

Public Hearing Summary

Reef Fish Amendment 63: Red Grouper Commercial Quota Pool Under the Grouper/Tilefish Individual Fishing Quota Program

Virtual Meeting

May 13, 2026

Council / Staff

Mike Allen
John Sanchez
Assane Diagne
Annie Suitor
Emily Muehlstein
Leo Eguia
Verena Wang

13 Members of the public attended; 8 Members of the public spoke.

Bill Tucker - Commercial; Dunedin, Florida

He asked why the Council severely cut the TAC a decade ago, dropping the quota down by 60% and then brought it up. The fact that people can't catch fish now is a reflection on the stock and that the fish are not there. Those with skin in the game do not want this new quota increase. This amendment would take from someone and give to someone else. He suggested that the Council needs Commercial CPUE data to understand what is going on in the fishery, particularly historical vertical line CPUE, as this is where most fish have been caught. This amendment would screw up the incentives of the IFQ program. There's currently so much red grouper quota available; he practically gives it away. He thinks people should get skin in the game and the Council should not create dependency.

He emphasizes that this is not about access, but about a willingness to pay market price. The fishermen's finance program should help with that. This Amendment is not for new entrants. He wants the Council to take No Action. It will not help the IFQ program, but rather, will be a cancer to the program. This would pull quota out of the market and increase the cost and not increase profitability. He emphasized that the IFQ program depends on shareholders making decisions for the health of the fishery. When quota is increased beyond what it should be, it is rejected by commercial fishermen. There does not need to be new effort in the fishery. The Council has lost any historical knowledge about how the IFQ program was built in response to overcapacity in the fishery. He wants this Amendment to be Considered but Rejected.

He mentions that recreational fishery data is substandard.

Martin Fisher - Commercial; St. Petersburg, Florida

He expressed concern about the purpose and need, namely, he did not think there was an issue with bycatch/regulatory discards for red grouper. He stated that the quota pool program is not designed for new entrants, as it is taking quota away and giving to people who currently catch fish. He asked why the eligibility criteria in Action 2 was set so low. He does not understand where the impetus for this action is coming, as it is not making a pathway for new entrants and

will benefit those who own shares. He is concerned about what happens when the fishery collapses and the quota is brought back to 2 million pounds. He prefers **Action 1, Alternative 1**, although if this does move forward, he prefers **Alternative 4** over **Preferred Alternative 3 and 2**.

He states that this Amendment would violate the Magnuson-Stevens Act, as the proposed changes would require a referendum because they are a fundamental change in the IFQ program. He mentions there is a problem with recreational fisheries data.

Jim Zurbrick - Commercial/Dealer; Steinhatchee, FL

He asked if there was a sense of how much of the quota of the quota pool will go to highliners and expressed that this action is not helping new entrants, but people who are catching red grouper now. He is a dealer and puts red grouper quota on people's boats. He used to give away red grouper allocation when the major increase occurred. He expressed that the AP didn't want to support any action on this amendment until the Council made progress on other ideas to improve access, including moving forward with Amendment 59. He supports helping the new guy. This Amendment helps the low producer and people who already catch fish.

Brian Lewis - Commercial; Clearwater, FL

In response to the Purpose and Need, he asked who is discarding red grouper? People discard gag because of a lack of quota, but not red grouper. It is a mystery who these people are. Previously, nothing was done about issues in the IFQ program. The program was developed because of overcapitalization. This won't solve any problems, will be a disruption in the fishery, and red grouper will become overfished. If there is an abundance, there will be plenty of quota available. This amendment would take quota and give to others when active commercial fishermen are struggling to catch fish. There are more questions than answers in this Amendment and it should be tabled. Some fishermen bought into this program, but some refuse to buy allocation. The fishermen who bought into the program will have their resources taken away. This is a waste of time and doesn't maintain the fishery.

Buddy Guindon - Commercial; Galveston, TX

He asked about the goals of this amendment. He stated that this is not creating new opportunities because red grouper shares and allocation are easily obtained because of the fluctuation in quota. This would redistribute the wealth in the fishery. It will take from some and give to those who already have quota. A highliner with boats in separate accounts will get most of the quota in the pool. A consequence of this amendment could be that people will no longer buy shares, until they are sure that they can keep them. This amendment is currently just being used for a quota increase, but the Council might not limit it to increases in the future. This will set a precedent. The Council should not destabilize the IFQ program. The Executive Order is supposed to enhance fisheries and not destabilize them.

Tim Dillingham - Commercial; Naples, FL

He initially supported the increase but now he doesn't because the ACL has not been reached. He purchased shares worth more allocation twelve years ago when the commercial ACL was around 6 million, then his allocation was brought down by 60% when the quota dropped. He would qualify for the quota pool program but would not get all the allocation he had originally bought. He does not want this Amendment, as he will get more allocation for his business if it is not in place. He thinks the Council should stop having knee jerk reactions resulting in big swings in catch limits like reducing gag grouper by 80% and now doing the opposite with red grouper. These massive quota fluctuations are not good for the industry and create economic disaster. Red Grouper is very affordable now, and it is not a good idea to mess it up. He stopped buying shares recently as he and other fishermen are losing confidence in the IFQ program.

