

Reef Fish Committee Report August 24, 2026 Dr. CJ Sweetman – Chair

The Committee adopted the modified agenda (**Tab B, No. 1**), and the minutes (**Tab B, No. 2**) from the June 2026 meeting were approved.

Discussion: Decision Points for Red Snapper Catch Limits and Allocations (Tab B, No. 9)

The red snapper stock assessment (SEDAR 98) is nearing completion, pending peer review and inclusion of updated recreational landings and other data. Council staff highlighted the decision points and timing for consideration of revised sector, component, and state allocations for red snapper. These decisions will need to begin with Council decisions related to catch limits for the entire Gulf red snapper stock, followed by allocations between the commercial and recreational fishing sectors, then between the federal for-hire and private angling components of the recreational sector, and lastly, among the five Gulf states for the private angling component. Allocation decisions can be tailored to the division being addressed but should be consistent in application and clear in justification. Council staff noted that the Council would likely review the results of SEDAR 98 at its April 2027 meeting.

A Committee member supported moving additional allocation to Mississippi, which has the lowest allocation of the private angling component annual catch limit (ACL) among the states. Another Committee member supported the idea of an allocation working group to advance the development of necessary information for reviewing sector and state allocations prior to the Council reviewing the results of SEDAR 98. A Committee member asked about the expected effects of the reduction in the magnitude of the recreational landings relative to the current catch limits. Council staff replied that the revised Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES) data for recreational landings is expected to be somewhere between the current MRIP-FES data and the legacy MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey data. Further, SEDAR 98 will calibrate recreational landings from Texas and LA Creel surveys to the current MRIP data, which will need to be updated prior to being considered for management purposes. It is unclear if there will be a new calibration unit for Texas recreational landings since calibration efforts there only occurred in 2016. Council staff thought prioritizing organizing the data and the necessary calibrations was key, followed by mapping out the timing of implementation for proposed management changes.

A Committee member thought it necessary to evaluate landings by state, as opposed to what a state is allocated to catch. Relative to the charge of the working group, a Committee member asked about the scope of materials and decisions that will be provided and produced. Council staff replied that having all historical landings by fleet and state, and by data unit with calibration ratios, was paramount. These data are likely to appear different from the current MRIP landings. NOAA General Counsel (GC) added that the working group meetings would need to be publicly noticed. Council staff thought participation from stock assessment data providers would be very

helpful to the working group, and the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) agreed. The Council should consider addressing a charge and move forward with forming a working group.

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 64: Delegate Federal For-Hire Red Snapper Management to Gulf States (Tab B, No. 4)

Council staff presented Reef Fish Amendment 64 which considers the delegation of the federal for-hire management authority for red snapper to the Gulf states. The amendment includes management measures to delegate to states, allocate the federal for-hire component annual catch target (ACT) among the states, sunset provisions, and accountability measures.

Staff discussed the purpose and need statement previously approved by the Council and presented a revised version suggested by the interdisciplinary planning team. Committee members supported the revision and suggested including fair and equitable access in the revised need statement. NOAA GC noted that fair and equitable access is not clearly defined and indicated that the initial purpose and need is too broad. A Committee member highlighted that fairness and equitability can be interpreted differently amongst the Gulf states. A Committee member suggested that the need statement could emphasize maximizing economic benefits instead of minimizing adverse economic impacts. Staff said an updated purpose and need will be included in the amendment.

Staff discussed the delegation of management authority to the states to set federal for-hire red snapper seasons, and bag and size limits, and inquired whether state-specific endorsements would be included in the amendment. Staff presented a map of the Gulf, including boundaries between states extending into federal waters. NOAA GC noted that, as in state management Amendment 50A, boundary lines would be needed if some states do not accept delegation. Committee members indicated that the effects of different seasons and bag limits could affect anglers' incentives to fish in certain areas and should be considered. Committee members stated they did not support sunset provisions and recommended their removal from the amendment.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, to move Action 2 to Considered but Rejected.

Action 2: Delegation Sunset Provisions

Alternative 1: No Action. No sunset provision

Alternative 2: The delegation of the federal for-hire management authority for red snapper to Gulf States will sunset after:

Option 2a: 2 years

Option 2b: 3 years

Option 2c: 4 years

Option 2d: 5 years

Motion carried without opposition.

