

**Reef Fish Committee Report  
January 27, 2026  
Dr. CJ Sweetman – Chair**

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

*Presentation: 2025 Reef Fish (Tab B, No. 4a) and IFQ Landings Update (Tab B, No. 4b)*

Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff reviewed reef fish and individual fishing quota (IFQ) program landings relative to catch limits. Preliminarily, recreational landings for gag grouper were estimated to be about 18,000 lb (gutted weight [gw]) under the 2025 annual catch target (ACT) of 230,009 lb gw. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) will confirm these landings by the April 2026 Council meeting.

A Committee member discussed the reopening of red snapper for the federal for-hire fleet at the end of 2025. The Committee member noted inconsistent dissemination of the notice that the season would reopen, which made fisheries management more difficult for state agencies. NMFS staff acknowledged the narrow timing of the federal register notice, the administrative delay due to the government shutdown, and their desire to reopen the season quickly. NMFS stated it would better communicate in advance with the states in the future.

A Committee member discussed the delay in implementation of the season change for the federal for-hire component for red snapper which was finalized by the Council in August 2025. NMFS again noted the government shutdown and the backlog of other actions before the Department of Commerce. Another Committee member stated that in their state, they intend to open their private recreational fishing season when the federal for-hire season opens. A Committee member sought flexibility given the delays in implementation, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) General Counsel advised building such flexibility into the fishery management plans (FMP) in the future. Council staff noted that final action was taken on this document in August 2025, and that it has yet to be transmitted due to an incomplete section and the document is pending review by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC).

***FINAL ACTION – Reef Fish Amendment 62: Modifications to Gulf Red Grouper Management Measures***

Mr. Trevor Moncrief (Chair, Standing Scientific and Statistical Committee [SSC]) presented the SSC's discussions on an interim analysis health check for Gulf red grouper, which was informed by the Gulf Fishery-Independent Survey of Habitat and Ecosystem Resources (G-FISHER) survey. Mr. Moncrief noted that the index is trending in a positive direction in recent years, and that the SSC would keep track of that trend via annual updates from the SEFSC.

Council staff presented the latest draft of Reef Fish Amendment 62 and public hearing summaries, and NOAA General Counsel reviewed the associated codified text.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to recommend the Council approve Reef Fish Amendment 62: Modifications to Gulf Red Grouper Management Measures 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 in 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.*

***FINAL ACTION – Reef Fish Amendment 58A: Shallow-water Grouper Complex Management Considerations***

Council staff reviewed the public comment summary, the updated document, and NOAA General Counsel reviewed the codified text. Several Committee members expressed hesitation on taking final action. Of highest concern was informing the Scamp Complex annual catch limit (ACL) allocation based on landings histories that incorporated the Marine Recreational Information Program’s Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES) data for the recreational sector. They noted that a pilot study examining MRIP-FES estimates is due later in 2026 and suggested delaying the document until the study results were available.

Other Committee members cautioned that delaying final action could have consequences for the fishery. They stated that the terminal year of SEDAR 68 was 2020 and continued that an SSC review to update catch advice with more contemporary data resulted in a reduction in recommended catch advice. They argued that the recently finalized framework action was meant as a short-term measure to reduce harvest of the Shallow-water Grouper Complex. Currently, catch levels of scamp and yellowmouth exceed the recommend acceptable biological catch (ABC) and the Council is obligated to address this issue by reducing harvest. The Committee decided to continue discussion on whether to direct staff to finalize the document at full Council.

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

Staff gave a presentation on Reef Fish Amendment 63. The amendment would establish a three-year pilot commercial red grouper quota pool and distribute the resulting annual allocation to eligible participants in the Grouper/Tilefish IFQ program. Staff discussed amounts of red grouper quota to be held in the pool, eligibility criteria, and distribution methods for the quota pool annual allocation.

A Committee member pointed out that this amendment is designed to help account holders who own little or no red grouper shares and suggested that varying levels of share ownership be considered. Staff replied that share ownership thresholds could be included.

The Committee thought minimum landings should be included in the eligibility criteria to receive quota pool allocation. A Committee member said ratios of share ownership relative to landings could also be considered. Another Committee member suggested that minimum landings requirements lower than 400 pounds per two-year period be considered since some fishermen may have limited red grouper landings because they could not buy allocation. The table below provides the number of eligible accounts for various landings thresholds below 400 pounds.

