GULF COUNCIL

Public Hearing Guide

Reef Fish Amendment 58A:

Shallow-Water Grouper Complex Management

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What is a Public Hearing?

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

How does a public hearing affect fisheries management?

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

How else can I get involved?

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

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

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

Introduction to Reef Fish Amendment 58A:

The Other Shallow-Water Grouper (SWG) complex includes scamp, yellowmouth grouper, black grouper and yellowfin grouper. All four species are currently managed with a single, combined annual catch limit.

In 2022, scamp and yellowmouth grouper were assessed as a single stock because they share similar life histories and the two species look almost identical, particularly when they are smaller than 16 inches total length. This can result in misidentification of the two species, leading scientists to recommend that the two species be assessed together. The assessment resulted in updated catch advice for the combined species based on the condition of the stock and the transition to a new survey for the recreational data (MRIP-FES). The assessment showed that fishing mortality is too high relative to the size of the stock. Newly recommended catch limits for scamp and yellowmouth groupers represent a decrease in allowable harvest. This is necessary to ensure sustainable harvest as required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

There is no stock assessment for yellowfin grouper and harvest of this species is typically very low. Black grouper, which spans the jurisdictions of both the Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils, was last assessed in 2010. The black grouper portion of the combined black and yellowfin grouper catch limits are based on the Gulf apportionment of black grouper between the Gulf and South Atlantic and based on average total landings from 1999-2008.

Since scamp and yellowmouth grouper catch must be reduced and black and yellowfin grouper catch recommendations remain unchanged, retaining a single annual catch limit for all species would either put scamp and yellowmouth grouper at risk of overfishing or unnecessarily reduce catch limits on species that don't need it.

As a result, the Council is considering modifying the structure and catch limits for the Other SWG complex by splitting it into two separate complexes. The Council is developing this document to:

- Split the Other SWG Complex into two separate complexes: black/yellowfin grouper (Black Grouper Complex) and scamp/yellowmouth grouper (Scamp Complex).
- Establish, status determination criteria, catch limits, sector allocations, and recreational accountability measures for the Black Grouper Complex.
- Establish, status determination criteria, catch limits, sector allocations, recreational annual catch target, recreational fixed closed season, and recreational accountability measures for the Scamp Complex.

These actions are being considered in response to analyses consistent with the best scientific information available and are intended to avoid future overfishing, avoid triggering a rebuilding plan, and allow for the greatest possible harvest without compromising the future health of the complex.

Action 1: Modification of Gulf of America (Gulf) Other SWG Complex and Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Share Categories

The Council is considering splitting the Other SWG complex into two separate complexes: the Scamp Complex and the Black Grouper Complex. This is being considered because scamp and yellowmouth grouper, will be at risk of overfishing if they remain in the Other SWG complex. Additionally, the new assessment for the Scamp Complex uses recreational landings that were calibrated to MRIP-FES; whereas, the Black Grouper Complex has not been updated. Separating the Other SWG complex will require the dissolution of the Other SWG complex and creation of two new complexes and associated commercial IFQ program share categories. Shares from the Other SWG complex will be distributed to the new share categories based on the current shareholdings of Other SWG complex by IFQ participants.

Alternative 1: No Action

Preferred Alternative 2: Dissolve the Other SWG complex and form two new complexes: the scamp and yellowmouth grouper complex (Scamp Complex) and the black grouper and yellowfin grouper complex (Black Grouper Complex). Create two new IFQ share categories and distribute shares so shareholders will receive the same percentages in each of the two new categories that they held upon dissolution of the Other SWG complex. The number of shares any one individual account may possess for each new complex will be capped at 7.266147%.

A comparison of Alternatives in Action 1:

Alternative 1: No Action, is not a legally viable alternative because it is not consistent with the best scientific information available. **Alternative 1** could allow for scamp and yellowmouth grouper to be overfished since Other SWG complex catch levels would be set above the newly recommended scamp and yellowmouth annual catch limit to account for allowable harvest of black and yellowfin grouper.

