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

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

Reef Fish 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, which is provided for the Committee's information only. The 2026 recreational landings data from the NOAA Office of Science and Technology (OST) were unavailable. Council representatives from the five Gulf States also reviewed their 2025 private angling fishing seasons for red snapper and offered projections for the 2026 fishing season as appropriate. In addition, the five Gulf states also presented their state survey-generated landings, effort, lengths and weights for greater amberjack, as available.

Alabama discussed how dead discards are reported through Snapper Check, their recreational reporting app, and how those data translate to an estimate of total dead discards by species. A Committee member requested that the total number of discards be provided, if available. Another Committee member asked about the noticeable difference in estimates between 2025 and 2026 for greater amberjack. Alabama responded that it plans to investigate that difference in the next few months. A Committee member asked about reported depredation, and Alabama replied that Snapper Check does not have a function to report dead discards from a specific cause. However, under Alabama Creel, there is a question for discards relative to depredation.

A Committee member asked about the bi-weekly estimates generated in Texas for red snapper, and how the in-season tracking compared to the final season landings estimates. Texas described their high- and low-use fishing seasons, and how the landings are aggregated post-collection. The Committee discussed challenges with intercepting anglers who land greater amberjack.

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

This joint amendment considers modifications to southeastern U.S. mutton snapper and yellowtail snapper management between the Gulf and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils (Councils). Stock assessments using data through 2023 estimated both species to be healthy. This amendment considers modifying the respective stock catch limits, jurisdictional apportionment of the respective stock ABCs and setting of regional ACLs, and South Atlantic sector allocations for both species within the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction. The Gulf Council does not use sector allocations for these species, so, the sector allocation actions apply only to the South Atlantic Council. Council staff stated that no public comments were received during the joint virtual hearing. SERO staff reviewed the proposed codified text.

> The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, **to recommend the Council approve Reef Fish Amendment 55/Snapper Grouper Amendment 44: Mutton Snapper and Yellowtail Snapper Management Measures and that it be forwarded to the Secretary of Commerce of 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.**
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> *Motion carried without opposition*.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council will review the Gulf Council's recommendations and consider final action at its December 2026 meeting.

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

This framework action modifies the current red snapper private recreational accountability measure. Presently, if a Gulf state's landings exceed its state-specific annual catch limit (ACL) in a fishing year, then in the following year, that state's ACL is reduced by the amount of the previous year's overage. Council staff indicated that no public comments were received on this action prior to the deadline. Staff reviewed the purpose and need statement and discussed the previously selected preferred alternative. NOAA General Counsel reviewed the codified text.

> The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, **to recommend the Council approve Modifications to Red Snapper Private Recreational Post-Season Accountability 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.**
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> *Motion carried without opposition*.

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 66 – Management Flexibility for the Federal For-hire Component of the Red Snapper Fishery (Tab B, No. 7)

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. Staff reviewed the current management structure, draft purpose and need, and proposed actions and alternatives based on input from the August 2026 Council meeting.

A Committee member asked about how changing the fishing year would affect data collection and quota monitoring. Council staff replied that it would create a mismatch in the commercial and recreational fishing years, which is not unheard of in the Gulf (e.g., king mackerel), but would require additional work by NOAA Fisheries to ensure the OFL is not exceeded. Another

Committee member noted that a core fishing season seems preferable for the northern Gulf, ending mid- to late-August. The Committee member asked how far in advance for-hire operators would want the reopening of the fishing season noticed. A Committee member replied that the for-hire operators would prefer to have any reopening and would appreciate the opportunity to allow customers to keep red snapper. Another Committee member did not think changing the fishing season was necessary and thought that fish harvested in March were likely to be undersized in areas vulnerable to localized depletion. The Committee member thought those fish were needed later in the summer and fall, and preferred discussion about a fixed season reopening in October. A Committee member added that in Texas, many for-hire operators are tied to the dock after Labor Day in September and requested that the 2026 landings be presented to determine what landings in September and October looked like in this fishing year. Another Committee member discussed differences in weather across the region and how that affects for-hire access, and added that the pending stock assessment results made consideration of these actions premature. A Committee member said that recreational landings for 2026 have not yet been reported to the public by NOAA Fisheries in the Gulf, which would make reopening the fishing season an uncertain task.

