABC, the total and sector annual catch limits (ACL), and sector annual catch targets (ACT). In addition, Amendment 62 considers eliminating the shallow-water grouper (SWG) February-March recreational closure in federal waters seaward of the 20-fathom boundary.

Recent Gulf Red Grouper Stock Assessments

A stock assessment was recently completed for red grouper (SEDAR 88) and reviewed by the SSC. Based on its review of the assessment, the SSC determined that the stock was not overfished or undergoing overfishing and recommended increases to the OFL and ABC relative to the current harvest limits. The stock assessment results indicated an increase in the red grouper stock size relative to the previous assessment; the primary driver of this outcome was the increase in the estimated natural mortality of red grouper relative to the previous stock assessment. In SEDAR 88, the estimate for natural mortality (M) was updated using Hamel and Cope 2022[1] and increased (from 0.14 to 0.186) based on the maximum age of 29 years. The modification of M resulted in an overall increase in spawning output, fraction of the unfished population estimate, and age-0 recruits relative to SEDAR 61. At its February 2025 meeting, SSC concluded that the SEDAR 88 stock assessment base model, using an F_{MSY} proxy of $F_{40\%SPR}$, was consistent with the best scientific information available and suitable for informing fisheries management. The SSC acknowledged that red grouper exhibits a variety of biological considerations that need to be accounted for when recommending catch advice. For example, it undergoes ontogenetic spatial shifts from nearshore shallow habitats to offshore deep-water habitats; large females transition to male based on environmental and social cues that are not completely understood; and its propensity to create unique habitats in the benthic substrate and territorial behavior may generate a carrying capacity issue that limits available space for other red grouper. It is also unclear if this density-dependent compensatory recruitment response is released during red tide events, which may explain the stock's overall resilience to these episodic mortality events. Ultimately, the SSC determined that accounting for the complex life history of red grouper was most imperative when recommending the OFL. The SSC discussed catch advice recommendations and focused on whether the proposed increases in certain scenarios would be sustainable long-term, with focus on the life history characterization of red grouper. The SSC expressed concern that the model may be overcompensating for some model adjustment or combination of inputs, but also considered that output as a realized reflection of

[1] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0165783622002545

stock resilience to episodic mortality. The SSC recalled its past history of using $F_{40\%SPR}$ for hermaphroditic groupers like gag, scamp and yellowmouth grouper, and yellowedge grouper. Given that history of decision-making, the SSC concluded that an $F_{40\%SPR}$ as the proxy for FMSY was appropriate. The SSC set the Gulf red grouper OFL and ABC using $F_{40\%SPR}$ for based on the SEDAR 88 base model projections and a constant catch scenario for the fishing years 2027 – 2029. The OFL was set at 11.28 million pounds gutted weight (mp gw), and the ABC at 8.78 mp gw.

At its April 2025 meeting, the Council requested an emergency rule on social and economic grounds be initiated by NMFS to increase red grouper catch limits, based on the results of the SEDAR 88 stock assessment, beginning in the 2025 fishing season. To meet the needs of this request, the SSC met in May 2025 to review updated projections, which begin in 2025; previously, 2025 and 2026 were modeled as interim years in the last set of catch projections. The SSC reviewed revised projections and recommended a revised OFL equal to 10.64 mp gw and an ABC equal to 8.28 mp gw. This OFL and ABC are the basis for the action alternatives in this amendment.

Current Management and Landings

Recent landings of red grouper are shown in Table 1.1.1. Landings are shown by sector, with recreational landings shown in MRIP-FES units,[2] and SRFS units. Both MRIP-FES units and SRFS units are provided, as the current sector allocations are based on historical landings in MRIP-FES units, and the Council is currently considering modifying sector allocations based on historical landings in SRFS units. Commercial red grouper landings have ranged from about 2.04 (2019) to 7.27 (1989) million pounds (mp) gutted weight (gw) between 1986 and 2021. Commercial landings since implementation of the IFQ program peeked at 5.6 mp gw in 2014, and landing have decreased since. Recreational landings (in MRIP-FES) peaked at nearly 8.0 mp gw in 2004 and have been in the range of 1.0 to 3.0 mp gw since 2014.

Table 1.1.1. Commercial and recreational landings (in SRFS and MRIP-FES) for red grouper in pounds gutted weight (gw).

[2] Although MRIP-CHTS, MRIP-FES, and Florida SRFS generate estimates measured in pounds of fish, these estimates are not directly comparable, as described above. The references to "MRIP-CHTS units," "MRIP-FES units," and "SRFS units" signify that the estimates use different scales.

Year	Commercial	MRIP-FES	SRFS
1986	6,285,679	3,348,897	2,315,259
1987	6,623,879	2,495,130	1,718,827
1988	4,608,010	4,652,818	3,094,220
1989	7,448,163	7,632,792	4,995,344
1990	4,761,530	3,565,320	2,480,918
1991	5,053,153	3,755,576	2,513,832
1992	4,441,443	6,046,978	4,098,128
1993	6,303,122	4,057,934	2,670,678
1994	4,865,022	3,827,267	2,576,400
1995	4,641,651	3,496,544	2,459,489
1996	4,324,410	910,313	673,218
1997	4,665,224	1,142,958	792,785
1998	3,702,575	1,513,890	1,046,353
1999	5,796,389	3,428,553	2,294,324
2000	5,684,097	4,242,231	3,019,957
2001	5,717,869	2,435,456	1,687,590
2002	5,759,433	3,172,348	2,131,719
2003	4,816,186	2,201,496	1,517,625
2004	5,634,787	7,983,239	5,310,661
2005	5,376,768	3,081,979	2,181,098
2006	4,980,916	2,655,065	1,799,940
2007	3,582,409	2,031,867	1,359,322
2008	4,710,801	1,604,398	1,144,493
2009	3,691,124	1,600,063	1,102,783
2010	2,910,970	1,963,762	1,381,781
2011	4,783,668	1,534,113	1,081,370
2012	5,219,133	4,131,722	2,877,227
2013	4,599,001	4,990,302	3,503,521
2014	5,601,144	5,368,575	3,657,396
2015	4,797,159	3,790,614	2,620,244
2016	4,497,582	2,632,907	1,382,081
2017	3,328,271	1,692,513	852,300
2018	2,363,280	2,053,526	1,074,144
2019	2,037,046	1,638,076	970,632
2020	2,368,322	2,078,904	1,504,892
2021	2,950,691	2,293,964	2,297,317
2022	2,428,938	2,792,851	1,460,801
2023	2,498,024	2,525,326	1,446,292
2024	2,527,545	2,267,459	944,212

Source: Commercial landings from SEFSC Commercial ACL Data (March 2025) and SERO Catch Share Database (March 2025); recreational landings from SEFSC Recreational MRIP-FES ACL File and SEDAR 88 WP-17.