Mark Dube - Commercial; FL

He had concerns with the definition of new entrants and asked about the legality of Amendment 53. He drew attention to the fact that this Amendment would reduce the percentage of quota that shareholders receive. By taking a portion of quota away, this Amendment would reduce everyone's percentage of quota. Currently shareholders have 100% of quota, but with this amendment that would not be the case.

Ron Chicola - Commercial; LA

He stated that you know what you're going to get in the AP when most participants are shareholders, like in the Council, where most members represent the recreational industry. People act like they own fish. NOAA never monetized the fish, as you can't own a public resource. He got out of the fishery for this reason.

Virtual Meeting
May 14, 2026

Council/Staff

John Sanchez
Assane Diagne
Annie Sutor
Emily Muehlstein
Leo Eguia
Carrie Simmons

16 Members of the public attended; 9 Members of the public spoke.

Jason Delacruz – Commercial; Madeira Beach, FL

Commercial fishermen have always been conscientious and have come to the podium saying this quota increase is ridiculous. We're going to build a subset of commercial fisherman that don't care and align with how the recreational advocacy groups work to destroy this fishery. Current landings are only at 31% of 2.79 mp quota and we're not going to even come close to catching all these fish. NMFS will realize it was a mistake and cut quota again and many people will complain that they get cut out. There is no reason to not buy quota now. If you always want to be a renter, that's fair, but not fair to the people who chose to buy in. The vast majority of people who own quota keep their quota separate from their boats and will fall into the category of non-shareholders, and so will be the ones to benefit.

Karen Clayton – Commercial; Tampa Bay, FL

Agrees with Jason about the there being opportunity to get into the business if they really want to. If people really want to get into the business, there's opportunity but they have to pay for it. There's very little you get for free in this life, but NMFS is just throwing that aside. Those that are promoting this are the only ones who will benefit. She supports **Action 1 Alternative 1, Action 2 Alternative 1, Action 3 Alternative 1**. There is no defined outline or plan as to how this will fully work and there are way too many questions to take to final action at this time.

Martin Fisher – Commercial; St. Petersburg, FL

He questioned the profitability of this quota pool, suggesting only \$51,000 would be saved. What happens at the end of three years? You will actually have to take a share percentage away from shareholders to implement the quota pool. Say all the people who don't own shares catch all 200,000 lbs then, NMFS will give the privilege to those people by making them shareholders. He believes the quota pool concept is built on a false premise. There are no issues with discards for red grouper other than regulatory discards. Maybe only a handful of people are discarding legal red grouper, however there is quota readily available. It's a false premise that this will improve profitability in the fishery. It's unrealistic that profitability will occur, especially when

the agency knows the fish won't be caught. He supports **Action 1 Alternative 1, Action 2 Alternative 1, Action 3 Alternative 1**. He also mentioned his longevity in the commercial fishery, beginning in 1979 and being the Reef Fish AP chair for many years.

Steven Rash – Commercial; Apalachicola, FL

He owns 20 reef fish boats, holds shares, leases quota to and for boats and acts like a quota back for them because they can't lease quota themselves. Is the council aware that the economic benefit of this action is negligible? The unintended consequence will be that you will take quota from one shareholder with landings and give it to another shareholder with landings.

Anything that the government gives to someone, it has to take from someone else. This applies to quota. Take shares from active, permit holding, landing fisherman and give it to someone else who has shares. It's extremely disappointing to see that the Gulf Council is further out in left field than he's seen in 43 years and is continually finagling with the IFQ program when there really isn't a problem. You can't cry and get a restaurant without paying for it, same for the IFQ. He remembers the Council discussing cyclical redistribution of IFQ, which is ludicrous. The real issue is the exploding effort from recreational fishery, discard mortality for recreational fishery is a crime against nature. If the council really wants to help the fishery it needs to address the real issues. He wants Amendment 63 to be considered but rejected and supports **Action 1 Alternative 1, Action 2 Alternative 1, Action 3 Alternative 1**. He asked that the Council come back to the real issues: quota will be worthless next year with the increase, and this will absolutely destroy any profitability. Why give away something that is worthless? He also speculates that NMFS is increasing the red grouper quota to give recreational fishermen more opportunity to catch them. It's not a coincidence that science gave them a year-round season.