A Committee member said a solution to allocating the federal for-hire component red snapper catch limit among states would be to keep the component as a single unit. Another Committee member said that allocation percentages for Alabama and Florida were reversed in the presentation. Staff replied that the data were inadvertently transposed. The Committee suggested that management authority could also be delegated to regions (e.g., two or more states) and recommended the addition of options for regional delegation in the amendment.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move**: To include options for regional management delegation in Reef Fish Amendment 64.

Motion carried with 1 in opposition, 1 absent, and 1 abstention.

Draft Options – Management Flexibility for the Federal For-hire Component of the Red Snapper Fishery (Tab B, No. 5)

Council staff presented options for delegating authority for modifying specific management measures to the NMFS Southeast Regional Administrator for the federal for-hire component for red snapper.

Council staff said the Council would need to ultimately define exactly what would happen in the following fishing year based on what happened in the previous fishing year. Changes to management measures within a fishing year cannot be projected because of the lag in reporting. The Regional Administrator can already reopen the fishing season later in the fishing year if there is enough of the ACT remaining. The Southeast Regional Office (SERO) made clear that any approach being discussed needs to be long-lasting and durable to changes in Regional Administrators and fishery dynamics. SERO thought that narrowing the scope of actions being considered, specifically eliminating changes to the minimum size limits, should be considered. Other Committee members echoed this reservation relative to the effects such a change would have on the estimation of selectivity and retention in the stock assessment. A Committee member favored preserving the summer fishing season, and prioritizing harvesting the ACT second to that. Another Committee member asked SERO about what flexibilities would be helpful for federal for-hire fisheries management, and SERO replied that it could provide some ideas. NOAA GC noted a previous action to modify the bag limit for red grouper based on fishery performance which was ultimately not successful relative to its stated goal. Committee members decided to wait for public comment to help orient the Council and staff on key goals for the proposed management actions. SERO reiterated the importance of the assumption that the stock is healthy when making management modifications. Another Committee member thought a fixed and predictable fishing season was a key need for the federal for-hire fleet.

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

Council staff presented a draft framework action to modify private recreational accountability measures for red snapper and provided historical examples of overages to demonstrate how the action could be implemented. After a presentation of the alternatives, a Committee member

asked which option aligns with scientific uncertainty, and another Committee member from Louisiana replied that 6% would be appropriate for their state data collection system (LA Creel).

A Committee member asked to revisit carryover provisions. Council staff and another Committee member responded that carryovers are not included in this action but are on the action schedule to be developed as a separate document. NOAA GC mentioned that carryover is allowed in Amendment 50A but is contingent on the implementation of a carryover amendment.

Some Committee members supported both **Alternative 2, Option 2b** and **Option 2c**. A Committee member suggested that as most overages have been within 10% of a state's ACL, **Option 2c** would be preferable. In response to a question about the start date of the frequency limitation, staff stated that the three-year rolling period would begin with the first year after the effective date of this action. NOAA GC reiterated that some flexibility would go away if there were back-to-back overages. A Committee member suggested considering the number of pounds instead of a percentage to accommodate states with comparatively small ACLs.

The Committee recommends, and I so move, **In Action 1, to make Alternative 2, Option 2c the preferred alternative.**

Alternative 2: Unless the best scientific information available determines that a greater, lesser, or no overage adjustment is necessary, NMFS would reduce a state's private angling component ACL in the fishing year following an overage of the ACL by the amount of the overage if:

- The applicable state exceeds its ACL by more than the percentage specified in **Options 2a-2c**, or
- A state's red snapper private angling component landings exceed the applicable state's component ACL by any amount and private recreational landings from all states combined exceed the total private angling component ACL, or
- A state exceeds its ACL more than once in any three-year rolling period no matter the amount of the overage, and regardless of whether the total private recreational ACL is exceeded.

Option 2c: up to 10% of the state-specific private angling ACL

Motion carried without opposition.

July 2026 SSC Meeting Presentation and Meeting Summary (Tab B, No. 7)

Mr. Trevor Moncrief (Chair, Scientific and Statistical Committee [SSC]) reviewed discussions from the July 2026 Gulf SSC meeting. Mr. Moncrief reviewed SSC discussions on the new Fisheries Integrated Modeling System, Mexican king mackerel landings and their consideration in the current Gulf SEDAR stock assessment for king mackerel, and a data analysis examining Gulf tilefish species.

