

**Reef Fish Committee Report
June 2, 2026
Dr. CJ Sweetman – Chair**

The Committee adopted the agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**) after adding an item under Other Business, and the minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the April 2026 meeting were approved.

FINAL ACTION – Reef Fish Amendment 63: Modifications to Gulf Red Grouper IFQ Program (Tab B, No. 4)

Staff reviewed a summary of input received at public hearings, and written comments received on the public hearing draft for Reef Fish Amendment 63. This amendment would develop a three-year quota pool to set aside a portion of the red grouper commercial quota and distribute the resulting annual allocation to eligible participants in the grouper/tilefish IFQ program. Most of the public comments received were not in support of the quota pool and challenged its effectiveness in reducing discards and enhancing economic profitability. Council staff reviewed recommendations from the Ad Hoc Red Snapper / Grouper-Tilefish IFQ Advisory Panel (AP). AP comments echoed public comments received and questioned the fairness of the quota pool and inquired about its potential beneficiaries.

Captain David Walker (AP Chair) noted that the AP did not support the quota pool and expressed concerns over the increase in the commercial red grouper quota. He asked why a quota pool is under consideration when there are not enough fish to support it. A Committee member inquired about industry support for the quota pool if the commercial quota were lower and the annual allocation prices were higher. Captain Walker stated that the IFQ program is a well-functioning program, and that Amendment 63 is a trojan horse that will set a precedent for other species.

A Committee member noted that the AP initially recommended scrapping the quota pool entirely but elected to leave an opportunity for its future consideration by unanimously approving a motion to “request the Council cease work on Reef Fish Amendment 63 (Commercial Red Grouper Quota Pool) until Reef Fish Amendment 59A (IFQ Permit Requirements) is finalized.” The Committee asked how share caps are calculated and whether they account for related accounts. Dr. Jessica Stephen (NMFS Southeast Regional Office [SERO]) replied that share caps are calculated at the shareholder account, entity, and individual levels. A Committee member noted that red grouper IFQ shares could currently be purchased for about \$8 a pound. Dr. Stephen stated that available reported data indicate higher prices but those do not reflect the anticipated release of additional allocation when Reef Fish Amendment 62 becomes effective.

Staff reviewed the purpose and need for the amendment. Based on the AP summary, NOAA General Counsel suggested the Committee further discuss the purpose and need to note that the pilot program is experimental. A Committee member asked how the quota pool would reduce discards. Another Committee member offered a motion for consideration and replied that outcomes of the quota pool, including a reduction in discards, are to be evaluated. A Committee member noted the oddity of modifying the purpose and need at this time.

The Committee recommends, and I so move: To modify the Purpose and Need section of the document as follows:

The purpose of this action is to establish a three-year pilot commercial red grouper IFQ quota pool and distribute the resulting annual allocation to eligible participants in the GT-IFQ program.

The need for this action is to test whether a quota pool may enhance economic profitability and reduce discards by improving access to red grouper annual allocation by fishermen engaged in the commercial harvest of red grouper and provide new opportunities for obtaining red grouper annual allocation.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Council staff reviewed the management alternatives and options. A Committee member indicated that increases in the red grouper commercial quota are expected to result in cheap, if not free, red grouper annual allocation. Another Committee member noted that quota increases are independent from Amendment 63. A Committee member asked why the quota pool should proceed before the implementation of Reef Fish 59A (Permit Requirements). Another Committee member replied that the timely completion of Reef Fish Amendment 59A is not a forgone conclusion and added that the Council missed opportunities when sizeable quota increases were implemented for other species. They added that work on Reef Fish Amendment 59A needs to continue but the permit requirements should not delay the work on the quota pool. A Committee member noted that the quota pool is a proof of concept and added their support to its implementation.

NOAA General Counsel presented the codified text for the proposed federal regulations. The Committee indicated that public testimony will be helpful in supporting discussions during full Council.

*Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 55/Snapper Grouper Amendment 44:
Mutton Snapper and Yellowtail Snapper Management Measures (Tab B, No. 5)*

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 (Councils). Council staff reviewed an updated version of the document that includes updated fishery closure analyses based on the current alternatives. Under Action 1, a Committee member noted that Option 3b in Alternative 3, which uses a more recent 10-year time series and includes SRFS data for the majority of that time series. Under Action 2, the Committee discussed removing the buffer in the Gulf between the ACL and the Gulf's apportionment of the ABC, given that the southeastern US yellowtail snapper stock is considered healthy.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to recommend that the Gulf Council select Alternative 3b in Action 1 as the preferred alternative.

