

**Reef Fish Committee Report
April 8, 2026
Dr. CJ Sweetman – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) after adding items under Other Business, and the minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the January 2026 meeting were approved as amended.

Presentations: Reef Fish and IFQ Program Landings and 2025 Gulf State Private Recreational Red Snapper and Greater Amberjack Landings Updates (Tab B, No. 4)

Southeast Regional Office (SERO) staff reviewed the status of reef fish and individual fishing quota (IFQ) program landings relative to catch limits. Notably, there were no dockside intercepts by the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) for greater amberjack during the 27-day fishing season in 2025. Council representatives from the five Gulf States reviewed their 2025 private angling fishing seasons for red snapper and projections for their 2026 fishing seasons. Committee members discussed the potential for declining growth rates for red snapper, given the decreases in average lengths observed by some states as average age of catches remained consistent. The states also presented the same data, without season projections, for greater amberjack. States noted substantially fewer intercepts of greater amberjack over time, and thus less data to inform trends in age, length, and weight patterns.

FINAL ACTION – Abbreviated Framework Action: Modification of Gulf Lane Snapper Catch Limits (Tab B, No. 5)

Council staff presented written public comments received on an abbreviated framework action to modify lane snapper catch limits, based on the results of the most recent interim analysis on lane snapper. This interim analysis used a composite video index to evaluate trends in the stock biomass against trends in landings and suggested the stock to be healthy. The Council’s Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommended increasing the Gulf lane snapper overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC). This document proposes adopting the increased catch limits and setting the annual catch limit (ACL) equal to the ABC. A fishing season duration analysis, assuming the pending increase to a 10-inch total length minimum size limit, projects no quota closure under the proposed catch limits. SERO staff reviewed the codified text for the proposed regulations.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to select Option 2 as preferred.**

Option 2: Modify the OFL for the Gulf lane snapper stock to be 1,336,443 lb ww, and the ABC to be 1,304,917 lb ww, for 2026 – 2028 and subsequent years. The stock ACL is set equal to the ABC.

Motion carried without opposition.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to recommend the Council approve the Abbreviated Framework Action: Modification of Gulf Lane Snapper Catch Limits 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.

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

Staff presented management actions for Amendment 63. In Action 1 (Commercial Quota Pool for Gulf Red Grouper), a Committee member suggested that alternatives considered would allocate too many pounds of red grouper allocation to the quota pool and noted that a pilot program could be established with smaller amounts.

The Committee recommends and I so move, **In Action 1, to add an Alternative 4.**

Alternative 4. Establish a three-year commercial quota pool for Gulf red grouper beginning in 2027. If the commercial quota (ACT) is at or below **4.28 million pounds gutted weight**, the quota pool is set at zero percent of the commercial quota (zero pounds). If the commercial quota is above 4.28 million pounds gutted weight, the quota pool would hold:

Option 4a: 15% of the commercial red grouper quota increase above 4.28 mp gw

Option 4b: 20% of the commercial red grouper quota increase above 4.28 mp gw

Option 4c: 25% of the commercial red grouper quota increase above 4.28 mp gw

Option 4d: 30% of the commercial red grouper quota increase above 4.28 mp gw

Motion carried with one opposed.

A Committee member supported helping fishermen access red grouper quota but questioned whether this amendment would be effective due to the current low price of red grouper quota. The Committee noted that the quota pool would lower the cost of harvesting red grouper for eligible participants.

In Action 2 (Eligibility Criteria for Participation in the Red Grouper Quota Pool), the Committee expressed support for a 500-lb minimum landings requirement.

The Committee recommends and I so move, **In Action 2, to make Alternative 2, Option 2b the preferred.**

Alternative 2: To receive annual allocation from the quota pool, IFQ account holders must possess a valid or renewable federal commercial reef fish permit and have minimum red grouper landings during a two-year reference period of at least:

Option 2b: 500 lb gw

Motion carried without opposition.

In Action 3 (Distribution of Quota Pool among Eligible IFQ Accounts), the Committee discussed the equal and proportional distribution of the quota pool allocation among eligible recipients. Committee members acknowledged the need to select preferred alternatives during this meeting. Dr. Jessica Steven (SERO) discussed features of the quota pool and the expected timeline for implementation. Tables illustrating quota pool amounts and alternative distributions are provided below.