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 59A: Permit Requirements in IFQ Programs (Tab B, No. 8)

Council staff presented Reef Fish Amendment 59A, which considers permit requirements in the red snapper and grouper/tilefish IFQ programs. The Committee reviewed previously selected preferred alternatives. Staff presented Action 5.1, which considers criteria for granting exemptions from the permit requirements to non-profit organizations. A Committee member suggested they would like to hear public comments from those involved in relevant non-profits.

Staff discussed criteria for maintaining exemptions from permit requirements (Action 5.2). A Committee member requested further criteria for maintaining a quota exemption, including details of how many participants applied to the quota bank, how many were awarded quota, and how many were not, which would be in an annual report to be submitted to the Council. SERO cautioned about the administrative and scheduling burdens that could be experienced by the Council and NMFS. A Committee member suggested grandfathering existing relevant non-profits and capping the number of exemptions, as a guard against participants using non-profit exemptions as a loophole. The Committee member also noted there are a few participants with loans from the fisheries finance program who have accounts that are not linked to permits. These participants would need exemptions, or future loans should be tied to permit requirements.

Committee members expressed concern about the timeline of this document and that a complex discussion on exemption criteria could slow down this amendment. Staff discussed issues the Committee might consider for eligibility and challenges with exemptions such as fairness, loopholes, current applicability, and assessment of the social, economic, and biological benefits expected from non-profit quota banks. A Committee member suggested that permit exemptions would be more directly relevant in a discussion of the activity requirements in Amendment 59B. Committee members suggested that there should be continued discussion about this action during full Council following public comment.

Public Hearing Draft – Reef Fish Amendment 55/Snapper Grouper Amendment 44: Mutton Snapper and Yellowtail Snapper Management Measures (Tab B, No. 10)

Reef Fish Amendment 55 / Snapper Grouper Amendment 44 is a joint amendment considering modifications to southeastern U.S. mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper management between the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils (Councils). This amendment considers modification of the respective stock catch limits, jurisdictional apportionment of the respective stock ABCs and setting of regional ACLs, and South Atlantic sector allocations within the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to move Alternative 2, Alternative 5, and Alternative 6 in Action 3 to Considered but Rejected.**

Alternative 2. Allocate 17.02% of the revised total annual catch limit for mutton snapper to the commercial sector and 82.98% of the revised total annual catch limit for mutton snapper to the recreational sector.

Alternative 5. Allocate 9.29% of the revised total annual catch limit for mutton snapper to the commercial sector in year one, 9.69% in year two, and 9.98% in year three and thereafter. Allocate 90.71% of the revised total annual catch limit for mutton snapper to the recreational sector in year one, 90.31% in year two, and 90.02% in year three and thereafter.

Alternative 6. Allocate 9.85% of the revised total annual catch limit for mutton snapper to the commercial sector in year one, 10.24% in year two, and 10.53% in year three and thereafter. Allocate 90.15% of the revised total annual catch limit for mutton snapper to the recreational sector in year one, 89.76% in year two, and 89.47% in year three and thereafter.

Motion carried without opposition.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to make Alternative 1 in Action 3 the preferred alternative.**

South Atlantic Preferred Alternative 1: No Action. Retain the current commercial and recreational sector allocations as 17.02% and 82.98%, respectively, of the current South Atlantic total annual catch limit for mutton snapper.

Motion carried without opposition.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to move Alternative 2, Alternative 5, and Alternative 6 in Action 4 to Considered but Rejected.**

Alternative 2. Allocate 52.56% of the revised total annual catch limit for yellowtail snapper to the commercial sector and 47.44% of the revised total annual catch limit for yellowtail snapper to the recreational sector.

Alternative 5. Allocate 55.28% of the revised total annual catch limit for yellowtail snapper to the commercial sector in year one, 55.30% in year two, and 55.29% in year three and thereafter. Allocate 44.72% of the revised total annual catch limit for yellowtail snapper to the recreational sector in year one, 44.70% in year two, and 44.71% in year three and thereafter.

Alternative 6. Allocate 55.44% of the revised total annual catch limit for yellowtail snapper to the commercial sector in year one, 55.45% in year two, and 55.45% in year three and thereafter. Allocate 44.56% of the revised total annual

catch limit for yellowtail snapper to the recreational sector in year one, 44.55% in year two, and 44.55% in year three and thereafter.

Motion carried without opposition.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to make Alternative 1 in Action 4 the preferred alternative.**

South Atlantic Preferred Alternative 1: No Action. Retain the current commercial and recreational sector allocations as 52.56% and 47.44%, respectively, of the current South Atlantic total annual catch limit for yellowtail snapper.