Trenton Knepp – Commercial; Sarasota, FL

He questions how we can get quota into the working man's hands. When there's a deduction it should be cut from the shareholders that aren't fishing. If the quota pool is implemented he would like the quota to be distributed at the beginning of the year because it's always hardest to buy quota right at the start of January. He keeps hearing shareholders say this will not help profitability but no value was meant to be set on the shares. Shareholders are extorting the fishermen, and fishermen have received threats for speaking up. Let the working man work. This program was never meant to be what it is now. They got their shares for free so, why do they deserve it more than the people who are working for it every day and continuing to pay. When a quota cut is made, it needs to come from the people not using it.

Bill Tucker – Commercial; Dunedin, FL

Is it possible for shareholders who sell their allocation to get quota? He hopes the unintended consequences identified are in fact unintended. He built longline boat when quota was high then, quota was then cut by 60% for everyone. There was not enough for some people to get by, and

he had to sell that boat. He also sold allocation to offset losses his losses. Other people needed it more than he did at the time. He gave up a lot for the fishery. Guys that need the quota will have to sell their boats this time. The council is picking winners and losers. We can't catch the small quota we have because the fish are not there. There is a lack of CPUE data in SEDAR 88 Table 2 and no CPUE data for vertical longline since 2009. CPUE data is the voice of the fishermen and that index is being left out. Does CPUE support the catch increase? He thinks it's a huge mistake to move forward without that data. The quality of effort is different than it was 15 years ago. Years of increasing technological availability, and a flat CPUE likely indicates a decrease in the availability of fish. This is not a jobs program; it's about controlling effort. The Council lost sight of the point of this program. Recreational fishermen are the problem compared to commercial fishermen who are trying to be conservative. If you take allocation away from shareholders to give to other people, why isn't that going to increase discards on the other end of the spectrum? If there is a need for people to get quota, why is there no one in the marketplace looking to buy? This is nothing more than social engineering and the council is picking winners and losers.

Brian Lewis – Commercial; Clearwater, FL

He echoes almost exactly what everyone is saying about this. 27 years ago, he had a fishing vessel with history and had the ability to get quota. He sold his boat and permit and the guy who bought the boat got to reap the rewards of the IFQ program. He remembers the grouper buyout program and thought that was a preposterous proposal. People crying now should think about that. He had to start from the beginning after the start of the IFQ program, shares were cheaper then. He owns shares now because of the hard work he put into it. This program is not a good idea. We don't need the quota increase; it will drive the price down. His vessel is solely dependent on red grouper after losing Gag. He is not in favor of this and supports **Action 1 Alternative 1, Action 2 Alternative 1, Action 3 Alternative 1**. People need access to capital to buy quota and the IFQ loan program is not great for everyone. Fishermen need to be recognized like farmers to have banks provide opportunities. There are plenty of people who don't want to buy quota. Seek other options to increase profitability.

Jim Zurbrick – Commercial; Steinhatchee, FL

He reminds everyone that IFQ AP recommended no action be taken on this amendment. Amendment 59 should be looked into first. There are people that will never buy, no matter the cost.

Jesse Baughman – Commercial; Naples, FL

At this time, with the USDA there are no programs or grants for people that live in areas with 50,000 people or more. This excludes all working waterfronts. She encourages folks to write letters to senators to get policy changed within USDA because they're not farmers, they're wild

seafood dealers. Fishermen need to get the farm bill changed. She is not sure why the quota is increasing overall.

Written Comment Summary

November 2025 – May 26, 2026

12 Public Hearing video views.

13 comments received.

- Mixed support for Amendment 63 with some supporting increased quota access for non-shareholders and others opposing the quota pool because red grouper allocation is readily available and cheap.
- The Council should focus on tightening eligibility for the quota pool, including limiting participation to active fishermen with recent catch history and small IFQ share ownership.
- Support for revising quota pool triggers and timing, including delaying implementation to 2028 and setting the quota pool allocation to 0% when the commercial quota falls below 4.9 million pounds.
- Reclaimed NOAA Fisheries shares from Amendment 36A should be added to the quota pool and allocation should be distributed equally among qualifying participants. Future allocation to the quota pool should only come from reclaimed IFQ shares following Amendments 59A and 59B.
- Concern the stock assessment does not accurately reflect red grouper abundance, as commercial quota is not being met, and management reforms should address recurring boom-and-bust cycles.
- Support for expanding the quota pool concept to other IFQ species such as red snapper, where allocation costs and discard mortality are more significant.

21 anonymous voicemails received.

- Many respondents expressed strong opposition to the IFQ system as a whole suggesting that shareholders are making all the money, extort the fishermen, and the system is corrupt and fraudulent. Non-shareholders have no voice in the Council or the IFQ AP.
- Support for providing IFQ reallocation to fishermen who don't own shares and can't compete because all their profit is lost buying IFQ allocation.
- Some opposition to Amendment 63 focusing on its irrelevance given the cheap cost of red grouper allocation and concern for stock health.
- Mixed opinions if Amendment 63 is consistent with the Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness Executive Order.