Quota Pool Amounts by Alternative

Action 1 - Alternatives 2 and 3						
Quota Pool Year	Red Grouper Commercial Quota*	Quota Increase above 2.79 mp	Red Grouper Quota in the Pool			
			(% of Quota Increase)			
			15%	20%	25%	30%
2027	4,830,000	2,040,000	306,000	408,000	510,000	612,000
2028	5,370,000	2,580,000	387,000	516,000	645,000	774,000
2029	5,370,000	2,580,000	387,000	516,000	645,000	774,000

Action 1 - Proposed Alternative 4						
Quota Pool Year	Red Grouper Commercial Quota*	Quota Increase above 4.28 mp	Red Grouper Quota in the Pool			
			(% of Quota Increase)			
			15%	20%	25%	30%
2027	4,830,000	550,000	82,500	110,000	137,500	165,000
2028	5,370,000	1,090,000	163,500	218,000	272,500	327,000
2029	5,370,000	1,090,000	163,500	218,000	272,500	327,000

Quota Pool Equal Distribution (Quota Pool at 15%)

Alternatives 2 and 3				
	50/50 Scenario (Equal)		60/40 Scenario (Equal)	
	With Shares	Without Shares	With Shares	Without Shares
Min. 300 lb	1,500	1,150	1,200	1,380
Min. 500 lb	1,779	1,214	1,423	1,457
Min. 1,000 lb	1,937	1,404	1,549	1,684

Proposed Alternative 4				
	50/50 Scenario (Equal)		60/40 Scenario (Equal)	
	With Shares	Without Shares	With Shares	Without Shares
Min. 300 lb	404	310	324	372
Min. 500 lb	480	327	384	393
Min. 1,000 lb	522	379	418	454

Quota Pool Proportional Distribution (Quota Pool at 15%)

Alternatives 2 and 3				
	50/50 Scenario (Proportional)		60/40 Scenario (Proportional)	
	With Shares	Without Shares	With Shares	Without Shares
Min. 300 lb	27 – 11,669	15 – 7,660	22 – 9,335	19 – 9,193
Min. 500 lb	50 – 11,712	27 – 7,666	40 – 9,370	32 – 9,200
Min. 1,000 lb	91 – 11,748	52 – 7,697	73 – 9,399	63 – 9,237

Proposed Alternative 4				
	50/50 Scenario (Proportional)		60/40 Scenario (Proportional)	
	With Shares	Without Shares	With Shares	Without Shares
Min. 300 lb	7 – 3,146	4 – 2,065	6 – 2,517	5 – 2,478
Min. 500 lb	13 – 3,158	7 – 2,067	11 – 2,526	9 – 2,480
Min. 1,000 lb	25 – 3,167	14 – 2,075	20 – 2,534	17 – 2,490

FINAL ACTION – Abbreviated Framework Action: Red Grouper IFQ Set Aside Quota Holdback (Tab B, No. 7)

NOAA General Counsel (GC) explained the procedure for requesting and taking action on this framework document. SERO noted that this abbreviated framework action would allow NMFS to withhold the quota necessary to start the pilot program in 2027, which can be released upon implementation. Taking final action on this framework at this meeting is necessary to implement Reef Fish Amendment 63 in 2027, which would allow for testing the value of the pilot program.

Committee members inquired about the implementation timelines for this action and for Reef Fish Amendment 63. SERO mentioned that it is currently difficult to accurately predict implementation timelines.

The Committee recommends and I so **move, to add an Option 3 that reads as follows:**

Option 3: Provide the NMFS Regional Administrator the authority to withhold the percentage of the red grouper commercial quota necessary to implement Amendment 63 during the 2027 fishing year. If Amendment 63 is not implemented by May 1, 2027, the withheld quota would be distributed to shareholders.

Motion carried without opposition.