Red Grouper Sector Allocations

The current allocation between the commercial and recreational sector is 59.3% and 40.7% and most recently modified by Reef Fish Amendment 53 that was completed in 2021 (GMFMC 2021). For grouper species in aggregate, an initial allocation between the commercial and recreational sectors was established in 1990 through Amendment 1 to the Reef Fish FMP (GMFMC 1989). The amendment specified a framework procedure for setting the total allowable catch (TAC) to allow for annual management changes. A part of that specification was to establish a species' allocation, which were based on the percentage of total landings during the reference period of 1979-1987. For grouper in aggregate, the commercial sector landed 65% and the recreational sector landed 35% over the reference period.

Noting that allocation procedures should be regularly reviewed, the Council examined the red grouper allocation in 2007. Because grouper was not identified to the species level in commercial landings until 1986, the new red grouper allocation was based on the percentage of average red grouper landings from 1986 through 2005. This resulted in a 76% commercial: 24% recreational allocation, which was set through the final rule for Amendment 30B to the Reef Fish FMP (GMFMC 2008). This was considered an interim allocation that would be in effect until the Council could implement a separate amendment to allocate grouper resources between recreational and commercial sectors. The Council established the Ad Hoc Allocation Committee composed of Council members to assist in drafting an allocation policy that would streamline future allocation decisions. The Council's allocation policy was adopted in early 2009 and provided principles, guidelines, and suggested methods for allocating fisheries resources between or within sectors.[3] In February 2012, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) released a technical memorandum on the principles and practice of allocating fishery harvests, which provides additional guidance to the Council (Plummer et al. 2012). Additionally, NMFS and the Council Coordination Committee released further guidance through an Allocation Review Policy (01-119)[4] and two procedural directives (01-119-01 and 01-119-02[5]) in 2016. These documents were developed to provide relevant information for allocation decision-making as well as what factors should be considered. In April 2019, the Council selected time-based criteria as its primary allocation review trigger bolstered by general monitoring of indicators for reallocation justification through the Council's general deliberative process including public input channels as a secondary trigger.[6] In addition, the policy notes that the Council may initiate supplementary allocation reviews at any time; for example, when new information, e.g., data recalibration, is made available.

The review of the recreational and commercial allocations of red grouper has a time interval of seven years and was originally scheduled for April of 2026. However, in response to a change in recreational data used in SEDAR 61, the Council conducted an allocation review through the

[3] The Council's allocation policy is located at https://gulfcouncil.org/uploads/2025/02/GMFMC-SOPPs-Fishery-Allocation-Policy.pdf.
[4] Allocation Review Policy 01-119 is located at https://media.fisheries.noaa.gov/dam-migration/01-119.pdf
[5] Procedural Directive 01-119-01 is located at https://gulfcouncil.org/uploads/2025/02/Allocation-Trigger-01-119-01.pdf; Procedural Directive 01-119-02 is located at https://gulfcouncil.org/uploads/2025/02/Allocation-Factors-01-119-02.pdf.
[6] Initial letter is located at https://gulfcouncil.org/uploads/2025/02/Allocation-Review-Policy.pdf.

development of Amendment 53 to the Reef Fish FMP (GMFMC 2021), which allocated 59.3% of the stock ACL to the commercial sector, and 40.7% of the stock ACL to the recreational sector. This allocation was based on the same years used to specify the allocation in Amendment 30B to the Reef Fish FMP (GMFMC 2008) but with the updated recreational landings estimates.

In 2024, the Council revised its allocation review time triggers, setting the red grouper review for 2029.[7] However, the results of a new stock assessment, SEDAR 88, are now available. As explained in more detail below, SEDAR 88 uses new recreational data. Therefore, the Council has determined that it is appropriate to conduct another allocation review through the development of this amendment.

Commercial Sector

Commercial harvest of red grouper has been managed under an individual fishing quota (IFQ) program since 2010 (GMFMC 2008). Anyone commercially fishing for red grouper must possess a commercial reef fish permit and red grouper allocation under the IFQ program. IFQ allocation is determined at the beginning of each calendar year by multiplying a shareholder's IFQ red grouper share (represented as a percentage of the total commercial quota) times the commercial quota for red grouper. The IFQ allocation may be increased during a calendar year, but may not be decreased as allocation is initially distributed. The commercial annual catch target (ACT), or quota, is set at 5% below the ACL. The difference between the commercial ACL and quota allows for multi-use allocation, as described below. The IFQ program acts as the accountability measure (AM) for the commercial red grouper portion of the reef fish fishery.

Red grouper multi-use (RGM) allocation

At the time the commercial quota for red grouper is distributed to IFQ shareholders, a percentage of each shareholder's initial red grouper allocation is converted to RGM allocation. This percentage is by a formula based on the red grouper and gag ACLs and quotas in a given year (See Section 2.1). RGM allocation may be used to possess, land, or sell either red grouper or gag under certain conditions. RGM allocation can only be used to possess, land, or sell red grouper after an IFQ account holder's (shareholder or associated vessel accounts) red grouper allocation has been landed and sold, or transferred; and to possess, land, or sell gag, only after both gag and gag multi-use allocation have been landed and sold, or transferred from all the IFQ account holder’s accounts. However, if gag is under a rebuilding plan, the percentage of RGM allocation is equal to zero. Gag is currently under a rebuilding plan, and thus RGM is currently set to zero.

Gag multi-use (GGM) Allocation

At the time the commercial quota for gag is distributed to IFQ shareholders, a percentage of each shareholder's initial gag allocation is converted to gag multi-use (GGM) allocation. This percentage is determined by a formula based on the gag and red grouper ACLs and quotas in a

[7] This updated schedule is located at https://gulfcouncil.org/uploads/2025/02/7178-Updated-Allocation-Review-Schedule.pdf

given year (See Section 2.1). GGM allocation may be used to possess, land, or sell either gag or red grouper under certain conditions. GGM allocation can only be used to possess, land, or sell gag after an IFQ account holder's (shareholder or associated vessel accounts) gag allocation has been landed and sold, or transferred; and to possess, land, or sell red grouper, only after both red grouper and RGM allocation have been landed and sold, or transferred from all the IFQ account holder's accounts. However, if red grouper is under a rebuilding plan, the percentage of GGM is equal to zero. Based on the results of the SEDAR 88 stock assessment, landing red grouper would be permissible in the GGM share category.

Recreational Sector

Both in-season and post-season AMs apply to harvest by the recreational sector. The in-season AM for red grouper requires NMFS to close the recreational sector when red grouper landings reach or are projected to reach the recreational ACL. If landings exceed the red grouper ACL in a fishing year, the post-season AM requires NMFS to shorten the duration of the following fishing year by the amount necessary to ensure landings do not exceed the ACT, unless NMFS determines that managing to the ACT in the following year is unnecessary. If red grouper is overfished and landings exceed the sector ACL, the ACL and ACT must be reduced in the following year by the amount of the previous year's overage.

