

Reef Fish Committee Report
August 26, 2025
Mr. Chris Schieble – Vice Chair

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

FINAL ACTION – Draft Abbreviated Framework Action: Modifications to the Federal For-Hire Red Snapper Fishing Season (Tab B, No. 4)

Council staff reviewed public comments received regarding the proposed modification to the federal for-hire red snapper fishing season. Council staff then reviewed the purpose and need and the current preferred alternative, and Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff reviewed the draft codified text.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to approve the Abbreviated Framework Action: Modifications to the Federal For-Hire Red Snapper Fishing Season and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce for review and implementation, and deem the codified text as necessary and appropriate, giving staff editorial license to make the necessary changes to the document. The Council Chair is given the authority to deem any changes to the codified text as necessary and appropriate.

Motion carried with one opposed.

FINAL ACTION – Draft Reef Fish Amendment 58B: Modifications to Deep-water Grouper Management Measures (Tab B, No. 5)

Council staff reviewed public comments received regarding the proposed modifications to the management of the deep-water grouper (DWG) complex. Council staff then reviewed the purpose and need and the current preferred alternatives.

Under Action 1, a Committee member acknowledged public comment requesting that the amendment be delayed, but recognized that yellowedge grouper is undergoing overfishing and the Council must act to end overfishing as soon as possible, per the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Another Committee member thought additional recreational reporting for DWG species was necessary to better understand recreational catches, especially since the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) is not designed to reliably sample species like those in the DWG complex. The Committee member also thought that phasing in the catch limit reductions for DWG would ease expected negative economic and social effects.

Under Action 2, a Committee member noted the high proportional standard error about the recreational landings data, stating that by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries own standards, those data should not be used for informing management; however, no other recreational landings data are available, leaving NOAA Fisheries nothing else to use to manage the recreational sector. NOAA General Counsel encouraged the Committee to reinforce its justification for Preferred Alternative 3 in Action 2. A Committee member

recognized that there is an increasing amount of recreational fishing effort for DWG species, and thought that while an equal reduction in sector ACL had prior support at the Council's June 2025 meeting, the increasing trend in recreational fishing effort was evident. Another Committee member noted that Preferred Alternative 3 is based on recent recreational landings, which are clearly increasing on these species.

Under Action 3, a Committee member thought that using a three-year simple moving average will help smooth out larger fluctuations in landings. Council staff clarified that Preferred Alternative 4 uses the average recreational landings over a three-year period against the average recreational ACL from the same three-year period, and the average DWG complex landings over a three-year period against the average DWG complex ACL from the same three-year period, to determine whether to apply the accountability measure (AM) in the following year.

SERO staff reviewed the draft codified text.

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 58A: Shallow-water Grouper Complex Management Considerations (Tab B, No. 6)

The Committee discussion focused primarily on considerations for distributing Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) among the new complexes, IFQ flexibility measures, the black grouper complex AM, scamp complex catch limits, and scamp complex recreational AMs. For the new scamp complex IFQ management measures (Actions 1 and 2), some Committee members advocated for distributing shares such that shareholders would receive the same percentages in each of the two new categories that they held upon dissolution of the Other Shallow-water Grouper (SWG) complex. Some Committee members also advocated for removing the IFQ AMs including the additional 4% buffer between the commercial ACL and quota, since the catch levels being considered are already greatly reduced as a result of the latest stock assessment. Another Committee member reported hearing support for allowing some flexibility measure within the scamp complex, especially for speckled hind (“kitty mitchell”). SERO staff indicated they could provide some additional information on possible IFQ scenarios based on management decisions presented in the document at full Council.

The Committee discussed a recreational AM for the new black grouper complex (Action 4). Some Committee members advocated for removing the consideration of a recreational in-season closure (Alternative 2). Several others suggested leaving that alternative in the action and recommended modifying the language in Alternative 3 to provide for the possibility of recreational access should the commercial sector not land its quota:

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in Action 4, to modify Alternative 3 as follows:

Alternative 3: A post-season recreational AM would be implemented for the black grouper complex if the recreational ACL and the black grouper complex ACL are exceeded. In the year following an overage, NMFS would close the recreational black grouper complex to harvest when the recreational ACL is met or is projected to be met, unless NMFS determines based upon the best scientific

information available (BSIA) that closure of the recreational fishing season is unnecessary.

Motion carried with no opposition and 1 absent.