Minimum Landings (2023-2024) Pounds	Total Accounts	Accounts with RG Shares	Accounts without RG Shares
No Minimum	316	130	186
50	285	119	166
100	267	111	156
200	248	107	141
300	235	102	133

A Council member asked whether the amendment would be implemented in time to start distributing quota pool allocation on January 1, 2027. Staff indicated that quota pool allocation could be distributed early in 2027. SERO staff noted that Amendment 63 would move to the top of SERO’s priorities and mentioned the option to explore quota holdback provisions to mitigate potential delays.

A Committee member asked about additional guidance Council staff would need to further develop the amendment. Staff replied that recommendations relative to the inclusion of share ownership and the consideration of minimum landings values as eligibility criteria would be helpful. The Committee member noted that public comments could provide guidance.

*Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 59A: Permit Requirements in IFQ Programs*

Council staff reviewed preferred alternatives in Reef Fish Amendment 59A and discussed recommendations from the March 2025 Ad Hoc Red Snapper / Grouper Tilefish IFQ Advisory Panel (AP) meeting.

In Action 1 (Obtaining and Maintaining a Shareholder Account), the AP approved a motion to add an alternative that establishes a control date for a requirement to obtain and maintain a shareholder account and make the control date the date of implementation of the amendment. Council staff noted that a similar motion was approved for Action 2 (Obtaining and Maintaining IFQ Shares) and Action 3 (Obtaining IFQ Allocation). SERO staff asked about the rationale for the control date recommended by the AP. Council staff responded that the AP’s motivation was to exempt those already participating in the IFQ programs from permit requirements. A Committee member expressed concern about locking some participants in and noted that previous amendments have already considered the issue. NOAA General Counsel noted that the

control date phrase was not appropriately used and that grandfathering existing participants would be the appropriate concept.

In Action 2, the AP approved a motion to add the following alternative: To obtain and maintain IFQ shares, in addition to the US citizenship or permanent residency requirement, a shareholder account must be associated with a valid or renewable commercial reef fish permit and/or a Gulf or South Atlantic Dealer Permit. A Committee member responded that vertically integrated operations should continue to participate, but expressed concern that dealer permits are open access permits. The Committee indicated that potential loopholes should be evaluated if dealer permits are included in the eligibility requirements. Another Committee member noted that it is important to limit potential adverse impacts on those already active in the IFQ programs and suggested that the inclusion of dealer permits should be further explored. SERO staff indicated that there is a wide range of business structures operating within the IFQ programs. They also noted that there are many participants in the IFQ programs in the audience and recommended hearing from dealers during public comments.

A Committee member noted that some dealers are vertically integrated, are actively participating in the IFQ programs, and own permits. Another Committee member stated that one common model of operation is for a fish house to own the shares and distribute the corresponding allocation among their vessels. A Committee member asked for Council staff to consider active participation in the fishery. Another Committee member clarified that speculators are not selling fish, rather they are selling allocation, and the goal of this amendment is to address that.

The Committee indicated that participation in the IFQ programs from quota banks and other non-profit organizations should be considered as the permit requirements are designed. A Committee member suggested that the Council should determine specific eligibility criteria for quota banks and vet applicants, which the Committee admitted could be cumbersome. NOAA General Counsel stated if the Council develops standards for quota banks, those standards will have to be applied equally to all applicants.

Council staff noted that the AP discussed hardship conditions and indicated that a one-year grace period before divestment may not be enough in some instances, for example, in case of death or boat damage. AP members also stated that fishermen who plan to retire would not be able to sell their IFQ shares in installments to young fishermen with limited capital. A Committee member asked about the difference between non-compliance in Preferred Alternatives 2 and 3 in Action 4. Council staff replied that alternatives in Action 4 address non-compliance once the amendment is implemented (Preferred Alternative 2) and non-compliance when a participant who used to be compliant falls out of compliance in the future (Preferred Alternative 3). A Committee member expressed support for longer grace periods, for non-compliant participants. Another Committee member indicated that a one-year grace period should be sufficient. SERO staff confirmed that a one-year grace period is equivalent to two years: the year after the expiration notice is sent plus the one-year grace period.