Since 2010, the recreational sector season triggered the in-season closure AM due to a NMFS projection that the recreational ACL was reached or was projected to be reached (2014, 2015, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). In four of those years, the recreational ACL was still exceeded, resulting in implementation of the post-season AM in the following year (2021, 2022, 2023, 2024[8]) to shorten the red grouper season as required.

In addition, recreational harvest of red grouper is prohibited seaward of the 20-fathom depth contour in the Gulf from February 1 through March 31 each year[9]. This time area closure was developed as a conservation measure for shallow water grouper species (gag, red, black, yellowfin, and yellowmouth groupers) during the spring spawning season. However, after 2025, only red grouper is expected to remain open to recreational harvest during this period. Gag is already subject to a season closure that opens September 1 and closes when the allowable harvest has been met. The remaining species are managed under the Other Shallow-Water Grouper complex. The Council recently transmitted a framework action (GFMC 2025) to modify management measures for the Other Shallow-Water Grouper complex including the establishment of a recreational fixed closed season that prohibits recreational harvest from January 1 through June 30. The Council has received public input that 20-fathom closure has limited conservation benefit and imposes a burden on recreational anglers. As a result, Council is considering eliminating this time-area closure in this document.

[8] Although a closure was triggered for the 2025 fishing year due to an overage of the recreational ACL in 2024, NMFS implemented an emergency rule (90 FR 37804) that obviated the need for this closure.
[9] This closure occurs in the portion of the Gulf EEZ seaward of coordinates defined in the Federal regulations at paragraph (d) of § 622.34, Seasonal and area closures designed to protect Gulf reef fish.

Red Grouper Recreational Data

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) created the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS) in 1979. In the Gulf, MRFSS collected recreational catch and effort data since 1981. MRFSS included both the Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) and onsite interviews at marinas and other points where recreational anglers fish. In 2008, the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) replaced MRFSS to meet increasing demand for more precise, accurate, and timely recreational catch estimates. MRIP is a state-regional-federal partnership that utilizes large-scale surveys of the saltwater recreational fishing community to estimate recreational fishing catch and effort information used in stock assessments and fisheries management. MRIP utilizes separate surveys to measure catch rate and effort by mode (e.g., private angler vs for-hire) to estimate total recreational catch. For each mode the catch rate is multiplied by the effort to obtain an estimate of total catch.

The MRIP Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) captures catch rate for both the private angler and for-hire modes. This survey was designed in 2013 to address concerns of potential bias and better account for all types of completed trips by extending the time period dockside samplers stayed at an assigned location (Foster et al. 2018). The more complete temporal coverage with the new survey design provides for consistent increases or decreases in APAIS angler catch rate statistics, which are used in stock assessments and management, for at least some species (NOAA Fisheries 2019).

MRIP transitioned from the legacy CHTS to a new mail survey, known as the MRIP-Fishing Effort Survey (FES), in 2015. The surveys were run side by side for three years, and in 2018, MRIP-FES replaced MRIP-CHTS. Both survey methods collect data needed to estimate marine recreational fishing effort (number of fishing trips) by shore and private/rental boat anglers on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. MRIP-CHTS used random-digit dialing of homes in coastal counties to contact anglers. The new mail-based FES uses angler license and registration information as one way to identify and contact anglers (supplemented with data from the U.S. Postal Service, which includes virtually all U.S. households). Comparisons of the CHTS and FES surveys from the side-by-side years indicated that, in general, total recreational fishing effort estimates generated from the FES are higher — and in some cases substantially higher — than the CHTS estimates (NOAA Fisheries 2019). This is because the FES is designed to measure fishing activity more accurately than the CHTS, albeit while recognizing a greater degree of uncertainty in those landings estimates. This increase in estimated effort is not because there was a sudden rise in fishing effort, but rather because FES better targets actual fishery participants through the directed mail survey. Likewise, the increase in uncertainty about the effort estimates reflects uncertainty that was likely also present in CHTS but went unaccounted for due to biases that were identified as FES was developed. NMFS developed a calibration model to allow historic effort estimates using MRIP-CHTS to be compared to estimates from MRIP-FES.

At the August 2023 Council meeting, the NOAA Office of Science and Technology (OST) discussed the release of a pilot study (NOAA 2023[10]), which evaluated potential respondents' bias as recall error in the mail portion of the recreational FES survey used to estimate effort. The 2023 pilot study evaluated this bias for a portion of the year across several states, and preliminary results suggest the order of the questions in the survey has led to overestimation of fishing effort by MRIP-FES. In light of the results of this pilot study, NMFS conducted a new and more comprehensive year-long study of FES, which compared the current FES design to a revised version that is mailed more frequently (monthly as opposed to every 2 months) and changes the order of fishing activity questions to improve respondent recall.
NMFS plans to produce a report outlining key findings and estimate comparisons in summer 2025, followed by peer review of the revised design, a peer reviewed report of the findings of the study, a peer review of the updated calibration model, and finally implementation of and transition to a revised FES in 2026 in collaboration with partners, which includes producing calibrated historical estimates updated to reflect outputs from the revised design.

Florida Gulf Reef Fish Survey (GRFS)/State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS)

In 2017, the State of Florida formally created GRFS to monitor private angling landings and discards of red snapper, red grouper, and several other species harvested in state and federal waters in the Gulf. In 2020, that survey was expanded statewide and renamed SRFS, and additional species were added.[11] SRFS was created to be compatible with MRIP-CHTS; however, calibrated historical landings for SRFS are somewhat larger for the recreational sector than that estimated by MRIP-CHTS, but lower than estimated by MRIP-FES. SRFS reports landings and discards monthly in numbers, with a conversion to weight based on that used by MRIP. SRFS uses a combination of dockside intercepts from SRFS and APAIS to estimate catch-per-unit-effort from private recreational vessels. To obtain complete estimates of recreational catch for stock assessment, SRFS private recreational landings and discard estimates have to be combined with recreational shore and charter for-hire catch informed by MRIP-FES, as well as headboat catch informed by the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS). Thus, when "SRFS" is referred to further in this document with respect to management of the red grouper stock and SEDAR 88, it encompasses all of these sources of data combined.
SRFS/GRFS has only been running since 2015, so the time series of private recreational landings/discards used in SEDAR 88 and in this report are MRIP-FES landings/discards converted to SRFS currency based on a ratio calculated using overlapping years of the two surveys (2015-2019) (see Cross et al. 2020).

[10] https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/recreational-fishing-data/fishing-effort-survey-research-and-improvements
[11] https://myfwc.com/research/saltwater/fishstats/srfs/program/

1.2 Purpose and Need

The purpose of this action is to modify the catch limits and sector allocations of Gulf red grouper and to consider eliminating the recreational closed season for SWG in federal waters seaward of the 20-fathom boundary.

