

**Reef Fish Committee Report
November 3, 2025
Dr. CJ Sweetman – Chair**

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

FINAL ACTION – Abbreviated Framework Action: Continuation of Management Measures to Reduce Reef Fish Release Mortality (Tab B, No. 4)

The Council is developing this abbreviated framework action to extend the requirement for commercial and recreational fishermen to possess a venting tool or descending device that is rigged and ready for use when fishing for reef fish in federal waters of the Gulf. This requirement was previously detailed under the Direct Enhancement of Snapper Conservation and the Economy through Novel Devices (DESCEND) Act, which expires on January 1, 2026. Staff reviewed public comment and the abbreviated framework action document. A Committee member inquired about the use of data from the Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS) through October 2025, as the SRHS was set to conclude operation. Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff clarified that the SRHS is still currently ongoing, but port sampling has concluded. SERO staff noted that should the administration consider this a regulatory action, there may be additional considerations taken to offset the regulatory burden.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to approve the Abbreviated Framework Action: Continuation of Management Measures to Reduce Reef Fish Release Mortality 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 without opposition.

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

Reef Fish Amendment 55 / Snapper Grouper Amendment 44 is a joint amendment to consider modifications to southeastern U.S. mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper management between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils. New stock assessments for southeastern U.S. mutton snapper (SEDAR 79) and yellowtail snapper (SEDAR 96) estimated these respective species to be healthy (i.e., not overfished or undergoing overfishing) as of 2023, with northward range expansion evident in both stocks in the Gulf. This amendment considers modification of the respective stock catch limits, jurisdictional apportionment of the respective stock acceptable biological catch (ABC) and setting of regional annual catch limits (ACL), and South Atlantic sector allocations for both species within the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction. The South

Atlantic Council will further develop alternatives for Actions 3 and 4, which consider South Atlantic sector allocations, at its December 2025 meeting in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The Gulf Council does not use sector allocations for these species, and as such, the sector allocation actions in practice apply only to the South Atlantic Council. Council staff reviewed the actions and alternatives in the document with the Committee, which had no edits. A Committee member agreed that both stocks are expanding northward on both Gulf and South Atlantic coastlines. Another Committee member wanted to avoid a situation of a region having a quota closure, especially with both stocks being in such a healthy condition.

Public Hearing Draft – Reef Fish Amendment 62: Modifications to Gulf Red Grouper Management Measures (Tab B, No. 5)

Council staff presented a public hearing draft of Reef Fish Amendment 62, which considers management modifications for red grouper based on the results of the most recent stock assessment (SEDAR 88). This stock assessment found red grouper to be healthy, and as a result, the SSC recommended modifications to catch limits and stock status determination criteria. The document proposes actions that consider modifying status determination criteria, catch limits, and sector allocations. It also considers removing the 20-fathom recreational seasonal closure for shallow-water grouper. Council staff reviewed the updated language of the Purpose and Need statements, following the Council’s request at its August 2025 meeting to incorporate references to the State of Florida’s State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS).

A Committee member inquired as to the rationale for the time series of 1986-2005 for sector allocation in Preferred Alternative 2 in Action 2. Council staff responded that it is the same time series used for sector allocation of red grouper in Reef Fish Amendment 53 but updated to incorporate SRFS landings, and it followed the same time series used for sector allocation of red grouper in Reef Fish Amendment 30B, where 2005 was the most recent year of landings. Council staff added that more recent years of landings are considered in Alternatives 3 and 4 and noted that the sector allocations differ, at most, 1.2% across Alternatives 2-4.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to approve ***Draft Amendment 62: Modifications to Gulf Red Grouper Management Measures for Virtual Public Hearings.***

Motion carried without opposition.

A Committee member inquired how quickly Reef Fish Amendment 62 could be implemented, if final action is taken at the January 2026 Council meeting. SERO responded that the commercial quota could be increased mid-year 2026 and that the recreational season could be extended for 2026. SERO stated that a priority re-evaluation of Council amendments would occur, following the end of the U.S. federal government shutdown. Council staff added that notice of public hearings in the federal registry cannot occur until the government shutdown has ended.