Splitting the Other SWG complex into two complexes would remove commercial flexibility measures that formerly allowed warsaw grouper and speckled hind (Kitty Mitchell) to be landed under the Other SWG share category as part of the commercial IFQ program. With the reduction in quota for the Scamp Complex, it is not expected that fishermen would utilize the former flexibility measure unless they have very limited deep-water grouper allocation available to them. While Scamp Complex shares will be distributed as a result of this document, those shares will correspond to fewer pounds of allocation due to the catch limit reduction from the stock assessment. Splitting the Other SWG complex is not the driver of that reduction. IFQ shares of Scamp Complex and Black Grouper Complex will be based solely on an IFQ's participant Other SWG shares. For example, if a participant currently holds 1% IFQ shares of Other SWG, they will receive 1% shares of the Scamp Complex and 1% shares of the Black Grouper Complex.

In 2025, the Council developed a document that will reduce the entire Other SWG annual catch limit by 54.7% as a short-term measure to reducing fishing mortality and to prevent scamp from being overfished. This measure was necessary to reducing fishing mortality for the Scamp Complex consistent with the recommendations based on the stock assessment. This results in a reduction of recreational season duration for all 4-species in the Other SWG complex and a reduced commercial quota. However, this Amendment splits the Other SWG complex (i.e., Preferred Alternative 2 in this Action) and will ensure that the recreational catch limits and seasons for the Black Grouper Complex will not be tied to management actions for the Scamp Complex.

Action 2: Establish Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), Optimum Yield (OY), Status Determination Criteria (SDC), Catch Limits, Sector Allocations, for the Black Grouper Complex

The black grouper stock spans both Gulf and South Atlantic jurisdictions and harvest is apportioned between the two Councils. The Gulf Council is not currently considering changes to black grouper catch limits because changes to the overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) would have to be agreed upon by both Gulf and South Atlantic Councils.

Alternative 1: No Action – Do not establish status determination criteria (SDC), catch limits, or sector allocations, for the Black Grouper Complex.

Preferred Alternative 2: Establish status determination criteria as defined for the Other SWG Complex and for black grouper in Amendment 48 to the Reef Fish FMP (GMFMC 2021) and set the SDC for the Black Grouper Complex based on the SSC recommendation of $F_{30\%SPR}$. Establish catch limits for the Black Grouper Complex as detailed in the table below, consistent with the Generic ACL/AM Amendment (GMFMC 2011) and the SSC's recommendations.

SDC and Catch Limits	
MSY	yield at $F_{30\%SPR}$
MFMT	F_{MSY}
MSST	75% of B_{MSY}
OY	90% of MSY
OFL	Undefined*
ABC	310,844
Stock ACL	310,844
Comm ACL	227,735
Rec ACL	83,109

*The black grouper OFL is for Gulf and South Atlantic combined, so the Gulf OFL is undefined. The stock complex ABC represents the summation of the ABC for yellowfin grouper and the Gulf-apportioned ABC for black grouper. Catch limits are in gutted weight and are inclusive of MRFSS data.

A comparison of Alternatives in Action 2:

Alternative 1: No Action, is not a legally viable alternative because establishing biological reference points, status determination criteria, and catch limits for the Black Grouper Complex is a requirement of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA).

Preferred Alternative 2 would establish Status Determination Criteria consistent with those defined for the Other-SWG complex. This is the simplest method available that is consistent with the requirements of the MSA and can be updated, if necessary, when new scientific information is available. **Preferred Alternative 2** would set the Complex Annual Catch Limit (ACL) would be set equal to the ABC. For **Preferred Alternative 2**, the commercial and recreational allocation of black grouper within the Black Grouper Complex is based on an analysis of historical landings for each species for the commercial and recreational sectors from 2001 through 2004. This procedure was developed in the Generic ACL/AM Amendment and remains unchanged. Using this approach 73% of the black grouper landings were attributed to the commercial sector and 27% to the recreational sector. Similarly, 80.1% and 19.9% of yellowfin grouper landings were assigned to the commercial and recreational sectors. The combined allocation (73.3% commercial and 26.7% recreational) in this action reflects a continuation of this same practice and reflects very low historical landings of yellowfin grouper for both sectors. Yellowfin grouper continues to be infrequently landed by either sector and is a minor component of the reef fish fishery.