A Committee member did not think for-hire operators were interested in a larger daily bag limit, and that a mismatch with the private recreational component would be unwelcomed. They added that it was possible that the ACT was not being harvested because the stock was in a depleted condition. Council staff added that the actions and alternatives presented were predicated on the assumption that the stock was healthy as estimated by the previous stock assessment, and that the stock status is being routinely estimated by subsequent stock assessments. Another Committee member said it was not preferable to take measures to increase access if the stock was in decline and was concerned about dropping the bag limit to one fish to keep the fishing season open. In contrast, a Committee member replied that they would support dropping the bag limit to keep the fishing season open earlier. Another Committee member said that having the flexibility to set fishing seasons by state was preferable, as is being discussed in Draft Reef Fish Amendment 64. The Committee discussed several potential outcomes of this action, but staff would benefit from additional specific guidance to further develop this document.

Presentation – Greater Amberjack Count (Tab B, No. 8)

Drs. Sean Powers (University of South Alabama, Scientific and Statistical Committee [SSC]) and Mark Albins (University of South Alabama) presented the results of the *Greater Amberjack Count*, which was a multi-institutional study conducted in the Gulf and South Atlantic regions to estimate the absolute abundance of greater amberjack within those respective regions. The study underwent a peer review in the Council office in Tampa in April 2026 and was published in a report to the U.S. Congress thereafter. Drs. Powers and Albins described the study and results.

Dr. Albins stated that there is no genetic distinction between the Gulf and South Atlantic populations, likely due to larval connectivity, but based on tagging data, limited movement between the regions justifies a two-stock approach. A Committee member asked whether the tagging, eDNA, and other study results suggested that a stock identification workshop warranted.

Dr. Powers supported having a stock identification workshop ahead of SEDAR 109, which is the next scheduled SEDAR stock assessment for Gulf greater amberjack.

> The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, **that the Council request a stock identification workshop as a component of the SEDAR 109 Gulf Greater Amberjack stock assessment.**
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> *Motion carried without opposition*.

A Committee member asked about how to get the maximum utility out of absolute abundance studies like the *Great Red Snapper Count* and *Greater Amberjack Count*. SERO said that integrating NOAA Fisheries into the planning, development, and execution of the study was key to it being useful across the science and management landscape. The Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) commented on the differences between the length compositions for the eastern and western Gulf, which may reflect varying levels of fishing mortality. This finding was consistent with results from other studies in the western Gulf investigating fish size and abundance on oil and gas platforms. The SEFSC expressed interest in continually updated acoustic tag survival estimates and offered the SEFSC's capacity to help support that effort. The SEFSC added that combinations of acoustic and visual surveys likely represented the future of fishery-independent surveying of fish populations in the Gulf.

A Committee member thought that a reason the project was ultimately not recommended for use in stock assessment or management by the CIE peer review process was due to the large coefficients of variation. Dr. Powers added that continued calibration of the survey methods was likely to yield tighter coefficients of variation, which would result in more confidence in the results. The SEFSC acknowledged that estimates of absolute abundance can be incorporated in the current stock assessment model as an index but cautioned against overlooking the peer-review comments, also noting that different estimates resulted from the different sampling methods. Dr. Powers replied that consideration of the study results may help identify and explain regional differences, and how to best consider them relative to management decisions.

A Committee member asked about the larger fish and higher exploitation rates estimated to occur in the western Gulf, versus the larger harvests but lower estimated abundance and smaller lengths estimated for the eastern Gulf. Dr. Albins replied that it could be an artifact of the mark-recapture modeling, which could be expanded in the future. Dr. Albins added that the estimation method for natural mortality could also be playing a role in that result.

A Committee member acknowledged that much was learned from the *Greater Amberjack Count* but recommended that such investments may be better served supporting other fishery-independent survey efforts. Other Committee members questioned the timing of such a recommendation, and to whom it would be made. The Committee member thought it best to focus the available funding on maximal integration into stock assessments.

Mr. Moncrief reviewed SSC comments brought up during Other Business at its September 2026 meeting on the *Greater Amberjack Count*, including a desire to see the SSC review scientific

studies before consideration by the Council, and a preference that such studies contribute more to stock assessments and management. A Committee member thought some components of the *Greater Amberjack Count* that were criticized by the peer-review were not fixable, such as those related to how samples were collected. Council staff said the SSC could consider the updated study report when crafting the terms of reference for the SEDAR 109 stock assessment.