Presentation: February 2026 SSC Summary (Tab B, No. 10)

Mr. Trevor Moncrief (Chair, SSC) reviewed SSC discussions about the greater amberjack interim analysis, which was informed by the G-FISHER index of relative abundance. Mr. Moncrief also reviewed discard mortality for reef fish species including gray triggerfish. Committee members discussed factors that make gray triggerfish vulnerable to discard mortality, and the 31-35% discard mortality estimate from the study. Mr. Moncrief then summarized emerging research on projecting recreational fishing season duration for gag grouper, SSC discussions on economic effects of mid-year IFQ quota changes, and a check-in about the progress of the gray triggerfish stock assessment. Lastly, Mr. Moncrief discussed stakeholder participatory workshops conducted by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC).

Draft Options – Modifications to Red Snapper Private Recreational Accountability Measures (Tab B, No. 8)

Council staff presented draft options for recreational red snapper in-season and post-season flexibility measures, beginning with the history of previous carryover provision efforts and draft options for an in-season private recreational red snapper ACL transfer mechanism. Council staff highlighted concerns with conducting carryover provisions and regional ACL sharing concurrent with one another and suggested that actions be independently analyzed. A Committee member stated that carryover provisions may not meet the original Council intent and highlighted that the options as presented may allow for carryover in excess. NOAA GC said if carryover provisions

are put in place, it would require modification of the ACL and subsequently the ABC. As such, the SSC would need to provide a range of eligible ABCs. NOAA GC also suggested that the Committee consider that adjusting ABC and ACL would need to abide by sector-allocations. A Committee member said in-season ACL transfers may not be feasible given the delay of in-season landings data. Another Committee member stated that Creel Survey data units only have a delay of approximately 10 days and, following the transition of Mississippi and Alabama to Creel, an in-season transfer program may soon be feasible. A Committee member wanted staff to continue to analyze carryover provisions, but to be analyzed with a more conservative approach.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, In Draft Action 1, draft Alternative 2, add Draft Options 2c and 2d.**

Draft Action 1: Establish a carryover provision for private recreational red snapper

Draft Alternative 2: Establish a carryover provision for private angling component of the red snapper ACL on a state-by-state basis. For states that did not land its state-specific ACL, the unused portion of would be carried over to the next fishing year in the amount of unused portion of the ACL not greater than *Options 2a-2d* of the previous year's state-specific private angling ACL.

- Draft Option 2a: 100% of unused state-specific private angling ACL can be carried over to the next year
- Draft Option 2b: 75% of unused state-specific private angling ACL can be carried over to the next year
- **Draft Option 2c: 50% of unused state-specific private angling ACL can be carried over to the next year**
- **Draft Option 2d: 25% of unused state-specific private angling ACL can be carried over to the next year**

Motion carried without opposition.

SERO staff suggested that modification of the current post-season accountability measure (AM) may address concerns about any annual overages while remaining under the total private recreational ACL. SERO will propose such language during full Council.

A Committee member recommended including an analysis of state-specific ACL overage frequency and percentages for future discussion. Another Committee member suggested the addition of an action to limit carryover to a percentage of the state-specific ACL rather than unused quota, to reduce annual variability. A Committee member wanted post-season and in-season quota transfers to be analyzed. The Committee recommended that proposed actions be analyzed by staff independently.

Presentation: Delegate Federal For-Hire Red Snapper Management to Gulf States (Tab B, No. 9)

Council staff presented the purpose and need and discussed the management actions for delegating federal for-hire red snapper management to the Gulf states (Action 1), allocating the federal for-hire component’s quota among the states (Action 2), and permitting states to close federal waters adjacent to their state waters (Action 3). In Action 2, a Committee member thought a longer landings time series should be considered. Another Committee member suggested that average landings per for-hire vessel could also be an allocation criterion.

The Committee recommends and I so **move**, **To add an Alternative 4 in Action 2 to allocate the federal for-hire red snapper quota between the Gulf States based on the Amendment 40 Sector Separation Formula (50%*1986-2005, 2007-2009, 2011-2013) + (50%*2007-2009, 2011-2013).**

Amendment 40 Calculation	FLW	AL	MS	LA	TX
For Hire Landings:	36.73%	26.29%	0.80%	11.08%	25.09%

Motion carried 11 to 3 with 3 abstentions.