Action 3: Recreational AMs for the Black Grouper Complex

Accountability measures (AMs) are intended to prevent harvest from exceeding the annual catch limit, and if exceeded, mitigate for the overage. For the Black Grouper Complex, the commercial IFQ program will serve as the AM for the commercial sector. There are currently no recreational AMs in place for the newly created Black Grouper Complex.

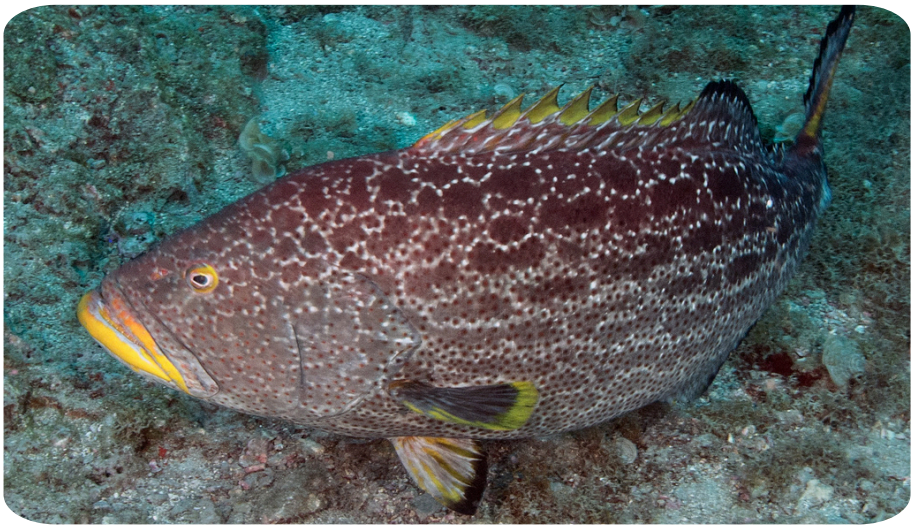
Alternative 1: No Action – Do not establish recreational sector AMs for the Black Grouper Complex.

Preferred Alternative 2: A post-season recreational AM would be implemented for the Black Grouper Complex. If the black and yellowfin grouper recreational ACL and the Black Grouper Complex ACL are exceeded in a fishing year, then in the following fishing year, NMFS would close the recreational Black Grouper Complex when the recreational ACL is projected to be met, unless the best scientific information available determines that closure of the recreational fishing season is unnecessary.

Alternative 3: If the average recreational Black Grouper Complex landings exceed the average recreational ACL, and the average Black Grouper Complex landings exceed the average Black Grouper Complex ACL over a three-year moving period, NMFS would reduce the duration of the recreational season by the amount projected such that the recreational ACL is not exceeded during the following fishing year, unless the best scientific information available determines that no adjustment to the recreational fishing season is necessary.

A comparison of Alternatives in Action 3:

It is highly unlikely that the Black Grouper Complex recreational ACL and Complex ACL will be exceeded and that any AM would be triggered as landings have always been well below allowable harvest limits and this is not expected to change based on the management actions considered in this document. **Preferred Alternative 2** would trigger in-season monitoring in the year after an overage but would not necessitate a closure of the recreational sector unless the recreational ACL was expected to be exceeded again. Alternative 3 would use a three-year moving average of landings and if that average results in a recreational ACL and Complex ACL overage, the recreational season would be reduced in the following year by the amount necessary to prevent another overage in that year.