The Committee reviewed the sector allocation alternatives for the scamp complex (Action 6) and decided to wait until after public comment to select a preferred option. Additionally, a Committee member requested that staff provide values for a potential new option that would incorporate an equal reduction based on historical total landings from the new complex ACL. The resulting reduction percentage would then be applied to each sector ACL for the new scamp complex with both sectors using a longer time series (2012-2023). Council staff stated they would report back at full Council.

The Committee decided that implementing an ACT for the new scamp complex (Action 7) would be appropriate given the uncertainty in scamp complex landings. SEDAR 68 assessed scamp and yellowmouth together and categorizing those species as a complex within the Council's ABC Control Rule was deemed appropriate by several Committee members.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, in Action 7, to make Alternative 2 the preferred:

Alternative 2: Establish a recreational ACT for the scamp complex by applying the Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule and assuming that scamp and yellowmouth grouper are considered a single stock. Use landings data from 2019 – 2023, excluding the 2020 COVID year. The ACT would be set at 14% below the recreational ACL.

Motion carried with no opposition and one absent.

The Committee considered establishing a payback provision for the recreational sector of the scamp complex (Action 8.2). SERO staff suggested modifying Alternative 2 such that a payback would only be triggered should the scamp complex be designated as overfished.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, In Action 8.2, to modify Alternative 2 as follows:

Alternative 2: If recreational scamp complex landings exceed the complex recreational ACL in a fishing year **and the stock complex is overfished**, NMFS would reduce the recreational ACL and ACT for the following fishing year by the amount of the ACL overage in the prior fishing year, unless the best scientific information available determines that a greater, lesser, or no overage adjustment is necessary.

Motion carried with no opposition and 1 absent.

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 62: Modifications to Gulf Red Grouper Management Measures (Tab B, No. 7)

Council staff reviewed the purpose and need statements and the draft actions and alternatives. A Committee member recommended referencing State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) in the purpose and need statements. Another Committee member inquired if the recreational sector would have closures with the phase-in approach of Action 1, Alternative 3. Council staff referenced Table 2.2.3 and noted that, when total ACL equals 70% of the ABC, closures are anticipated with some of the Action 2 alternatives if a phase-in approach is selected. A Committee member noted that no closure is expected with the red grouper emergency rule in 2025 and recommended avoiding a closure in 2026. Another Committee member commented that a possible recreational season closure in November 2026 would be an improvement over the season closure dates in recent years. He added that an update on red grouper landings for this year would be helpful for Council discussions. A Committee member stated that setting the total ACL at 70% of the ABC in the first year seemed arbitrary, and he would like to avoid recreational season closures. Another Committee member recommended setting the total ACL equal to 80% of ABC in 2026. A Committee member stated that a full assessment of red grouper from FWC would be available in 2028. Council staff noted that an interim analysis has been requested and would come to the SSC in February 2026. Another Committee member referenced E.O. 14276 (Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness) and recommended avoiding season closures.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, in **Action 1**, to **modify Alternative 3** as follows:

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 80% of the ABC in 2026, 90% of the ABC in 2027, and 100% of the ABC in 2028 and subsequent years. The OFL, ABC, and total ACL in mp gw are as follows: **(table updated)**

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

Motion carried with no opposition and 1 absent.

The Committee member discussed having a new alternative in Action 1 which would implement a permanent buffer, such that the total ACL is equal to 90% of ABC. Committee members stated that Council members and the SSC have expressed caution towards the large increase to the OFL and ABC, so a buffer would account for management uncertainty until the next stock assessment.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, **in Action 1, to add an Alternative 4 where the total ACL is set at 90% of the ABC.**

Motion carried with no opposition and 1 absent.

A Committee member noted that in discussions of other amendments, like deep-water grouper, recommendations for sector allocations to be based on longer timeframes of landings have been made, but he noted that the resulting sector allocation percentages for red grouper are all very similar, regardless of the timeframe selected. Another Committee member inquired if any of the current alternatives in Action 2 could be considered but rejected, given the similarities in resulting sector allocation percentages. NOAA General Council stated that the current alternatives all have appropriate rationales for inclusion in the amendment and encouraged stating the rationale for a preferred alternative, when selected. Another Committee member stated Alternative 2 made the most sense to him as a preferred alternative, as it is based on SRFS data and also retains the years used to establish sector allocations in Reef Fish Amendment 53.

Action 3 considers removing the recreational season closure for shallow-water grouper, and a Committee member expressed that he still has concerns about this change resulting in an increase in recreational landings and noted it was put in place as a conservation measure. Another Committee member stated that, with the recent stock assessment for red grouper, conservation measures may be of less concern currently and recommended Alternative 2 as the preferred. Another Committee member added that removal of this closed season was listed during the Council's discussion of E.O. 14192 (Unleashing Prosperity through Deregulation).