The need for this action is to use the best scientific information available to increase catch limits and reduce economic hardship on the commercial and recreational Gulf red grouper sectors and to eliminate the recreational closed season for SWG, consistent with the authority under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

1.3 History of Management

The following summary describes management actions that affect the management of red grouper in the Reef Fish FMP. More information on the Reef Fish FMP can be obtained from the Council.[12] A history of red grouper management through 2019 is presented in Reef Fish Amendment 53.[13]

Amendment 1 was implemented in January 1990. It set a 20-inch total length (TL) minimum size limit on red grouper; set a five-grouper recreational daily bag limit; set an 11.0 mp ww commercial quota for grouper, with the commercial quota divided into a 9.2 mp ww shallow-water grouper quota and a 1.8 mp ww deep-water grouper quota; and defined shallow-water grouper as black grouper, gag, red grouper, Nassau grouper, yellowfin grouper, yellowmouth grouper, rock hind, red hind, speckled hind, and scamp; and defined deep-water grouper as misty grouper, snowy grouper, warsaw grouper, and yellowedge grouper. The amendment also allowed a two-day possession limit for charter vessels and headboats on trips that extended beyond 24 hours, provided the vessel has two licensed operators aboard as required by the United States Coast Guard (USCG), and each passenger can provide a receipt to verify the length of the trip. In addition, the amendment limited fishermen fishing under a bag limit to a single day limit; established a longline and buoy gear boundary at the 50-fathom depth contour west of Cape San Blas, Florida, and the 20-fathom depth contour east of Cape San Blas, inshore of which the directed harvest of reef fish with longlines and buoy gear was prohibited, and limited the retention of reef fish captured incidentally in other longline operations (e.g., shark) to the recreational daily bag limit; limited trawl vessels to the recreational size and daily bag limits of reef fish; established fish trap permits, allowing a maximum of 100 fish traps per permit holder; prohibited the use of entangling nets for directed harvest of reef fish; limited retention of reef fish caught in entangling nets for other fisheries to the recreational daily bag limit; established the fishing year to be January 1 through December 31; and established a commercial reef fish vessel permit (GMFMC 1989).

[12] http://www.gulfcouncil.org/fishery_management_plans/index.php.
[13] https://gulfcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/B-5d-RF-AM-53-Red-Grouper_6_16_2021.pdf

Amendment 30B was implemented in May 2009. It set an interim allocation of red grouper between the recreational and commercial sectors; made adjustments to the red grouper total allowable catch (TAC); established ACLs and AMs for the commercial and recreational red grouper sectors and the commercial aggregate shallow-water grouper fishery; adjusted recreational grouper bag limits and seasons, including a recreational closed season for shallow-water grouper from February 1 through March 31; adjusted commercial grouper quotas; reduced the red grouper commercial minimum size limit; replaced the one-month commercial grouper closed season with a four-month seasonal area closure at the Edges; eliminated the end date for Madison-Swanson and Steamboat Lumps marine protected areas; and required that vessels with a federal charter vessel/headboat permit for Gulf reef fish must comply with the more restrictive of state or federal reef fish regulations when fishing in state waters (GMFMC 2008a).

Amendment 29 was implemented in January 2010 and established an IFQ program for the commercial harvest of grouper and tilefish species in the reef fish fishery (GMFMC 2008b).

Generic ACL/AM Amendment, largely implemented in January 2012 with other elements implemented later in the same year, established in-season and post-season AMs for all stocks that did not already have such measures defined. The AM states that if an ACL is exceeded, in subsequent years an in-season AM will be implemented that will close all shallow-water grouper fishing when the ACL is reached or projected to be reached (GMFMC 2011a).

Amendment 32 was implemented in March 2012. It set the red grouper commercial ACL at 6.03 mp gw and the recreational ACL at 1.90 mp gw; modified grouper IFQ multi-use allocations; added an overage adjustment and in-season measures to the red grouper recreational AMs to avoid exceeding the ACL; and added an AM for the red grouper bag limit that would reduce the four red grouper bag limit in the future to three red grouper, and then to two red grouper, if the red grouper recreational ACL is exceeded (GMFMC 2011b).

A **December 2012 framework action**, implemented in 2013, modified the February 1 through March 31 recreational closed season on shallow-water grouper in federal waters to eliminate the closure in federal waters shoreward of the 20 fathom boundary.

An **emergency rule**, implemented in May 2019, reduced the red grouper commercial and recreational ACLs and ACTs consistent with a stock ACL of 4.16 mp gw, to provide a temporary reduction in harvest levels while a framework action was developed to reduce catch limits on a long-term basis. The commercial ACL is 3.16 mp gw; the commercial quota is 3.00 mp gw. The recreational ACL is 1.00 mp gw; the recreational ACT is 0.92 mp gw (NOAA 2019).

An **April 2019 framework action**, implemented in October 2019, reduced the catch limits for red grouper consistent with the May 2019 emergency rule (GMFMC 2019).

Amendment 53 modified the commercial and recreational sector allocations of red grouper to 59.3% and 40.7%, respectively, based on landings from 1986-2005 in MRIP-FES units. It will also set the OFL at 4.66 mp gw, the ABC at 4.26 mp gw, and the total ACL at 4.26 mp gw. The commercial ACL will be 2.53 mp gw; the recreational ACL will be 1.73 mp gw. The commercial ACL/ACT buffer will be retained at 5%; the recreational ACL/ACT buffer will

increase from 8% to 9%. The commercial ACT will be 2.40 mp gw; the recreational ACT will be 1.57 mp gw (GMFMC 2021).

A **November 2021 framework action**, implemented in August 2022, increased red grouper catch limits based on a new mean weight adjustment methodology for recreationally caught grouper. The new OFL was set at 5.99 mp gw, the ABC at 4.96 mp gw, the stock ACL at 4.96 mp gw, the commercial ACL/ACT at 2.94/2.79 mp gw, and the recreational ACL/ACT at 2.02/1.84 mp gw.

An **emergency rule**, implemented in August 2025, increased the red grouper OFL to 10.64 mp gw, ABC to 8.28 mp gw, and the stock ACL to 7.45 mp gw, which is 90% of the ABC. The commercial ACL and quota are 4.42 mp gw and 4.20 mp gw, respectively, and the commercial ACL and ACT are 3.03 mp gw and 2.76 mp gw, respectively. This allows for a temporary increase in harvest levels while an amendment is developed to increase catch limits on a long-term basis (NOAA 2025).