Alternative 3: Modify the OFL and ABC and the jurisdictional apportionment of the mutton snapper ABC and the regional ACLs using the average of historic and recent landings, and the following reference period, based on the recommendations of the Councils’ SSCs for 2027 – 2028 and subsequent years. Each region’s ACL will be set equal to its apportionment of the stock ABC. Monitoring of landings for mutton snapper will be inclusive of SRFS for recreational private vessel landings, MRIP for federal for-hire and recreational shore landings, and SRHS for headboat landings. Catch limits shown below are in lb ww and rounded to the nearest whole pound.

Option 3b: Use 50% of the average landings from 2014 – 2023 and 50% of the average landings from 2021 – 2023. This method apportions 15% of the stock ABC to the Gulf Council, and 85% to the South Atlantic Council.

	OFL (F_{30%SPR})	ABC (75% of F_{30%SPR})	Gulf Apportionment and ABC/ACL (15%)	South Atlantic Apportionment and ABC/ACL (85%)
2027	3,313,030	2,752,377	412,857	2,339,520
2028+	3,270,355	2,772,615	415,892	2,356,723

Motion carried without opposition.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to recommend that the Gulf Council select Alternative 4b in Action 2 as the preferred alternative.

Alternative 4: Modify the OFL and ABC and the jurisdictional apportionment of the yellowtail snapper ABC and the regional ACLs using the average of historic and recent landings, based on the recommendations of the Councils’ SSCs for 2026 – 2028 and subsequent years. Use 50% of the average landings from 2014 – 2023 and 50% of the average landings from 2021 – 2023. This method apportions 17% of the stock ABC to the Gulf Council, and 83% to the South Atlantic Council. The South Atlantic Council’s regional ACL will be set equal to its apportionment of the stock ABC. Catch limits shown below are in lb ww and rounded to the nearest whole pound.

Option 4b: The Gulf regional ACL will be set equal to the Gulf jurisdictional apportionment of the stock ABC.

	OFL (F _{30%SPR})	ABC (75% of F _{30%SPR})	Gulf Apportionment and ABC/ACL (4b) (17%)	South Atlantic Apportionment and ABC/ACL (83%)
2026	4,495,187	3,925,031	667,255	3,297,026
2027	4,364,600	3,913,426	665,282	3,287,278
2028+	4,307,856	3,918,634	666,168	3,291,653

Motion carried without opposition.

Draft Options – Modifications to Red Snapper Private Recreational Post-Season Accountability Measures (Tab B, No. 6)

Council staff provided an overview of the historical private recreational red snapper landings and the draft options document for modifying private recreational accountability measures. Following this presentation, a Committee member reminded the Council that the red snapper stock assessment is currently underway, and asked if the results of the assessment could indicate a change in stock status which could affect this action. Another Committee member suggested, and the Committee agreed, that future iterations of the document should modify the purpose and need statement by removing "...and providing sustained access for recreational participants and members of fishing communities in states across the Gulf." The Committee discussed whether to add an alternative proposed by the Interdisciplinary Plan Team (IPT) which proposed to not cap a state's overage and manage to the full private recreational ACL. The Committee agreed that the proposed alternative does not meet the overarching intent of state management and suggested not including it for future iterations of the document.

Committee members discussed the proposed Options under Alternative 2, and the Committee found Options 2b, 2c, and 2d to be reasonable given the historic range of overages, and the range of uncertainty that comes with state-specific data collection estimations. However, the Committee found Option 2a to be too low. As a result, the Committee made a motion:

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to recommend In Action 1, to remove Option 2a from Alternative 2.

Alternative 2: If a state's red snapper private angling component landings exceed the applicable state's component ACL by more than the percentage specified in Options 2a-2d or private recreational landings from all states exceed the private angling component ACL, NMFS will reduce that state's private angling ACL in 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.

Option 2a: up to 2.5% of the state-specific private angling ACL

Motion carried with no opposition.

The Committee discussed additional guardrails to put restrictions on the frequency with which a state can exceed its' ACL without requiring payback. The Committee suggested including limitations on back-to-back overages and limiting overages to no more than once every three years for the next iteration of the document. NOAA General Counsel stated that limitations on frequency do not need to be added as another action item but can be included as conditions under the proposed action.