Action 4: Establish MSY, OY, and SDC for the Scamp Complex

Scamp and yellowmouth grouper were assessed as a single stock used the most contemporary recreational landings estimates informed by the Marine Recreational Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey. The results indicated that current harvest rates are depleting the stock and require a reduction to avoid the stock from becoming overfished.

The MSY is the largest long-term average harvest that can be taken from a stock each year, on a continuing basis and relies on the relation between spawner and recruits. MSY proxies are often used in place of MSY when the data necessary for direct estimation of MSY are insufficient. The MSY proxy used for the Other SWG complex is the yield when fishing at 30% spawning potential ratio ($F_{30\%SPR}$). Meaning that allowable harvest is set to allow the population to produce 30% of the juveniles that it could if there were no fishing at all. The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee recommended using a more conservative spawning potential ratio of 40% for the Scamp Complex. The justification for this recommendation was because these species transition from female to male and are longer lived grouper species and is consistent with the management of other grouper species with a similar life history. Using $F_{40\%SPR}$ instead of $F_{30\%SPR}$ is also estimated to increase the resiliency of the stock by leaving more fish in the water to spawn.

The Maximum Fishing Mortality Threshold (MFMT) is associated with the MSY proxy and establishes a limit for fishing mortality such that the stock biomass does not fall below the MSY proxy level.

The Minimum Stock Size Threshold (MSST) is a biomass-based metric associated with the MSY proxy. The MSST sets a threshold, below the MSY proxy level, such that when the biomass falls below this level, the stock is considered overfished.

Optimum yield (OY) is a level of harvest that will provide the greatest overall benefit to the Nation and is based on the MSY proxy as reduced by any relevant economic, social, or ecological factor. It takes the protection of marine ecosystems into account and, in the case of an overfished fishery, provides for rebuilding to a level consistent with producing the MSY or MSY proxy.

Alternative 1: No Action – Do not establish Status Determination Criteria for the new Scamp Complex as established in Action 1.1.

Preferred Alternative 2: Establish the MSY proxy, and other status determination criteria for Scamp Complex based recommendations of the SSC:

Criteria Type	Alternative 2
MSY	yield at $F_{40\%SPR}$
MFMT	F_{MSY}
MSST	75% of B_{MSY}
OY	90% of MSY

A comparison of Alternatives in Action 4:

Alternative 1: No Action, is not a legally viable alternative as it is not consistent with the requirements of the MSA. **Preferred Alternative 2** is consistent with the requirements of the MSA and will establish, status determination criteria for the Scamp Complex, consistent with the best scientific information available. In doing so, **Preferred Alternative 2** is expected to prevent overfishing of the Scamp Complex.

Action 5: Establish Catch Limits and Sector Allocations for the Scamp Complex

Creation of the new Scamp Complex requires the establishment of catch limits and sector allocations. Establishing sector allocations allows each sector to be managed separately and held accountable for their portion of the harvest.

Catch limit recommendations derived from the results of SEDAR 68 represent approximately a 58% reduction in allowable harvest of scamp and yellowmouth grouper. The current commercial allocation is based on landings from 2001-2004, but recent recreational sector landings represent a larger portion of landings than those used to establish the existing allocation.

Alternative 1: No Action – Do not establish catch limits for the new Scamp Complex as established in Action 1.1.

Preferred Alternative 2: Establish catch limits for the Scamp Complex. The complex ACL is set equal to the complex ABC. The complex ACL equals the combined commercial and recreational sector ACLs. Establish sector allocations for the Scamp Complex as follows:

Option 2a: The commercial and recreational allocations for scamp and yellowmouth grouper are based on those established in the Generic ACL/AM Amendment. The commercial sector is allocated 80.1% of the Scamp Complex ACL, and the recreational sector is allocated 19.9%.