CHAPTER 2. MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES

2.1 Action 1: Modification of Gulf Red Grouper Overfishing Limit (OFL), Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC), and Total Annual Catch Limit (ACL)

Alternative 1: No Action. Maintain the current maximum sustainable yield (MSY) proxy, OFL, ABC, and total ACL for red grouper. The MSY proxy for red grouper is the yield when fishing at a 30% spawning potential ratio ($F_{30\%SPR}$). The total ACL is set equal to the ABC. The OFL, ABC, and total ACL in millions of pounds (mp) gutted weight (gw) are calculated using, in part, recreational landings data from the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES), and are as follows:

OFL (MRIP-FES)	5.99 mp gw
ABC (MRIP-FES)	4.96 mp gw
Total ACL (MRIP-FES)	4.96 mp gw

Alternative 2: Revise the MSY proxy and catch limits for red grouper based on the results of Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 88, and recommendations of the Gulf Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) using a three-year constant-catch scenario. The OFL and ABC for red grouper would be set based on an MSY proxy of the yield when fishing at $F_{40\%SPR}$, and the yield when fishing at 75% of the F_{MSY} proxy, respectively. The OFL and ABC are derived, in part, using the State of Florida's State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) data for private recreational vessels. The total ACL is set equal to the ABC. The OFL, ABC, and total ACL in mp gw are as follows:

OFL	10.64 mp gw
ABC	8.28 mp gw
Total ACL	8.28 mp gw

Alternative 3: Revise the MSY proxy and catch limits for red grouper based on the results of SEDAR 88, and recommendations of the Gulf Council's SSC using a three-year constant-catch scenario. The OFL and ABC for red grouper would be set based on an MSY proxy of the yield when fishing at $F_{40\%SPR}$, and the yield when fishing at 75% of the F_{MSY} proxy, respectively. The OFL and ABC are derived, in part, using SRFS data for private recreational vessels. The total ACL is set at 70% of the ABC in 2026, 80% of the ABC in 2027, 90% of the ABC in 2028, and 100% of the ABC in 2029 and subsequent years. The OFL, ABC, and total ACL in mp gw are as follows:

OFL	10.64 mp gw
ABC	8.28 mp gw
Total ACL (in 2026)	5.80 mp gw
Total ACL (in 2027)	6.62 mp gw
Total (in 2028)	7.45 mp gw

Note: *Alternative 1 is not a viable alternative because the catch limits were set using MRIP-FES recreational data, and SRFS recreational data are recognized as consistent with the best scientific information available for red grouper.*

Discussion:

Gulf red grouper was assessed in SEDAR 88 (2024), using data through 2022, and was estimated to be healthy as of that terminal year of data after review by the SSC. The SSC evaluated SEDAR 88 and found the analyses to be consistent with the best scientific information available at its February 2025 meeting. At its May 2025 meeting, the SSC recommended that the OFL and ABC for red grouper for 2027 – 2029 and subsequent years at 10.64 mp gw and 8.28 mp gw, respectively. As part of its discussions, the SSC evaluated the MSY proxy for red grouper, considerate of its life history characteristics. Red grouper is a protogynous hermaphrodite, in that it is born female and can change sex to male later in life. Consistent with the guidance provided by Harford et al. (2019), especially for species which change sex, and considerate of red grouper's historically demonstrated vulnerability to red tide mortality (SEDAR 88 2024), the SSC recommended a revision to the MSY proxy for red grouper. The current proxy value is the yield when fishing at $F_{30\%SPR}$, which based on the aforementioned guidance, the SSC thought could result in too high a likelihood of overharvest when combined with other factors like hermaphroditism and episodic red tide mortality. To better ensure the continued biological health of the fishery, the SSC recommended increasing the proxy used to the yield when fishing at $F_{40\%SPR}$, which would be expected to result in a more robust spawning stock biomass over time.

Alternative 1 (No Action) would maintain the current MSY proxy of $F_{30\%SPR}$, which corresponds to the current OFL of 5.99 mp gw and ABC if 4.96 mp gw as established in the November 2021 Framework Action under the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf (Reef Fish FMP; GMFMC 2022). These current catch limits were informed by the 2021 Interim Analysis for red grouper and used MRIP-FES data for private recreational vessel landings. The Council is responsible for determining the MSY proxy to be used in calculating catch limits; however, **Alternative 1** is not a viable alternative because it is not based on the best scientific information available.

Alternative 2 would modify the MSY proxy to be the yield when fishing at $F_{40\%SPR}$ and increases the OFL and ABC to 10.64 and 8.28 mp gw, respectively, for 2027 – 2029 and subsequent years. Like **Alternative 1**, **Alternative 2** sets the total ACL equal to the ABC as approved by the SSC at its May 2025 meeting, which is consistent with Council practice for healthy fish stocks. Further, catch limits under **Alternative 2** are informed by SRFS data for private recreational vessels, as opposed to MRIP-FES data in **Alternative 1**. SRFS data were found to be more precise and a better representation of catch and effort for this recreational fleet for red grouper during the SSC's review of SEDAR 88.

Alternative 3 would also modify the MSY proxy to be the yield when fishing at $F_{40\%SPR}$ and increase the OFL and ABC to 10.64 mp gw and 8.28 mp gw, respectively, informed by SRFS data. However, **Alternative 3** provides a more conservative approach to management compared to **Alternative 2**, as the total ACL would be set at a percentage of the ABC which would start at

70% in 2026 and increase by 10% each year until it reaches 100% of the ABC in 2029. **Alternative 3** was proposed to provide a more conservative option given the large increase in catch limits that were indicated as sustainable under SEDAR 88 compared to **Alternative 1**, especially given concern from some Council members and members of the public at the April 2025 Council meeting about the sustainability of the SEDAR 88 indicated harvest limits. Substantial increases to allowable and realized catch are expected for red grouper by updating catch limits to use SRFS recreational data under **Alternative 2** and **Alternative 3**, compared to **Alternative 1**.

Alternative 2 would result in the highest increase in catch limits through 2028, as the "phased-in" approach used in **Alternative 3** would start with a lower ACL, and gradually increase that until it equals the ACL in **Alternative 2** and the ABC in 2029. Because management of red grouper is done by sector, the sector-specific effects of **Alternative 2** and **Alternative 3** are more appropriately addressed with sector allocations and sector ACLs and ACTs in Section 2.2.

2.2 Action 2: Modification of Gulf Red Grouper Sector Allocations and Sector ACLs

Alternative 1: No Action. As established in Amendment 53 to the Reef Fish FMP (GMFMC 2022), the commercial sector would be allocated 59.3% of the total ACL; the recreational sector would be allocated 40.7% of the total ACL. These sector allocations of the total ACL are based on the average landings using FES-adjusted MRIP-FES data during the years 1986 through 2005, based on the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) ACL monitoring datasets. The commercial buffer between the ACL and ACT (quota) is 5%; the recreational buffer is 9%.

Alternative 2: Revise the sector allocations of the total ACL between the recreational and commercial sectors as the average landings using SRFS data during the years 1986 through 2005. The allocations for red grouper are 68.2% commercial and 31.8% recreational. The commercial buffer between the ACL and ACT is 5%; the recreational buffer is 9%.

Alternative 3: Revise the sector allocations of the total ACL between the recreational and commercial sectors as the average landings using SRFS data during the years 1986 through 2009. The allocations for red grouper are 69.2% commercial and 30.8% recreational. The commercial buffer between the ACL and ACT is 5%; the recreational buffer is 9%.

Alternative 4: Revise the sector allocations of the total ACL between the recreational and commercial sectors as the average landings using SRFS data during the years 1986 through 2024, excluding 2020. The allocations for red grouper are 68.4% commercial and 31.6% recreational. The commercial buffer between the ACL and ACT is 5%; the recreational buffer is 9%.