Draft – Reef Fish Amendment 65 – Regional Management of Recreational Greater Amberjack (Tab B, No. 9)

Council staff presented options for considering greater amberjack state and regional management along with recreational sector-separation using catch history-based allocation alternatives modeled from Amendment 50. Several Committee members contended that using landings history for regional management and sector-specific allocation was not appropriate given the minimal historical landings in Mississippi. Another Committee member stated that splitting the state of Florida into separate regions creates a sample size issue for dockside intercepts of greater amberjack. As a result, there would be increased uncertainty for harvest estimates from those regions which could cause issues in recreational monitoring.

The Committee directed staff to discontinue work on exploring recreational sector separation for greater amberjack and stated that further presented options should not split the state of Florida into regions. A Committee member requested an examination of state landings history from 1986-2006, as this represents a time period when greater amberjack management measures, while applied throughout the Gulf, were less likely to have region-specific effects. A Committee member additionally requested that options using some percent of regional biomass and effort, as was done in Amendment 50, also be presented for consideration. The Committee directed staff to contact the primary investigators of the *Great Amberjack Count* to obtain appropriate estimates of biomass to inform the future option scenarios. SERO staff stated that future discussions of the document would require more explicit discussion of methodologies to monitor state quotas and reduce the probability of exceeding catch limits.

September 2026 SSC Meeting Presentation and Meeting Summary (Tab B, No. 10)

Mr. Trevor Moncrief (Chair, SSC) reviewed discussions from the September 2026 Gulf SSC meeting, beginning with the SSC's review of the SEDAR 94 stock assessment of West Florida Hogfish. The stock was estimated to be healthy, and the SSC accepted it as consistent with the best scientific information available. The SSC recommended an OFL of 208,103 lb whole weight (ww), and the ABC at 177,581 lb ww, for 2028 – 2030 and subsequent years. These catch limits were recommended under a proxy for fishing mortality at maximum sustainable yield (F_{MSY}) at a 40% spawning potential ratio ($F_{40\%SPR}$), which aligns with the SSC's recommendations for species which change sex (protogynous hermaphrodites, e.g., hogfish, groupers). A Committee member agreed that the hogfish stock seemed healthy based on their local observations. Florida noted that it records harvest method as part of its State Reef Fish Survey (SRFS) dockside interviews. Council staff reviewed the results of the Council's Fisherman Feedback tool, which collected stakeholder feedback about hogfish ahead of the SEDAR 94 stock assessment. Most responses were from west-central Florida, overall response

sentiment was "neutral/mixed," and sentiment regarding stock condition was primarily positive, with most individuals remarking that they only discard hogfish because they were too small.

> The Committee recommends, and I so **move**, **to direct staff start a document to update catch limits for West Florida Hogfish based on the SSC's recommendations following its review of the SEDAR 94 stock assessment.**
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> *Motion carried without opposition*.

Draft Options – Reef Fish Amendment 59A: Permit Requirements in IFQ Programs (Tab B, No. 11)

Council staff presented on Reef Fish Amendment 59A, which addresses permit requirements in the red snapper and grouper/tilefish IFQ programs. The presentation centered on management actions to exempt non-profit organizations from permit requirements. Action 5.1 lists the requisite documentation to be provided with an exemption form and determines cut-off dates for the establishment of non-profit organizations that would be eligible to apply for exemptions.

Action 5.2 establishes requirements to renew exemptions, including minimum amounts of allocation owned and distributed, and a minimum number of participants to whom allocation was distributed in the previous calendar year. This action also requires organizations to submit an annual activity report. Committee members discussed the minimum requirements and suggested that Action 5.2 might not be necessary because the August 26, 2026, control date would limit exemptions to non-profit organizations already established. NOAA General Counsel discussed the language of the control date and stated that it is to be determined whether any non-profit organization operating within the IFQ program would qualify for an exemption based on the control date. NOAA General Counsel emphasized that exemption criteria are not meant to be tailored to specific organizations but must be consistent with the purpose of the amendment.

A Committee member thought addressing non-profit exemptions should be part of a different document, as this issue will have to be revisited when activity requirements are discussed in Reef Fish Amendment 59B. Another Committee member contended that Amendment 59A was the appropriate document for non-profit exemptions from permit requirements. SERO stated non-profit exemptions are expected to result in more administrative and rule-making complexity, which could prolong the rule-making process. Committee members expressed concern that exemptions could slow Amendment 59A down and stated that the Council must give explicit directions for the continued development of exemptions. Committee members stated they would like to hear from members of the public before further discussing exemptions.

Other Business

No other business came before the Committee.

Madam Chair, this concludes my report.