Year	OFL	ABC	Stock ACL	Comm ACL	Rec ACL
2027-2031+	233,000	183,000	183,000	146,583	36,417

Preferred Option 2b: The commercial and recreational allocations are based on the proportion of average scamp and yellowmouth grouper landings for 2012-2023 excluding the 2020 COVID year. The commercial sector is allocated 38.6% of the Scamp Complex ACL, and the recreational sector is allocated 61.4%.

Year	OFL	ABC	Stock ACL	Comm ACL	Rec ACL
2027-2031+	233,000	183,000	183,000	70,638	112,362

Option 2c: The commercial and recreational allocations are based on reducing catch limits equally (percentagewise) between the commercial and recreational sectors based on the most recent three years of scamp and yellowmouth grouper landings (i.e., 2021-2023). The commercial sector is allocated 29.7% of the Scamp Complex ACL, and the recreational sector is allocated 70.3%.

Year	OFL	ABC	Stock ACL	Comm ACL	Rec ACL
2027-2031+	233,000	183,000	183,000	54,351	128,649

A Comparison of Alternatives in Action 5

Alternative 1: No Action, is not a legally viable alternative because it is inconsistent with the requirements of the MSA. Alternative 1 fails to address the need to modify the sector allocation and catch limits for the Scamp Complex consistent with both the change in the recreational landings survey data unit, and the requirements of the current IFQ program.

The remaining alternatives would set catch limits based on the OFL and ABC recommended by the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee, using yield projections from the most recent stock assessment. **Option 2a**, would establish sector allocations based on the historical commercial allocation defined in the Generic ACL/AM Amendment. This option does not account for the change in the recreational landings survey data unit and would result in a de facto reallocation away from the recreational sector because contemporary recreational landings estimates show much higher historical recreational landings. This is attributed to both a changes in the monitoring program (i.e., the use of the MRIP-Fishing Effort Survey) that consistently estimates greater recreational landings than estimated by previous recreational data programs. A second factor is that the recreational component now more actively targets and lands these species than in the past. This change in fishing behavior could be from more restrictive regulations on other species as well as changes in fishing practices and technology that allow more access to fishing sites that are relatively deep and farther offshore than nearshore reefs where these species are less common.

Preferred Option 2b uses the most recent period of historical landings and would decrease the commercial allocation while increasing the recreational allocation from the baseline apportionment. **Option 2c** would establish allocations based on equal reductions (by percentage) for each sector based on the most recent three years of landings. Both **Preferred Alternative 2b** and **Alternative 2c** increase the recreational sector's allocation of the complex ACL considerably. However, due to the reductions in the catch limits resulting from the using yield projections from the most recent stock assessment, both the commercial and recreational sectors are expected to experience reductions in landings from those observed in recent years. This reduction in landings is expected to grow the stock over time to a biomass level consistent with the MSY proxy.

Action 6: Establish Recreational Annual Catch Target (ACT) Buffers for the Scamp Complex

Annual Catch Targets (ACTs) are harvest levels set below Annual Catch Limits to account for management uncertainty. Management measures such as fishing seasons are then based on the ACT and reduce the likelihood that the ACL will be exceeded. The Council is considering creating a recreational ACT for the Scamp Complex because required reductions in allowable harvest, coupled with increased management uncertainty resulting from the creation of a new complex, make it more likely that the ACL will be exceeded.

Alternative 1: No Action – Do not establish a recreational ACT for the Scamp Complex.

Preferred Alternative 2: Establish a recreational ACT 14% below the recreational ACL.

Alternative 3: Establish a recreational ACT 18% below the recreational ACT.

A comparison of Alternatives in Action 6:

Alternative 1: No Action, would result in a higher likelihood that the annual catch limit would be exceeded and that accountability measures would be triggered. Both **Alternatives 2 and 3** apply the Council's ACL/ACT Control Rule to calculate the buffer between the recreational ACT and the recreational ACL. However, **Preferred Alternative 2** assumes scamp and yellowmouth grouper as a single complex, while **Alternative 3** uses scamp as an indicator species.