Discussion:

Alternative 1 (No Action) would maintain the sector allocations established in Amendment 53 (GMFMC 2021), with commercial and recreational allocation of the red grouper stock ACL divided 59.3% and 40.7%, respectively, as apportioned using MRIP-FES data from the reference period. **Alternative 1** maintains the same reference period of landings (1986 – 2005) as in the initial interim allocation established in Reef Fish Amendment 30B (GMFMC 2008) and Amendment 53 (GMFMC 2021). Reef Fish Amendment 53 modified the interim allocation based on the use of MRIP-FES informed recreational data that increased estimates of historical recreational landings and thus, increased the 24% recreational interim allocation to 40.7% in Reef Fish Amendment 53 (GMFMC 2021). Likewise, the use of MRIP-FES also increased the estimates of future recreational catch and effort thus, the intent of this allocation change was to maintain historical fishing practices noting that maintaining the 76% commercial and 24% recreational allocation with the use of a new recreational data collection system would result in a de facto reallocation to the commercial sector (GMFMC 2021). The change to the SRFS in this action informed recreational data would result in a similar pattern albeit, in the opposite direction. Recreational landings and effort estimates from SRFS are generally lower than those produced by MRIP-FES. Thus, continuing with the current allocation without accounting for the decrease in estimated catch and effort associated with the change to SRFS from MRIP-FES would result in a de facto reallocation to the recreational component. The action alternatives

consider increases to the commercial allocation and a reduction in the recreational allocation to balance the changes with differing catch estimates between SRFS and MRIP-FES. Consistent with previous allocation considerations by the Council, alternatives also consider various reference periods to inform landings and the resulting allocations.

Alternatives 1- 4 include a 9% buffer between the recreational ACL and ACT which was calculated using the Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule following SEDAR 61 in 2019; the 5% buffer between the commercial ACL and ACT was set to account for the gag multi-use allocation of the IFQ program.

Alternatives 2-4 reflect recreational landings estimated using SRFS landings data. **Alternative 2** would base the commercial and recreational sector allocations of red grouper on landings from the same timeframe as used in setting current allocations through Amendment 53 (GMFMC 2022) but would use SRFS landings data. The resulting allocations are 68.2% commercial, 31.8% recreational. Both **Alternatives 1** and **2** would base the commercial and recreational sector allocations on the same timeframe as used in Amendment 30B (GMFMC 2008) and Amendment 53 (GMFMC 2022).

Alternative 3 would base the commercial and recreational sector allocations on landings from the timeframe 1986 through 2009 (Table 2.1.2), ending the time series upon implementation of the commercial grouper-tilefish individual fishing quota (IFQ) program in 2010, which includes management of red grouper (GMFMC 2008b). The resulting allocations are 69.2% commercial and 30.8% recreational. The commercial IFQ program was implemented and effectively limited commercial harvest to its ACL. The recreational sector by its nature, is more variable both in the estimation of the landings and the effectiveness of the various seasons, size, and bag limits used to constrain harvest. **Alternative 3** does not include post-IFQ implementation years, as a result of these potential biases. However, by not including these post-IFQ implementation years, **Alternative 3** may not capture more recent dynamics of the fishery such as increased participation by the recreational sector through time that is common in the reef fish fishery.

In contrast, the recreational sector could exceed its ACL because when a closure is triggered, it may not be possible to close the fishing season before the ACL is met. An overage of the recreational ACL has occurred seven times since the inception of the IFQ program in 2010 despite early season closures in six of those years.

Alternative 4 would base the commercial and recreational allocations on landings from the timeframe 1986 through 2024, excluding 2020. The resulting allocations are 68.4% commercial and 31.6% recreational. **Alternative 4** incorporates the longest time period of landings currently available (Table 1.1.1) while omitting 2020 from consideration as the fishery dynamics for both sectors were likely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. **Alternative 4** may better capture the recent dynamics of the fishery than **Alternatives 1-3**; however, the potential bias from recreational harvest exceeding its ACL seven times since 2010 could affect the resulting sector allocation calculations. The various time series under consideration in **Alternatives 2-4**, which use SRFS landings data, have relatively small differences in sector allocations (at most, 1%). The resulting sector ACLs, commercial quotas and recreational ACTs for the alternatives in Action 2, if Action 1 Alternative 2 is selected as the preferred, are shown in Table 2.2.1. The

resulting total ACLs, sector ACLs, commercial quotas and recreational ACTs if Alternative 3 is selected in Action 1 are shown in Table 2.2.2.

Table 2.2.1. Total ACL, Sector ACLs, Commercial Quotas and Recreational ACTs Resulting from Action 1 Alternative 2.

	Total ACL (mp gw)	Commercial ACL/Quota (mp gw)	Rec ACL/ACT (mp gw)
Alt 1	8.28	4.91/4.66	3.37/3.07
Alt 2	8.28	5.65/5.36	2.63/2.40
Alt 3	8.28	5.73/5.44	2.55/2.32
Alt 4	8.28	5.66/5.38	2.62/2.38

Table 2.2.2. Total ACLs, Sector ACLs, Commercial Quotas, and Recreational ACTs resulting from Action 1 Alternative 3.

	Total ACL (mp gw)	Commercial ACL/Quota (mp gw)	Rec ACL/ACT (mp gw)
2026 (70% of ABC)			
Alt 1	5.8	3.44/3.27	2.36/2.15
Alt 2	5.8	3.96/3.76	1.84/1.68
Alt 3	5.8	4.01/3.81	1.79/1.63
Alt 4	5.8	3.97/3.77	1.83/1.67
2027 (80% of ABC)			
Alt 1	6.62	3.93/3.73	2.69/2.45
Alt 2	6.62	4.51/4.29	2.11/1.92
Alt 3	6.62	4.58/4.35	2.04/1.86
Alt 4	6.62	4.53/4.30	2.09/1.90
2028 (90% of ABC)			
Alt 1	7.45	4.42/4.20	3.03/2.76
Alt 2	7.45	5.08/4.83	2.37/2.16
Alt 3	7.45	5.16/4.90	2.29/2.09
Alt 4	7.45	5.10/4.84	2.35/2.14
2029 (ABC = ACL)			
Alt 1	8.28	4.91/4.66	3.37/3.07
Alt 2	8.28	5.65/5.36	2.63/2.40
Alt 3	8.28	5.73/5.44	2.55/2.32
Alt 4	8.28	5.66/5.38	2.62/2.38

The recreational AM for red grouper requires NMFS to project the recreational harvest for each year. If the recreational harvest is expected to reach the recreational ACL before the end of the year, NMFS will close the recreational sector when the recreational ACL is met. NMFS developed an analysis of the projected season lengths for each combination of alternatives in Action 1 and 2. Overall, the lower the recreational ACL, the more likely an early season closure

will be required. This could result either from the Total ACL selected in action 1 and/or the allocation selected in Action 2. The results for each combination of viable alternatives are presented in Table 2.2.3, and additional information is available in Appendix A. Alternative 1 in Action 1 is not viable and thus, not considered part of the analysis. Alternative 2 in Action 1 would set the Total ACL equal to 8.28 mp gw and is not anticipated to require early season closure for any of the allocation alternatives in Action 2. Alternative 3 in Action 1 would increase the Total ACL by 10% each year from 20026 through 2029. As a result, early season closures are most likely in the earliest years of this yield stream. If Alternative 3 in Action 1 was selected as preferred, early season closures are predicted for **Alternatives 2** and **3** in Action 2 in 2026 only. No other combinations are expected to result in recreational closures in 2026, and none result are expected to result in early season closures in 2027 and beyond.