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

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

Motion carried with no opposition and 1 absent.

A Committee member inquired about the timeline for this document, given the emergency rule is only in effect until the end of 2025. Council staff are planning for a public hearing draft at the November 2025 Council meeting and final action at the January 2026 Council meeting. Council staff requested that the Committee consider if virtual public hearings would be sufficient, or if any in-person public hearings would be needed and, if so, locations for those in-person public hearings.

A Committee member stated that discussion about inclusion of additional actions in Amendment 62 that would assist with some of the updated goals of the IFQ program from 2023 by establishing a commercial quota set aside for red grouper allocation was warranted. The proposed actions would assist in implementing alternative mechanisms for equitably redistributing shares and allocations to accounts harvesting IFQ species and in creating an allocation bank to further reduce bycatch and discards of IFQ species. The Committee member thought, given the proposed large increase in the red grouper commercial quota, this appears to

be an opportune time to not only reward shareholders with larger amounts of allocation but to also pilot an alternative mechanism for distributing commercial red grouper allocation. Several Committee members expressed concern these proposed actions would delay progress of the current amendment and supported exploring the concept in another amendment. Another Committee member inquired if these actions would assist new entrants, and SERO staff responded that the actions could possibly assist if a fisher had entered the fishery in the last few years and had a landings history. A Committee member stated that past conversations about share distributions included the requirement of a referendum. NOAA GC replied that these actions would not be creating new shares. To allow time for Committee members to consider his proposed actions and to allow for public testimony, the Committee will wait to consider the motion until Full Council.

Review of Recreational Initiative Recommendations and Prioritization Schedule (Tab B, No. 8)

Council staff reviewed the Recreational Initiative Working Group's recommendations and categorized them by type of action (education or management), status of action, timeline to action, and contributors required to complete the action. Of the Working Group recommendations presented, the Committee highlighted 12 recommendations for the Council to consider continuing or initiating action on and prioritization. A Committee member shared the sentiment of the Working Group encompassing overarching goals of increased communication with the recreational angling community and increased access amongst anglers. It was highlighted that Working Group priority 4.4: "The Council should continue to delegate authority for setting red snapper management measures for private recreational anglers and state guideboats to each of the five Gulf states" was not included in the recommended list for prioritization as it has already been completed by the Council but continues to be an ongoing priority to maintain state management of red snapper. A Committee member highlighted that when the Council is prioritizing action, staff capacity across all agencies and alignment with Executive Orders 14276 (Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness) and 14192 (Unleashing Prosperity Through Deregulation) should be considered.

Recreational Initiative Working Group Recommendations for Prioritization

Education

2.2: The Council should better communicate the conservation implications of different fishing activities based on individual species' biology and life-history (e.g., depth/location and months of spawning, etc.), empowering anglers to make better decisions based on their conservation ethic.

5.1: The Council should seek opportunities to partner with recreational fishing community leaders to educate and engage anglers to be more active participants in the Gulf Council's management process—potentially through a leadership program sponsored by the Gulf Council, where participants are invited to attend council meetings, review outreach materials, and providing public comment.

5.2: The Council should work with partners to develop scaled-down modules of the Marine Resources Education Program (MREP) to share with a wider audience—possibly including short videos on specific components of the fisheries science and management process.

5.3: The Council should promote opportunities for anglers to report catch information and on-the-water observations of fish abundance and presence (e.g., through the Council's Fisherman Feedback Tool).

6.2: The Council should work with the recreational community, including the for-hire and private angler sectors, to develop seasons that maximize overlap in focal species to enable harvest of multiple species on a given trip and reduce discards. Maximizing overlap with the season for red snapper, the primary target for reef fish anglers Gulf-wide, should be a key priority. At the same time, the Council should recognize the for-hire and tackle industry's need to have a focal species available for harvest at all times.

Management

1.1: To achieve Gulf-wide consistency, specific and measurable guidelines and expectations must be set for Gulf recreational data providers regarding the quality of data that will be acceptable, beyond the ambiguous "best available data."

3.1: The Council should explore development and implementation of a harvest control rule approach for Gulf focal reef fish species to set multi-year measures (e.g., size and bag limits and seasons), beginning with an evaluation of fishery-dependent or independent indicators that could be used to assess stock status in the absence of an assessment.

3.2: The Council should examine the feasibility of implementing carryover provisions for the uncaught portion of an Annual Catch Limit for reef fish species, along with assessing the ability to distribute paybacks for Annual Catch Limit overages across multiple subsequent years to increase stability. Implementation of these could be explored through a pilot study and would be contingent upon stock status and/or trend.