Motion carried without opposition.

The Committee recommends, and I so **move, to take Reef Fish Amendment 55/Snapper Grouper Amendment 44: Mutton Snapper and Yellowtail Snapper Management Measures out to virtual public hearings.**

Motion carried without opposition.

Overview: Understanding Catch Per Unit Effort (CPUE) from Fishery-Independent and -Dependent Indices of Relative Abundance (Tab B, No. 12 a-c)

Dr. Mike Allen (Council member) presented an overview of CPUE, discussing benefits and limitations to its use for fishery-independent and fishery-dependent indices. A Committee member asked if spatial information collected from commercial Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) could be used to inform CPUE estimates generated from fishery-dependent sources. Dr. Allen indicated that VMS data could be beneficial but stated that, in some cases, there may not be enough resolution in those data, so they should also be carefully examined when calculating CPUE. He continued that fishery-independent surveys also have sources of error, such as water turbidity in camera surveys, and fisheries scientists try to mediate those factors much as possible.

SEFSC staff reviewed CPUE estimates for red grouper in the commercial longline and handline fleets. These data were compared with those from two fishery-independent surveys: the NMFS Bottom Longline survey and the G-FISHER video survey. A Committee member asked why there was a general decline in CPUE for the two commercial fleets beginning in 2014. Council staff said that a number of management measures, including hook limitations and spatial restrictions to avoid sea turtle interactions seasonally, were also implemented during that time. Several Committee members stated that an examination of how regulatory changes affect CPUE trends in fishery-dependent data would be informative.

Dr. Ted Switzer (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) provided an overview of the history and application of the G-FISHER camera survey. The survey has expanded to include more Gulf offshore habitat, but observations can be limited in certain areas due to water

turbidity. A Committee member asked if there had been an effort to calibrate the hydroacoustic approach used in the western Gulf to the video method used in the eastern Gulf. Dr. Switzer responded that calibration work was being conducted to compare those two methods to make them directly comparable. Another Committee member asked if future work would include increased sampling off Alabama, and Dr. Switzer indicated that as more habitat mapping from Alabama becomes available, that will open up the sampling frame to that area. SEFSC staff stated that SEAMAP could serve as a model for G-FISHER as a collaborative Gulf-wide survey that can provide data for scientific projects and inform management measures.

Discussion – Exempted Fishing Permits (Tab B, No. 11)

SERO reviewed the process for submitting, reviewing, and approving an exempted fishing permit (EFP). Louisiana then summarized its proposed EFP for its management of recreational greater amberjack. The proposal discussed how Louisiana intends to manage recreational greater amberjack within its jurisdictional boundary, including the fishing season (June and July), minimum size limit (34-inch fork length), daily bag limit (1 fish per person), and catch limit (68,060 lb whole weight) and a payback provision. Louisiana also proposed to perform biological sampling for age and growth of the recreational and commercial fleets. Recreational landings will be monitored under LA Creel. SERO discussed recent litigation, which reinforced the necessity for public review, and defining a catch limit for each EFP.

A Committee member noted that the proposed catch limit for Louisiana was approximately 17% of the recreational ACL for the Gulf and 20% of the recreational ACT, and after accounting for average Florida landings, would leave less than 5-8% for the remaining states. A Committee member also noted that the proposed EFP is in LA Creel data units and that a common data unit amongst the Gulf states would be needed. Another Committee member expected that any EFPs for greater amberjack would be subject to catch limit attenuation relative to any changes in stock catch limits from a stock assessment. Louisiana will hold its fishing season during the period when its recreational red snapper fishing season is open, which will accomplish its goal of having a fishing opportunity for greater amberjack while creating efficiencies for its biological sampling. A Committee member questioned whether allowing harvest in June and July was best for the stock and its recovery due to timing of spawning for the stock, also noting that currently, greater amberjack is not targeted in June and July and can be avoided by using cut bait for red snapper instead of live bait, which will catch both species. Louisiana predicts a reduction in discard mortality around structure in its waters by allowing retention of greater amberjack in June and July. Another Committee member asked about access to greater amberjack for anglers in neighboring Mississippi. Louisiana replied that anglers would need to be properly licensed to fish in Louisiana waters and land their catch in Louisiana.

Other Business

No other business was brought before the Committee.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my report.