Table 2.2.3. Projected Gulf recreational (Rec) closure dates based on resulting ACLs (mp gw) from combinations of Action 1 and Action 2 alternatives.

Action 1 Alt	Action 2 Alt	Rec ACL (mp gw)	Projected Closure
Action 1 Alt 2	**Alt 1**	3.37	No Closure
	Alt 2	2.63	No Closure
	Alt 3	2.55	No Closure
	Alt 4	2.62	No Closure
Action 1 Alt 3	**2026 (70% of ABC)**		
	Alt 1	2.36	No Closure
	Alt 2	1.84	November 23
	Alt 3	1.79	November 11
	Alt 4	1.83	November 21
	2027 (80% of ABC)		
	Alt 1	2.69	No Closure
	Alt 2	2.11	No Closure
	Alt 3	2.04	No Closure
	Alt 4	2.09	No Closure
	2028 (90% of ABC)		
	Alt 1	3.03	No Closure
	Alt 2	2.37	No Closure
	Alt 3	2.29	No Closure
	Alt 4	2.35	No Closure
	2029 (ABC = ACL)		
	Alt 1	3.37	No Closure
	Alt 2	2.63	No Closure
	Alt 3	2.55	No Closure
	Alt 4	2.62	No Closure

2.3 Action 3: Modification of the February-March Recreational Shallow-Water Grouper (SWG) Closure

Alternative 1: No Action. Retain the February 1 through March 31 recreational closed season for SWG in federal waters seaward of the 20-fathom boundary.

Alternative 2: Eliminate the February 1 through March 31 recreational closed season for SWG in federal waters seaward of the 20-fathom boundary.

Discussion:

Alternative 1 would retain the February 1 through March 31 recreational closed season in federal waters seaward of the 20-fathom boundary for all six SWG species (black grouper, red grouper, gag, yellowfin grouper, scamp, and yellowmouth grouper). The recreational closed season was initially established in all federal waters in a framework action (GMFMC 2006) and then modified in another framework action which eliminated the recreational closed season in federal waters shoreward of the 20-fathom boundary (GMFMC 2012).

Alternative 2 would eliminate the February 1 through March 31 recreational closed season for SWG in federal waters seaward of the 20-fathom boundary. The Council's Reef Fish AP recommended the removal of this recreational time-area closure during its April 2024 meeting. The 20-fathom closure is intended to provide additional protection during the spawning season for SWG species by limiting harvest in deeper waters. However, this fishing effort may be redirected into inshore waters where the average size of fish is smaller and more interactions with undersize fish occur. This could lead to additional fishing effort (and discards) necessary to harvest the bag limit, thereby potentially reducing, or eliminating the conservation benefit of this seasonal area closure.

The recreational season for gag would currently be unaffected by **Alternative 2** as Amendment 56 to the Reef Fish FMP (GMFMC 2023) modified the start date for the gag recreational season to open September 1. The recreational season for black grouper, scamp, yellowmouth grouper, and yellowfin grouper would also currently be unaffected as a framework action (GFMC 2025), currently in the rulemaking process, established a recreational fixed closed season for the Other SWG complex as January 1 through June 30 each year (season open July 1 through December 31). However, should the recreational fixed closed seasons for gag, black grouper, scamp, yellowmouth grouper, and yellowfin grouper be subsequently modified, the elimination of the recreational closed season for SWG in federal waters seaward of the 20-fathom boundary would affect those species. The recreational season for red grouper would be affected by **Alternative 2**, as red grouper has no other recreational fixed closed season.

During the June 2024 Council meeting, some Council members noted that removal of the 20-fathom recreational closed season could increase landings of red grouper such that the season may be shortened at the end of the year. Potential impacts regarding a seasonal closure based on the removal of the 20-fathom closure are difficult to estimate as recreational harvest depth related information for recreational harvest is not available or imprecise. For **Alternative 2,** a

reasonable assumption is that catch rates are unlikely to decrease for red grouper relative to **Alternative 1** and that the other SWG species are expected to remain unaffected.

CHAPTER 3. LIST OF AGENCIES CONSULTED

National Marine Fisheries Service
- Southeast Fisheries Science Center
- Southeast Regional Office
- Office for Law Enforcement

National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration General Counsel

Environmental Protection Agency
United States Coast Guard
United States Fish and Wildlife Services
Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources/Marine Resources Division
Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
Mississippi Department of Marine Resources
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

CHAPTER 4. LIST OF PREPARERS

Name	Expertise	Responsibility
Matt Freeman, Gulf Council	Fishery Biologist, Economist	Co-Team Lead – amendment development, introduction, physical, biological, and ecological effects; Economic effects, Regulatory Impact Review
Daniel Luers, NMFS/SF	Fishery Biologist	Co-Team Lead – amendment development, introduction, and administrative effects
Adam Stemle, NMFS/SF	Economist	Economic Environment
David Records, NMFS/SF	Economist	Regulatory Flexibility Act analysis
Christina Package-Ward, NMFS/SF	Anthropologist	Social effects, Social environment
Alisha Gray, NMFS/SF	Fishery Biologist, Data Analyst	Data analysis

Name	Discipline/Expertise	Role in EA Preparation
Mara Levy, NOAA GC	Attorney	Legal review
Noah Silverman, NMFS	Natural Resource Management Specialist	NEPA review
David Dale, NMFS/HC	EFH Specialist	Habitat review
Jennifer Lee, NMFS/PR	Protected Resources Specialist	Protected resources review
Scott Sandorf, NMFS/SF	Regulatory Writer	Regulatory preparation and review
Juan Agar, NMFS SEFSC	Economist	Economic review
Francesca Forrestal, NMFS SEFSC	Research Fishery Biologist	Physical, biological, and ecological review
Ryan Rindone, Gulf Council	Research Fishery Biologist	Physical, biological, and ecological review
Carrie Simmons, Gulf Council	Fishery Biologist	Physical, biological, and ecological review
John Froeschke, Gulf Council	Fishery Biologist	Physical, biological, and ecological review
Frank Helies, NMFS/SF	Fishery Biologist	Physical, biological, and ecological review

NMFS = National Marine Fisheries Service, SF = Sustainable Fisheries Division, PR = Protected Resources Division, HC = Habitat Conservation Division, GC = General Counsel

CHAPTER 5. REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A. RECREATIONAL SEASON ANALYSES FOR GULF OF AMERICA RED GROUPER

Southeast Regional Office
LAPP/DM Branch
August 2025

Gulf of America[114] (Gulf) red grouper are currently managed in federal waters under the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf (Reef Fish FMP). In 2025, a stock assessment of red grouper was completed (SEDAR 88 2025), and passed a peer-review by the Gulf Council's (Council) Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). The SSC recommended increasing the Gulf red grouper Overfishing Limit (OFL) and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC). To act on these recommendations, the Council initiated work on Amendment 62 to the Reef Fish FMP that considers red grouper catch limits and sector allocations. This analysis provides the average recreational landings of recreational Gulf red grouper and recreational season closures based on all management options being considered.

