

## **Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council Spring 2025 Liaison Report**



The Gulf Council (Council) met in Gulf Shores, Alabama, from April 7-10, 2025. During the meeting, the Council announced that it will be doing business as the 'Gulf Council' in response to the President's Executive Order to rename the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America. The new logo above was unveiled, and the Council previewed its newly designed website which is scheduled to launch soon. The Council also named Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission Trident Team as the 2024 Law Enforcement Team of the Year and plans to honor the Team during a future Council meeting. The following is a summary of the other issues addressed during the meeting:

### **Reef Fish**

#### **Mutton Snapper**

The Council was presented with the results of the most recent mutton snapper stock assessment which indicated mutton snapper is neither overfished nor experiencing overfishing. The mutton snapper stock is co-managed by the Gulf and South Atlantic Council's so, a joint document will be developed to implement the new catch recommendations.

#### **Yellowtail Snapper**

The Council was presented with the results of the most recent yellowtail snapper stock assessment which indicated the stock is not overfished nor experiencing overfishing. The yellowtail snapper stock is co-managed by the Gulf and South Atlantic Council's so, a joint document will be developed to implement the new catch recommendations.

### **Recreational Initiative Final Report**

The Council received a summary of public comments and a final report on the Council's Recreational Initiative, which is an effort to evaluate past and current recreational reef fish management strategies and explore potential innovative management approaches that could be applied in the future. The effort focused on five species: red snapper, red grouper, gag grouper, greater amberjack, and gray triggerfish. The primary work of the Recreational Initiative was performed by a Working Group comprised of individuals representing key Gulf recreational fishing interests, including private anglers, for-hire operators, associated marine industries, and advocates. The Working Group developed a suite of recommendations to improve recreational fisheries management and angler satisfaction. The Council directed its staff to perform and analysis of the working group recommendations so it can strategically prioritize an action plan.

### **Lane Snapper**

After hearing public comment and recommendations from its Reef Fish Advisory Panel, the Council took final action on a Framework Action to increase the lane snapper minimum size limit to 10 inches total length for both the commercial and recreational sectors. In recent years, lane snapper landings have regularly exceeded annual catch limits and commercial and recreational lane snapper fishing seasons have closed early. This has occurred despite two recent increases to allowable harvest. The Council decided to increase the lane snapper minimum size limit to constrain landings to the annual catch limit and reduce the likelihood of in-season closures. This Framework Action will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for consideration and implementation as soon as practicable.

### **Deep Water Grouper**

The deep-water grouper complex is comprised of warsaw grouper, snowy grouper, yellowedge grouper, and speckled hind, and is currently managed with a single annual catch limit for the complex. The most recent stock assessment on yellowedge grouper (SEDAR 85) determined that while yellowedge grouper is not overfished, it is experiencing overfishing. Based on the stock assessment results, which indicated low recent recruitment and increased recreational harvest, the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) recommended an overall decrease in the allowable harvest to end overfishing. While yellowedge grouper is the most commonly landed species in the deep-water grouper complex, it is frequently caught with the other deep-water grouper species. Thus, the SSC also recommended updated catch limits based on average historical landings for the other three deep-grouper species in the complex, and that the catch limits for those species and yellowedge grouper be combined.

The Council reviewed options for Reef Fish Amendment 58B, which considers modifying deep-water grouper management measures and selected a preferred alternative that would establish catch limits for the complex based on the SSC's recommendations. This would result in an annual catch limit of 555,026 pounds gutted weight, which represents approximately a 50% reduction in allowable harvest. The Council waited to select a preferred alternative for sector allocations. The Council also narrowed the options for modifying accountability measures and selected preferred alternative that will trigger a recreational season reduction if average recreational landings exceed the recreational and total complex annual catch limit over a 3-year period. The Council plans to review a public hearing draft of this document during its June 2025 meeting and will gather public input before taking final action as soon as August 2025.

### **Shallow-Water Grouper**

The shallow-water grouper complex is comprised of scamp, yellowmouth grouper, black grouper, and yellowfin grouper, and is currently managed with a single annual catch limit for the complex. The Council worked on a draft framework action to modify the catch limit and recreational season for the Shallow-Water Grouper complex while Reef Fish Amendment 58A is developed. The Council previously chose a preferred alternative that would reduce the shallow-water grouper complex by 54.7%, resulting in an annual catch limit equal to 322,000 pounds gutted weight. During this meeting, the Council chose a preferred alternative that would open the recreational season on July 1 and close when the recreational portion of the annual catch limit is projected to be met. Under current projections, the season is expected to remain open through December 31.