Presentation: Reef Fish Amendment 63: Modifications to Gulf Red Grouper IFQ Program (Tab B, No. 6)

Council staff presented Reef Fish Amendment 63, which would establish a three-year pilot commercial red grouper IFQ share pool and distribute the resulting annual allocation to eligible participants. The presentation included options for quota amounts held in the pool, eligibility criteria, and methods for distributing quota pool annual allocations.

Committee members asked whether a quota pool is needed because red grouper annual allocation is currently available at very low prices. A Committee member noted that the amount of quota distributed could make a significant difference for several participants. The Committee inquired about the number of IFQ accounts with red grouper landings. Dr. Jessica Stephen (SERO) indicated that in 2024, there were 283 IFQ accounts with red grouper landings.

The Committee discussed alternative methods for determining the amount of quota held in the quota pool. A Committee member suggested that the quota pool could hold a fixed amount of quota during the three-year pilot program. SERO added that it was important to ensure that the amount of allocation available to the quota pool was sufficient to make the program viable and useful to fishermen. A Committee member noted that the amount in the quota pool could be expressed as a percentage of quota increases above a preset baseline. Examples below provide alternatives based on quota increases and fixed quota pool amounts.

Commercial Quota Pool for Gulf Red Grouper

Alternative A: Establish a commercial quota pool for Gulf red grouper beginning in 2027. If the commercial quota (ACT) is below 2.79 million pound gutted weight (mp gw)*, the quota pool is set at zero percent of the commercial quota (zero pounds). If the commercial quota is at or above 2.79 mp gw, the quota pool would hold:

- Option a:** 10% of the commercial red grouper quota increase above 2.79 mp gw
- Option b:** 15% of the commercial red grouper quota increase above 2.79 mp gw
- Option c:** 20% of the commercial red grouper quota increase above 2.79 mp gw
- Option d:** 25% of the commercial red grouper quota increase above 2.79 mp gw

Quota Pool Year	Red Grouper Commercial Quota*	Quota Increase	Red Grouper Quota in the Pool (% of Quota Increase)			
			10%	15%	20%	25%
2027	4,830,000	2,040,000	204,000	306,000	408,000	510,000
2028	5,360,000	2,570,000	257,000	385,500	514,000	642,500
2029	5,360,000	2,570,000	257,000	385,500	514,000	642,500

Alternative B: Establish a commercial quota pool for Gulf red grouper beginning in 2027. If the commercial quota (ACT) is below 2.79 mp gw*, the quota pool is set at zero percent of the commercial quota (zero pounds). If the commercial quota is at or above 2.79 mp gw, the quota pool would hold:

Option a: 400,000 lbs gw

Option b: 500,000 lbs gw

Option c: 600,000 lbs gw

Committee members asked about when quota withheld for appeals would be released. SERO replied that any withheld quota would likely be released by the end of February annually, once the appeals process was completed. Another Committee member noted that the quota pool would not be a mechanism for new entrants but targets fishermen already participating in the red grouper fishery with landings history.

Presentation: Delegation of Management of Federal For-Hire Vessels to the Gulf States for Red Snapper (Tab B, No. 7)

Staff presented the delegation of management of the red snapper federal for-hire component to Gulf states. Topics discussed included identifying Gulf states intending to assume the management of their portion of the red snapper federal for-hire component, data collection programs, and allocating the red snapper federal for-hire ACL among states. A Committee member recalled that similar issues were addressed during the development of amendments addressing red snapper state management for private anglers. Another Committee member suggested that emphasis should be placed on improving data collection programs rather than pursuing delegation.

The Committee discussed the purpose and need. A Committee member thought it premature to proceed with developing alternatives and indicated that more feedback from the public would be needed, especially given the many letters the Council has received thus far in opposition to the proposed action. Another Committee member thought that, despite those letters of objection, that it was important to explore these issues and that the process of doing so would highlight the challenges to be overcome. A Committee member noted that for-hire management should be state-specific and not “one-size-fits-all.” Another Committee member noted that delegation would be a form of adaptive management that could respond to states’ specificities.