Recreational landings data

Gulf recreational landings for red grouper were obtained from the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) recreational ACL files (accessed May 2025; **Table 1**). The SEFSC recreational landings dataset includes landings from the Texas Parks and Wildlife recreational creel survey (TPWD), Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries creel survey (LA Creel), Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS), and Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES; Florida, Alabama and Mississippi). The MRIP FES file contains estimates from MRIP's Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS), MRIP FES (private angler effort estimates), and For-Hire Telephone Survey (FHS; for-hire effort estimates). For 2020 and 2021, imputed MRIP FES catch estimates are used to account for disruptions in the dockside sampling due to COVID. Monthly landings were estimated for MRIP FES, TPWD and LA Creel by assuming equal daily catch rates for months within a wave and then combined with SRHS, which are provided monthly. Predicted future landings for the recreational sector were estimated by averaging monthly landings in 2022-2024 for January through June. Due to recreational season closures in 2021 through 2024, predicted future landings for the recreational sector were estimated by averaging monthly landings in 2020-2022 for July through August and 2020 singularly for September through December since those landings were more consistent and elevated through December. The average monthly landings for each month were then divided by the number of days in each month to provide a daily catch rate for each sector.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS; accessed May 2025) provides private angling landings for red snapper, gag, red grouper

[14] The Gulf of Mexico was renamed the Gulf of America pursuant to Executive Order 14172, and Secretary of the Interior Order No. 3423. All geographical references to the Gulf of America or "the Gulf" in this Framework Action refer to the same body of water known as the Gulf of Mexico in the regulations at 50 CFR part 622.

and several other reef fish species harvested in state and federal water of the west coast of Florida. FWC SRFS data was determined best available data by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) at the May 2025 meeting for reporting and analyzing Florida private recreational landings of red grouper. As a result, Florida private recreational landings of red grouper in the MRIP FES landings file were replaced with SRFS landings that are calibrated to MRIP FES to generate a SRFS informed recreational landings time series with which future landings could be projected. SRFS landings are reported in whole weight, but were converted to pounds gutted weight (lb gw) using a revised gutted to whole weight conversion factor of 1.05 (SEDAR 88). All landings are reported in lb gw (**Table 1**).

Average recreational landings of red grouper are calculated to project future landing rates and are provided to compare against each of the proposed annual catch limits (ACLs; **Table 2**). The recreational sector will be closed if the ACL is met or is projected to be met. Predicted recreational closure dates are provided in **Table 2** based on cumulatively summed projected recreational landings of red grouper.

Table 1. Monthly recreational landings (lb gw) of Gulf red grouper from 2020-2024 along with projected future landings estimated using averaged landings from 2022-2024 for January through June, 2020-2022 for July and August, and 2020 for September through December.

Year	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total Landings
2020	58,287	99,625	185,870	33,786	70,905	255,523	168,920	123,696	150,107	140,021	121,969	96,184	1,504,893
2021*	129,815	32,576	394,996	171,275	177,608	774,480	341,632	220,738	45,550	8,550	38	59	2,297,317
2022*	100,123	79,368	45,173	207,264	83,941	407,007	361,860	151,619	24,322	-	-	123	1,460,801
2023*	131,622	148,848	118,156	102,413	206,665	428,655	197,298	96,482	9,772	9,906	495	132	1,450,444
2024*	66,180	193,517	119,559	145,487	136,192	285,707	15,118	855	46	30	-	-	962,692
Projected Landings	99,308	140,578	94,296	151,721	142,266	373,790	290,804	165,351	150,107	140,021	121,969	96,184	1,966,396

Source: SEFSC MRIP FES recreational ACL dataset [May, 2025] and FWC SRFS [May 2025].
Notes: MRIP FES landings include red grouper landings (TPWD, SRHS, LA Creel, MRIP FES, FWC SRFS).
*The red grouper recreational season ran January 1 through September 14 in 2021, January 1 through August 30 in 2022, January 1 through July 20 in 2023, and January 1 through June 30 in 2024. Closed seasons are highlighted in gray.

Table 2. Projected Gulf red grouper closure dates expected for the recreational sector with each proposed Annual Catch Limit (ACL) alternative. Data Source: SEFSC MRIP FES Recreational ACL Dataset (May 2025) and FWC SRFS (May 2025).

Action 1, Alternative 2 Options		
Action 2 Alternatives	Recreational ACL (lb gw)	Projected Closure
Alternative 1	3,370,000	No Closure
Alternative 2	2,630,000	No Closure
Alternative 3	2,550,000	No Closure
Alternative 4	2,620,000	No Closure
Action 1, Alternative 3 Options		
2026 (70% of ABC)		
Action 2 Alternatives	Recreational ACL (lb gw)	Projected Closure
Alternative 1	2,360,000	No Closure
Alternative 2	1,840,000	**Nov 23**
Alternative 3	1,790,000	**Nov 11**
Alternative 4	1,830,000	**Nov 21**
2027 (80% of ABC)		
Action 2 Alternatives	Recreational ACL (lb gw)	Projected Closure
Alternative 1	2,690,000	No Closure
Alternative 2	2,110,000	No Closure
Alternative 3	2,040,000	No Closure
Alternative 4	2,090,000	No Closure
2028 (90% of ABC)		
Action 2 Alternatives	Recreational ACL (lb gw)	Projected Closure
Alternative 1	3,030,000	No Closure
Alternative 2	2,370,000	No Closure
Alternative 3	2,290,000	No Closure
Alternative 4	2,350,000	No Closure
2029 (ABC = ACL)		
Action 2 Alternatives	Recreational ACL (lb gw)	Projected Closure
Alternative 1	3,370,000	No Closure
Alternative 2	2,630,000	No Closure
Alternative 3	2,550,000	No Closure
Alternative 4	2,620,000	No Closure

The reliability of these results is dependent upon the accuracy of the underlying data and input assumptions. The analysis intends to create a realistic baseline as a foundation for comparisons, under the assumption that projected future landings will accurately reflect actual future landings. These closure dates are our best estimate, but uncertainty still exists as economic conditions,

weather events, changes in catch-per-unit effort, fisher response to management regulations, and a variety of other factors may cause departures from any assumption.