Two Committee members indicated interest in continuing work on the red snapper carryover and transfer quota sharing document. Council staff noted that the Council requested the document to modify accountability measures to come prior to discussion on carryover or transfer provisions, but further discussion on prioritization of documents can occur in full Council.

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 59A: Permit Requirements in IFQ Programs (Tab B, No. 7)

Council staff stated that the Ad Hoc Red Snapper/Grouper-Tilefish IFQ AP (AP) received presentations on quota banks from Ben Martens of the Maine Coast Fisherman's Association and from Ashford Rosenberg of the Gulf of America Reef Fish Shareholder's Alliance. Council staff reviewed recommendations from the AP, highlighting the motions made.

AP members discussed the continued participation of dealers in the IFQ programs and noted that there were challenges with requiring dealers to have reef fish permits and with carving out an exemption for dealers. In Action 1 (Requirements to Open and Maintain Shareholder Accounts), the AP supported the Council's preferred alternative which requires all applicants to possess a valid or renewable commercial reef fish permit to obtain and maintain an IFQ shareholder account. In Action 4 (Divestment from Non-compliant Shareholder Accounts), the AP supported the Council's preferred alternatives and options.

AP members discussed the role of non-profit organizations such as quota banks and recommended that changes to participation requirements in Reef Fish Amendment 59A not be applicable to 501(c)(3) non-profits that serve commercial fishermen and fishing communities.

Committee members suggested further discussions on criteria for non-profits that serve commercial fishermen and fishing communities and how these non-profits would be incorporated into the IFQ system. Staff presented the actions and preferred alternatives selected by the Council. In Action 1, staff noted that the Council previously selected Preferred Alternative 3:

Preferred Alternative 3. In addition to the US citizenship or permanent residency requirement, all applicants are required to possess a valid or renewable commercial reef fish permit to obtain and maintain an IFQ shareholder account.

The Committee discussed Action 2 (Requirements to Obtain and Maintain IFQ Shares) and made the following motion:

The Committee recommends and I so move, In Action 2, to make Alternative 3 the preferred:

Alternative 3: 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.

Motion carried with no opposition.

The Committee discussed Action 3 (Requirements to Obtain IFQ Allocation) and made the following motion:

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

Alternative 2: To obtain annual allocation, 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.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Staff noted that the Council already selected preferred alternatives in Action 4 (Divestment from Non-compliant Shareholder Accounts):

Preferred Alternative 2. NMFS will reclaim shares from shareholder accounts that are not compliant with requirements set in Actions 1, 2, 3, or 4:

Preferred Option 2a: 1 year following the effective date of the final rule implementing these requirements.

Preferred Alternative 3: After implementation of this amendment, if a shareholder account is no longer in compliance with the requirements set in Actions 1, 2, 3, or 4, the owner(s) of the shareholder account must divest of their shares, or the shares will be reclaimed by NMFS:

Preferred Option 3a: 1 year following the non-compliant status.

Council staff presented AP recommendations made during Other Business in the AP Meeting, including the addition of a request for Commercial Catch-per-unit-effort data (CPUE) from the IFQ landings data, a discussion of the new USDA Office of Seafood, the Executive Order (EO) 14276 (Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness), and a mandatory reporting program under Other Business.

Committee members discussed AP recommendations related to catch per unit effort (CPUE).

The Committee recommends and I so move, to request the Council ask NMFS/SEFSC for commercial CPUE from 2010 through 2025 for red grouper.

Motion carried with no opposition.

Staff presented the other motions made by the AP recommending the Council initiate documents to address sea turtle gear (for-hire and commercial), the hook limitation beyond 50 fathoms, and the crew limitation on dually permitted vessels. The AP also approved a motion to support the proposed mandatory pilot program for permit and reporting for deepwater grouper for the recreational sector.

A Committee member reiterated that the crew limitation for dually permitted vessels is no longer necessary and would be a positive deregulatory action. The Committee suggested a law enforcement perspective on this issue would be helpful.