The Committee recommends and I so **move: To direct staff to begin developing a document that considers the following Purpose and Need statement:**

Purpose: The purpose of this action is to establish a program structure through which a Gulf state may establish a management program that would provide flexibility in the management of the Federally permitted vessel’s harvest of red snapper for their anglers.

Need: The need is to reconsider the management of the Federal charter for-hire harvest of red snapper within the context of the states of the Gulf: to prevent overfishing while

achieving, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield from the harvest of red snapper by the Federal for-hire sector; take into account and allow for variations among, and contingencies in the fisheries, fishery resources, and catches; and provide fair and equitable access for the sustained participation of the fishing communities of the Gulf and to the extent practicable, minimize adverse economic impacts on such communities.

Motion carried 9 to 4 with 3 abstentions and 1 absent.

Regarding data calibration, the Committee noted that Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama would all be under their respective Creel programs and monitoring in a similar way. Florida and Texas would require program modifications to their surveys to also monitor federal for-hire red snapper catch and effort. A Committee member highlighted differences in how the state surveys operate, which could create disparities in comparing landings.

The Committee indicated that determining allocation between the states would be a key discussion point in the future. A Committee member noted that states with a small number of vessels may not fare well in allocation results. A Committee member noted that allocation would consider several factors, including landings.

A Committee member indicated that the consideration for delegating for-hire management to the Gulf states is timely given ongoing discussions between state governors' offices and NMFS regarding recreational fisheries management, and the ways in which states may contribute to addressing management challenges.

Council staff recalled the structure of Reef Fish Amendments 50 A to F, which included an umbrella amendment and then separate state-specific amendments for delegation of authority for managing the private angling component for red snapper. Council staff recommended, and the Committee agreed, to begin with an umbrella document in this instance as well.

Public Hearing Draft – Reef Fish Amendment 58A: Shallow-water Grouper (SWG) Complex Management Considerations (Tab B, No. 8)

Council staff provided a presentation focusing on two actions in the document. The first, Action 1.2, considers how IFQ shares of Other SWG could be redistributed in the proposed Scamp and Black Grouper Complexes. IFQ shares could be distributed either using the existing percentage of shares only, landings history only, or a combination of the two. Dr. Jessica Stephen (SERO) presented several scenarios, informed by IFQ data, to demonstrate how the various alternatives would affect shareholders who currently hold Other SWG shares.

The second part of the presentation focused on Action 3, which considers recreational accountability measures (AM) for the Black Grouper Complex. An initial exploration of using a 3-year average to trigger the AM did not definitively produce an outcome that differed substantially from using last year's estimate to predict recreational landings in the following year. A simulation analysis indicated that recreational Black Grouper Complex landings have historically been lower than the recreational Black Grouper Complex ACL being considered in

Action 2. Therefore, exceeding the recreational ACL and the Complex ACL was unlikely even when applying high percentage standard error to harvest estimates.

The Committee reviewed the purpose and need as well as each action in the document. The Committee agreed that splitting the existing Other SWG complex was warranted given the assessment results for scamp and yellowmouth grouper in SEDAR 68.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, in **Action 1.1**, make **Alternative 2** the preferred.

Alternative 2: Dissolve the existing Other SWG complex and form two new complexes: scamp and yellowmouth grouper complex (Scamp Complex) and black grouper and yellowfin grouper complex (Black Grouper Complex). Create two new IFQ share categories: one for the Scamp Complex and one for the Black Grouper Complex.

Motion carried with no opposition.