4.1: The Council should consider implementing regional/state flexibility in recreational reef fish management (while maintaining federal management authority) whenever possible.

4.2 The Council should explore a regional management approach for red and gag grouper (maintaining a single Gulf-wide Annual Catch Limit) that splits management measures between Florida, where the vast majority of both species are caught, and the other four Gulf states, where gag and red grouper are only encountered rarely. Specifically, such an approach should maximize harvest opportunity for anglers in Florida while allowing for limited year-round retention of incidental catch in other states.

4.3: The Council should explore differentiating management measures (i.e., size limit, bag limit, and season) for greater amberjack between the eastern Gulf (Florida and Alabama) and western Gulf (Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas) given regional differences in fishery characteristics (maintaining a single Gulf-wide Annual Catch Limit).

6.1: The Council should implement a replacement and/or enhancement to DESCEND Act (P.L. No. 116-340), which requires Gulf reef fish anglers to have a descending device rigged and ready for use, by January 2026 to reduce discard mortality in a growing fishery.

6.2: The Council should work with the recreational community, including the for-hire and private angler sectors, to develop seasons that maximize overlap in focal species to enable harvest of multiple species on a given trip and reduce discards. Maximizing overlap with the season for red snapper, the primary target for reef fish anglers Gulf-wide, should be a key priority. At the same time, the Council should recognize the for-hire and tackle industry's need to have a focal species available for harvest at all times.

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 55 / Snapper Grouper Amendment 44 – Modifications to Mutton Snapper and Yellowtail Snapper Management Measures (Tab B, No. 9)

Council staff reviewed the proposed action and alternatives for modifying the jurisdictional apportionment and catch limits for southeastern US mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper. NOAA General Counsel recommended dividing the action into two, with one addressing each species. A Committee member preferred consideration of the “bowtie approach” to determining the jurisdictional apportionment and was not opposed to maintaining the current apportionment percentages.

Other Business

Update on MRIP-FES Pilot Study

A Committee member requested a brief update on the status of the MRIP-FES pilot study. The SEFSC indicated the study has been completed on schedule and will undergo a desk review by the Center for Independent Experts. Updated calibrations for federally managed species are expected to be available in the spring of 2026. The NOAA Office of Science and Technology will provide a more thorough update on the study’s progress to the Council’s SSC in October 2025.

DESCEND Act

A Committee member noted the Council’s continued interest in the use of descending devices for reducing discard mortality on reef fish species. Council staff recalled that the Council has already requested staff to develop a document to extend and enhance the DESCEND Act; however, enhancement of those measures would take more time. The Committee noted that the DESCEND Act sunsets in January 2026. Council staff commented that timing for expected implementation of any continued measures would be subject to current staff workload. SERO staff echoed the concern about the prioritization of the current Council document workload.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to direct staff to draft an abbreviated framework action to continue the measures in the DESCEND Act in the Gulf, with the goal of taking final action in November 2025.

Motion carried without opposition.

IFQ Marketplace

SERO staff detailed the release of a new feature within the Southeast Gulf Catch Shares online system called the IFQ Marketplace, which will serve as a platform to facilitate connections between IFQ participants who are interested in buying or selling shares of allocation for the Gulf Red Snapper and Grouper-Tilefish Catch Share programs. NOAA Fisheries thinks this platform will increase IFQ marketplace transparency and accessibility. SERO staff provided a brief demonstration of the platform for the Committee.

Greater Amberjack

A Committee member recalled that the planned start date for the recreational fishing season for greater amberjack was September 1, and to date, no clarity has been provided to the public. SERO staff replied that the decision for a closure remains under review, but to date, no decision has been made, and as such, the season is currently scheduled to open as planned. The Committee member replied that the lack of communication on this issue to the Council and the Gulf states has made communicating with anglers very difficult and requested that SERO communicate such developments more effectively in the future. Another Committee member asked SERO for an explanation of the lag in communications. SERO replied that a closure notice was prepared and sent to NOAA headquarters some time ago, and that closure notice remains under review. The Committee member asked what would happen if the recreational sector exceeded its ACL again in 2025. SERO recommended that the Council send a letter regarding its concerns to NOAA Fisheries. A Committee member recalled the long rebuilding period and multiple stock assessments which have indicated that greater amberjack is overfished. The Committee member acknowledged needing the fish to catch, but also not wanting to see the Council do anything to harm the rebuilding of the stock. SERO added that a commercial closure for greater amberjack has been prepared and submitted, and fishermen will be given at least a five-day notice before the commercial fishery closes.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.