The Committee recommended that staff should further explore the inclusion of dealer permits as an alternative eligibility criterion and begin developing options for the continued participation of quota banks in the IFQ programs.

### *Presentation: Regional Management of Greater Amberjack for the Recreational Sector*

Council staff presented on current greater amberjack management measures, summarized the timeline for the greater amberjack interim analysis and the Greater Amberjack Count, and highlighted key decision points necessary for regional management. Several Committee members expressed concern surrounding the accuracy of MRIP-FES landings data. SERO staff said the largest challenge with management of greater amberjack is monitoring of the recreational fishery, whether through MRIP-FES or state-specific surveys. SERO noted that state/regional management hinges on whether these data collection and monitoring methods are adequate and suggested identifying the monitoring methods as a first step in determining how best to proceed with state or regional management. A Committee member suggested using the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER) program to better monitor greater amberjack landings. Another Committee member asked whether the Council would receive a presentation from the principal investigators on the Greater Amberjack Count, similar to that being presented to the Gulf SSC in May 2026. A Committee member also asked about the timeline for the interim analysis to inform catch advice, and Council staff clarified that it was requested to be developed for that purpose but were unsure whether it will just be a health check due to the stock still being in a rebuilding plan.

A Committee member noted there are several avenues of incoming greater amberjack research moving through the Council process that may be used to inform the decision points surrounding state/regional management. They suggested waiting for some data to move through the process prior to development of a document to allow staff to determine how to incorporate new data sources into management advice. Another Committee member noted the need for a document for greater amberjack state/regional management to be developed concurrent with the assessment process to allow for catch advice and management decisions to be better aligned, and to expedite the process. The Committee agreed to recommend that staff develop a draft document outlining action items for greater amberjack regional management, recognizing the process is likely iterative and staff will include new information that develops from the interim analysis for greater amberjack, and the Greater Amberjack Count.

### *Presentation: Recreational Initiative Working Group Prioritization and Recommendations*

Council staff reviewed the six Council-prioritized Recreational Initiative Working Group's recommendations, relevant background information and proposed workplans that would align with working group recommendations.

SERO staff highlighted that there is ongoing work between NMFS and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission to implement a database to which Gulf states can import data to provide

further transparency for Gulf landings, and be accessible to the public, aligning with the working group's recommendation 1.1. Council staff stated that when the database is completed, it would be beneficial to bring through the Council process to educate the Council and identify the database as a resource for stakeholders.

A Committee member expressed support for additional measures for carryover provisions for reef fish species, in support of recommendation 3.2. Another Committee member suggested re-prioritizing action on the proposed red snapper accountability measures document to include discussion on carryover provisions and payback measures for the private recreational sector. NOAA General Counsel noted that there is a framework for carryover provisions in Amendment 50, but it was predicated on the implementation of the (currently tabled) Generic Carryover Amendment. A Committee member also expressed interest in re-initiating that previously tabled document that considered a broader implementation of carryover provisions across FMPs. SERO staff noted that there is a framework used by the South Atlantic Council for Atlantic migratory group Spanish mackerel to allow for reallocating un-used quota between regions. This framework may serve as an example of a way forward, albeit there may be some challenges with differences in execution due to state-survey data units. Another Committee member expressed interest in investigating a similar quota transfer system for red snapper. Council staff highlighted continued efforts to engage with the working group on Council initiatives that align with working group recommendations.

### *Presentation: January 2026 Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) Webinar Summary*

Mr. Moncrief reviewed SSC discussions about interim analyses for Gulf lane snapper and gag grouper, which are both also informed by the G-FISHER index of relative abundance. Mr. Moncrief discussed trends in the index for lane snapper and briefly discussed the SSC's evaluation of various reference periods to inform the SSC's catch recommendation.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to direct staff to begin a document to update the catch limits for lane snapper based on the SSC's recommendations.**

*Motion carried without opposition.*

For gag, Mr. Moncrief noted that this interim analysis was conducted as a health check and shared the rationale for that from the SEFSC. He then reviewed the index trend for gag and the related SSC discussion. He noted the SSC will continue to monitor gag and that a new stock assessment for gag is presently underway (SEDAR 105). A Committee member noted that there may be a delay between observations on the water and fishery-independent indices.

### *Other Business*

No other business was brought before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.