The Committee recommends and I so **move**, **In Action 2, to add an Alternative 5 to allocate the federal for-hire red snapper quota between the Gulf States based on 50% of Amendment 40 Sector Separation Formula (50%*1986-2005, 2007-2009, 2011-2013)+(50%*2007-2009, 2011-2013) and 50% of each state’s average red snapper landings between 2021 and 2024 +(50%*2021-2024) in Alternative 3.**

Amendment 40 with Alt. 3 Calculation	FLW	AL	MS	LA	TX
For Hire Landings:	38.96%	25.69%	0.76%	10.27%	24.32%

Motion carried 12 to 3 with 2 abstentions.

A Committee member suggested that only the years after sector separation should be considered in allocation decisions. The Committee thought the structure of the actions could be improved by adding options relative to the closure of federal waters (Action 3) to the delegation action (Action 1). The Committee noted that future iterations of the document should detail the extent of the delegation and include accountability measures.

Discussion of 2026 Gag Grouper and Greater Amberjack Recreational Fishing Seasons

SERO staff reviewed recreational fishing season duration projections for gag grouper for 2026. Recreational landings from the 2025 fishing season did not exceed the recreational ACL.

Current 2026 season projections by SERO estimate a 25 – 33-day fishing season; projections reviewed by the SSC estimate a 34-day season. SERO will announce a final season duration at a later date. The gag recreational fishing season opens September 1.

SERO staff discussed the 2026 – 2027 recreational fishing season for greater amberjack. Based on past fishing season, SERO estimates approximately a 45-day fishing season, and will announce the final season duration for fall 2026 by early May. The greater amberjack recreational fishing season opens September 1.

Discussion of 2026 Federal For-hire Red Snapper Fishing Season

SERO staff reviewed the projected fishing season duration for the federal for-hire component for red snapper for the 2026 fishing season. The season will open June 1 and close October 26. SERO expressed concern about the ever-increasing duration of the for-hire season projections.

Other Business

Greater Amberjack Exempted Fishing Permit

Mr. Chris Schieble noted no dockside intercepts of greater amberjack across the states in 2025 through MRIP. He identified key goals of a proposed exempted fishing permit (EFP) for greater amberjack, to allow the states to take the lead in locally managing fishing by the recreational sector. Mr. Schieble noted that Louisiana's goals included improving the timeliness and accuracy of landings data, and to use the experience to better prepare for future state management of the species. He expected Louisiana to submit its EFP by summer 2026 and thought Louisiana would open their fishing season earlier in the calendar year when Louisiana's anglers are more likely to want to fish for greater amberjack. A Committee member from Texas indicated their state's support for an EFP for greater amberjack, as did one from Mississippi. A Committee member asked about the process of allocating catch among the states. Mr. Schieble said that his state's EFP currently uses a two-month fishing season, commensurate with the current fall fishing season duration for the recreational sector. The EFP would allow Louisiana to re-specify when those two months of fishing occur for both private anglers and the federally permitted charter for-hire fleet.

Gag Grouper Exempted Fishing Permit

Dr. CJ Sweetman discussed the 2025 gag grouper fishing season and said that Florida is preparing an EFP to propose state management for gag grouper. This EFP is estimated to be submitted to NOAA Fisheries in the near future and will be presented for consideration at the June 2026 Council meeting. Dr. Sweetman noted that based on public feedback, the gag EFP will only include private angling and state for-hire vessels and would not include the federally permitted charter for-hire fleet. A Committee member from Louisiana voiced their support for Florida's efforts in this regard.

Reallocation of Private Recreational Red Snapper ACL Between the Gulf States

General Joe Spraggins reviewed the current state-specific allocations of the red snapper private recreational ACL. In the process of establishing these allocations, there was a 3.78% remainder that was ultimately added to Florida's state-specific allocation. General Spraggins wanted to revisit that remainder, and what other options may be appropriate for apportioning that percentage. He noted that sector allocations should be reviewed periodically, per the Council's own allocation review policy. The Committee discussed a document that revisits state-specific allocations of the red snapper private recreational ACL for all states. At present, the Council has decided to wait to re-evaluate these allocations until the results of the MRIP-FES pilot study are finalized and the results reviewed by the Council's SSC. A Committee member emphasized that any reallocation be fair and equitable, as was established under Reef Fish Amendment 50. Council staff discussed several measures currently being considered by the Council on this topic.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.