## **Red Grouper**

The Council was presented with the results of the most recent red grouper stock assessment which indicated that red grouper is not overfished or experiencing overfishing. Catch advice resulting from this assessment is more than double the current catch limits. The Council initiated work on a document to increase red grouper catch limits. However, implementation of that amendment isn't possible before next year so, the Council also requested that National Marine Fisheries Service initiate an Emergency Rule to increase catch limits for both the recreational and commercial sectors in 2025 based on social and economic needs of communities relying on the red grouper fishery.

## **20-Fathom Recreational Seasonal Closure**

Currently, the recreational harvest of shallow-water grouper species (scamp, yellowmouth grouper, black grouper, and yellowfin grouper) and red grouper is closed for the recreational sector seaward of 20-fathoms in February and March, each year. Gag grouper is also closed to recreational harvest during that time each year. The red grouper assessment results indicated that they were healthy; thus, the Council decided to continue discussing the removal of the seasonal 20-fathom shallow-water grouper closure for the recreational sector.

## **DESCEND Act**

The Descending Device and Venting Tool for the Direct Enhancement of Snapper Conservation and the Economy through Novel Devices Act (DESCEND Act), which requires reef fish anglers to have descending devices or venting tools rigged and ready when fishing for reef fish in federal waters, is scheduled to expire in January 2026. The Council initiated work on a document to consider replacing provisions in the DESCEND Act upon its expiration.

## **Gag**

The National Marine Fishery Service estimates that the 2024 recreational annual catch limit was exceeded by more than 100,000 pounds. Gag is currently considered to be overfished; therefore by law, the recreational sector is subject to payback provisions. When the annual catch limit is exceeded, the following year's catch limit is reduced by the amount of the previous year's overage. The gag stock condition appears to be improving and catch limits are scheduled to increase each year as the stock rebuilds. However, overages triggering paybacks result in shorter recreational seasons. The Council requested that the National Marine Fisheries Service reduce the recreational bag limit to 1-fish per person for the 2025 season only. This measure is expected to reduce the likelihood that an overage will occur, and another payback will be triggered.

## **Greater Amberjack**

The Council received a presentation on decision points to consider when evaluating options for regional and state management of greater amberjack for the recreational sector. Decision points include whether to include the federal for-hire component; the number of states or regions to consider; the method used to determine how to divide allowable harvest amongst states or regions; and which management measures to delegate under a state management scenario. The Council plans to move forward with development of a document to continue to evaluate these decision points on greater amberjack for discussion at a future meeting.

## **Data Collection**

### **Federal For-Hire Data Collection**

The Council continued work on a draft amendment that considers developing a new for-hire data collection program. After hearing recommendations from its Ad Hoc Charter For-Hire Advisory Panel, the Council chose preferred alternatives that would require owner/operators of federal for-hire vessels to submit a trip declaration for for-hire fishing trips, and complete electronic reports for each trip before offloading. Additionally, a portion of vessel owner/operators will be selected each year to submit economic data on charter fishing activity. A ‘did not fish’ report will have to be submitted weekly when fishing does not occur. The Council plans to continue work on this amendment and gather public feedback on the proposed changes before taking final action during its November 2025 meeting.

### **Southeast Regional Headboat Survey**

The Southeast Region Headboat Survey is a long-term data collection program that informs a substantial number of stock assessments. Funding is no longer available for port agents who collect dockside validation data from headboats in Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The Council requested that NOAA’s Southeast Fisheries Science Center analyze and summarize the impacts of losing the Southeast Regional Headboat Survey to the fisheries management process, including stock assessments.

## **Advisory Panel Appointments**

### **Spiny Lobster Advisory Panel**

Advisory Panels are comprised of people who are knowledgeable about a particular fishery and advise the Council on issues related to their expertise. The Council populated its Spiny Lobster Advisory Panel, with appointed members serving a three-year term. The list of people who have been selected to serve can be found [here](#).

### **Shrimp**

#### **Texas Closure**

The Council approved the annual Texas federal closure for shrimp in 2025. The closure is part of a cooperative seasonal closure with the State of Texas that aims to allow shrimp to reach a larger and more valuable size prior to harvest, and to prevent waste of brown shrimp that might otherwise be discarded due to their small size. The closure will go into effect in May and is expected to last from 45-90 days.

#### **Shrimp Vessel Position Data Collection Program**

After hearing public comment and recommendations from its Shrimp Advisory Panel, the Council took final action on a Framework Action to modify the vessel position data collection program for the federal shrimp fishery in the Gulf of America. The Council selected a program that uses cellular electronic logbooks (cELBs) for the Gulf shrimp fishery that archives position data and automatically transmits it to National Marine Fisheries Service via cellular service to a non-law enforcement database. The Council also specified that the cELB units should be type-approved in a process external from the existing Vessel Monitoring System type-approval process. This Framework Action will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation as soon as practicable.