Regarding the recreational fishing season duration, the longest fishing season would be achieved under **Alternative 1**, followed by **Preferred Alternative 2** and then **Alternative 3**. Because the precision of the recreational landings survey data is low for the Scamp Complex, the probability of NMFS accurately constraining recreational fishing effort to a forecasted recreational fishing season is unknown. Using an ACT in this circumstance lowers the probability of a recreational ACL overage compared to **Alternative 1**.

Action 7.1: Establish a Fixed Closed Season and Recreational Sector AMs for the Scamp Complex

To help avoid an overage of the newly recommended Scamp Complex ACLs, the recreational fishing season must be shortened to appropriately constrain recreational landings. Recreational harvest of the Scamp Complex is highest in the months of May – August and lower in the other months. Scamp harvest tends to be elevated when the recreational season for gag is open as scamp can be caught while targeting gag. Currently, gag opens September 1 each year but has been constrained to short seasons in recent years while the stock rebuilds.

Additionally, to further ensure that overages do not occur, the Council is considering allowing NMFS to close the season when the recreational ACT is projected to be met.

Alternative 1: No Action – The Scamp Complex would be open to harvest by the recreational sector from January 1 through December 31 each year.

Alternative 2: Establish a fixed closed season for the recreational sector from January through May each year (open on June 1 until December 31). Allow NMFS to close the recreational season when the recreational ACT is projected to be met.

Preferred Alternative 3: Establish a fixed closed season for the recreational sector from January through June each year (open on July 1 until December 31). Allow NMFS to close the recreational season when the recreational ACT is projected to be met.

A comparison of Alternatives in Action 7.1:

Harvest would not be constrained to newly recommended catch limits under **Alternative 1**: No Action. If the Council maintains its preferred recreational ACL (Action 5) and recreational ACT (Action 6) for the Scamp Complex the recreational season duration is estimated to be 94 days with a July 1 recreational season start date which is **Preferred Alternative 3** whereas **Alternative 2** would open the recreational season on June 1 with an estimated 90-day season. Both alternatives provide closure authority to NMFS when the recreational ACT is projected to be met.

Action 7.2: Establish a Recreational Payback Provision for the Scamp Complex

Some Accountability Measures, including ACTs and in-season closures, are designed to prevent harvest from exceeding Annual Catch Limits. Other Accountability Measures, like payback provisions, are designed to mitigate overages if they occur. The Council is considering establishing a payback provision for the recreational sector to ensure that the stock does not become overfished.

Preferred Alternative 1: No action. Do not establish a recreational payback provision.

Alternative 2: If recreational Scamp Complex landings exceed the Scamp Complex recreational ACL in a fishing year and the 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.

A comparison of Alternatives in Action 7.2:

Payback provisions do succeed in mitigating overharvest and preventing overfishing. However, payback provisions also decrease predictability of recreational season durations from year to year. Additionally, payback provisions can prove troublesome when increases in harvest efficiency occur, or when the size of landed fish increases, possibly as a result of a rebounding stock, but the stock assessments are not conducted regularly resulting in the ACLs remaining the same.

Public Meeting Information:

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

Madeira Beach, Florida
Thursday, January 8, 2026
City of Madeira Beach Recreation Civic Center, 200 Rex Place, Madeira Beach, FL 33708,

Galveston, Texas
Monday, January 12, 2026
Hilton Galveston Island, 5400 Seawall Blvd, Galveston, Texas 77551

Lafayette, Louisiana
Tuesday, January 13, 2026
Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
200 Dulles Dr., Lafayette, Louisiana, 70506

Webinar
Wednesday, January 21, 2026
https://tinyurl.com/mr26974z

Send Us Your Comments:

Scan the QR code to submit your comment or:

- Comment online at https://tinyurl.com/2wbjn6m7
- Email us at gulfcouncil@gulfcouncil.org

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