The Committee discussed the IFQ redistribution alternatives in Action 1.2. A Committee member stated that moving IFQ shares to participants who may have never harvested that species was counter to broader goals the Council has expressed for the program. The Committee member contended a main objective when reviewing the IFQ program was to put shares in the hands of those who land the fish. Several Committee members acknowledged that sentiment, but questioned whether Amendment 58A was the appropriate document to achieve larger IFQ program goals. They stated that mechanisms in the program would still allow for shares to be made available to permitted fishermen, especially for the Black Grouper Complex. The Committee understood that allocation price for Scamp Complex shares would see an increase due to the reduction in catch limits coming from the stock assessment and stated that has happened for several other IFQ species. The Committee ultimately reached consensus that removing the action would be the most pragmatic approach and would result in a proportional distribution of Scamp Complex and Black Grouper Complex share categories based on existing Other SWG share percentages.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to **move Action 1.2 to Considered but Rejected**.

Action 1.2: Distribution of IFQ Program Shares to Newly Established Scamp and Black Grouper Complex Share Categories

Alternative 1: No Action. Proportionally distribute Scamp Complex and Black Grouper Complex share categories based on existing Other SWG share percentages to the Scamp Complex and the Black Grouper Complex.

Alternative 2. Proportionally distribute Scamp Complex and Black Grouper Complex share categories to IFQ participants based on participant's individual

landings histories of each IFQ for each sub-complex within a specified reference period:

Option 2a: Use IFQ participants landings history from 2011 – 2024

Option 2b: Use IFQ participants landings history from 2016 – 2024

Option 2c: Use IFQ participants landings history from 2020 – 2024

Alternative 3. Proportionally distribute Scamp Complex and Black Grouper Complex share categories to IFQ participants, with 50% based on existing Other SWG share percentages and 50% based on landings histories, by species, for each IFQ participant within a specified reference period.

Option 3a: Use IFQ participants landings history from 2011 – 2024

Option 3b: Use IFQ participants landings history from 2016 – 2024

Option 3c: Use IFQ participants landings history from 2020 – 2024

Motion carried without opposition.

Council staff indicated that language in the alternative to break up the Other SWG complex into the two new complexes would need to be updated to specify the IFQ share cap. The intention is to use the existing share cap (7.266147%) for Other SWG for the new complexes and this updated language will be integrated into the next version of the document.

In Action 3, the Committee discussed the various analyses used to inform the action discussion. While average recreational harvest of the Black Grouper Complex has been historically lower than the recreational ACL selected as preferred in Action 2, there is still the possibility of an overage and it is possible that Black Grouper Complex catch levels may be revisited in the future. The Committee ultimately decided that establishing a post-season recreational AM would benefit the complex and help constrain harvest to sustainable levels.

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

Alternative 2: 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 without opposition.

The Committee decided to retain its preferred alternatives in Action 2, 4, 5, and 6. When considering the Scamp Complex recreational closed season and payback provision (Actions 7.1 and 7.2), the Committee decided to wait until full Council to make any decision about selecting a

preferred alternative for those actions. Council staff requested the Committee provide direction on how they would like public hearings to be conducted for Amendment 58A at full Council.

Review of State Program Landings for Red Snapper and Greater Amberjack (Tab B, No. 10)

The reef fish and IFQ program landings were not available due to the government shutdown. Council members representing the five Gulf states reviewed their private recreational red snapper fishing season statistics with the Committee, including data on average length, weight, and trip-level fishing effort data.

These Council members also presented similar data for greater amberjack, as available. States generally reported fewer intercepts for greater amberjack compared to red snapper, rendering less certainty in those data as reported. Generally, landings of greater amberjack across states were estimated to decline over the last several years, commensurate with regulatory modifications to retention limits and fishing season duration.

Other Business

Mississippi and Alabama Creel Use for 2026

A Committee member from Mississippi summarized implementation progress for the Creel survey program in that state. Another representative from Mississippi noted that the state submitted its documentation and data for certification by NMFS in September 2025, but added that the timeline from that point for receiving certification was unknown. The representative from Mississippi noted that the federal for-hire component was included in Mississippi's implementation of Creel, and that it could easily be separated from other recreational modes.

A Committee member from Alabama summarized implementation progress for the Creel survey program in that state. While Alabama's documentation and data were also submitted for certification by NMFS in September 2025, their implementation process is not as far along as Mississippi. Alabama intends to continue operating its Snapper Check survey in the interim.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.