Draft Amendment 65 – Regional Management of Recreational Greater Amberjack (Tab B, No. 8)

Council staff presented decision points and options for considering regional management of recreational greater amberjack. Broadly, greater amberjack is harvested by both the commercial and recreational sector Gulf-wide, and the recreational sector has historically requested region-specific seasons and management measures. The stock has remained overfished despite numerous management approaches which have resulted in shorter recreational fishing seasons, modifications to commercial trip limits, and decreased angler satisfaction. The Committee considered several major decision points, including whether to include the federal for-hire component of the recreational fishery in regional management, state- or regional management boundaries, allocation, a common data unit, specific management tools for delegation, and accountability measures.

In considering whether to include the federal for-hire component, the Committee requested staff provide additional information on historic landings between for-hire and private vessels that could be used to inform this action. When considering state or regional management, a Committee member recommended that action alternatives include options for state management and regional management. Possible regional management could include a three-region configuration, with the western Gulf including states west of the Mississippi River, a northern Gulf region (including the state of Alabama and panhandle of Florida), and an eastern Gulf region which would include the rest of peninsular Florida. For an allocation mechanism, the Committee suggested staff review what was previously discussed for Reef Fish Amendment 50 and explore the stock biomass results from the *Greater Amberjack Count*.

When discussing possible allocation values and the next decision points (common data unit, specific management tools, and accountability measures), the Committee acknowledged that a stock assessment would need to be completed to inform these actions. Updated catch advice

would be required before calculating allocation values between states or regions, and a range of management and accountability measures would have to aligned to that allocated quota to ensure the stock is sustainably managed. Tentatively, the greater amberjack stock assessment is expected to be completed in the fall of 2028. A Committee member stated the importance of sustainability when considering state or regional management for greater amberjack given its current overfished status. The Committee stated that work on portions of the document could be developed while the stock assessment is ongoing. Council staff indicated that information on greater amberjack for-hire and private vessel landings history could be presented to the Council during the October 2026 meeting.

Presentation: May 2026 SSC Summary (Tab B, No. 9)

Mr. Trevor Moncrief (Chair, SSC) reviewed SSC discussions about the G-FISHER index of relative abundance. A Committee member asked whether the SSC discussed instances of truncating G-FISHER data relative to specific circumstances. Mr. Moncrief replied that the SSC discussed those possibilities in general and acknowledged the need for situation-specific decisions. The Committee member also asked about the expansion of the G-FISHER survey into the western Gulf. Mr. Moncrief replied that the possibility of leveraging new camera technologies to expand the survey was widely supported by the SSC. The SEFSC noted that a high-level overview of the G-FISHER survey may be of interest to the Council, given its importance to the stock assessments of many Council-managed species.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to request a presentation on the G-FISHER survey at an upcoming Council meeting.

Motion carried without opposition.

Discussion – Exempted Fishing Permits

The Committee heard an update from the State of Florida regarding an exempted fishing permit (EFP) for Gulf gag grouper. The State of Florida will have a draft prepared for later in 2026 for Council review, which will include modifications to the fishing season, along with other measures.

The Committee heard a summary of a proposed EFP for state management of recreational greater amberjack. The State of Louisiana plans to modify its fishing season to start in June 2027, with the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries able to close fishing when the Louisiana-specific ACL is expected to be met. Louisiana plans to use increased dockside intercepts during that part of the year to measure landings more precisely through its LA Creel survey, and to collect additional biological samples. NOAA General Counsel recalled the process by which EFPs are to be submitted and approved. The Committee noted an appreciation for hearing from the states about their intentions prior to the EFPs being considered for approval. Louisiana will submit their EFP for greater amberjack in the next couple of months, to start in the summer of 2027.

Other Business

Discussion of Sea Turtle Gear Requirements for Commercial and For-hire Vessels

A Committee member recalled the regulations applicable to commercial and federal for-hire vessels regarding special sea turtle release and handling gear. The Committee member noted that private recreational anglers, often fishing in the same areas with the same gears, are not beholden to the same requirements. Several Committee members stated that in their careers as for-hire captains, they have never hooked a sea turtle, and penalties for requisite gear on board are severe. SERO Staff thought it prudent to hear from a representative from the NMFS Protected Resources Division and added that the requirements were to be periodically reviewed with subsequent revisions to the biological opinion relative to the Council's Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, to request NMFS review and assess the efficacy and need for the current sea turtle release gear requirements for federally permitted charter for-hire and commercial reef fish vessels. As part of this assessment, NMFS should consider streamlining the current regulatory burden on these fleets, including proposing a simplified gear kit that represents the most recent research on interactions with sea turtles when fishing for reef fish species.

Motion carried without opposition.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.