

Gulf Fishery Management Council

August 2025 Liaison Report



The Gulf Council met in San Antonio, Texas, from August 25-28, 2025. Three new Council members, Brenda Ballard, John ‘Johnny’ Marquez, and Dr. Micheal ‘Mike’ Allen were inducted for a 3-year term. The Council elected J.D. Dugas as Chair and Dr. Kesley Banks as Vice Chair, each for a one-year term. The following is a summary of the Council’s actions:

Executive Orders

After hearing recommendations provided during a series of Advisory Panel meetings and a public engagement session, the Council developed a list of management recommendations it plans to pursue in response to Executive Order 14276, “Restoring American Seafood Competitiveness.” The Council decided to explore requirements for active participation and permits for commercial individual fishing quota (IFQ) holders; consider extending descending and venting tool requirements from the Direct Enhancement of Snapper Conservation and the Economy through Novel Devices Act (DESCEND Act); and considering removing low priority species from federal fishery management plans. The Council also developed a relevant list of items that are outside the Council’s purview that could be shared with other federal agencies. The Council will develop a work plan and submit a letter to the Secretary of Commerce detailing its approach to this Executive Order.

The Council also developed a list of regulations that could be considered for removal under Executive Order 14192, “Unleashing Prosperity through Deregulation.” The Council plans to submit a letter to NOAA Fisheries detailing its suggestions.

Yellowtail and Mutton Snapper

Recent stock assessments for yellowtail snapper and mutton snapper showed that neither stock is overfished or experiencing overfishing and resulted in new catch advice for both species. Both stocks are co-managed by the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils, so the Gulf Council began work on Gulf Reef Fish Amendment 55 / South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Amendment 44, which considers modifying the catch limits and the allowable harvest apportioned to each Council. The Gulf Council narrowed the range of alternatives being considered to split allowable harvest between the two jurisdictions. The South Atlantic Council is expected to work on this document before it comes back to the Gulf Council for further consideration.

For-Hire Red Snapper Season

After hearing a summary of public comments received, the Council took final action on a Framework Action that considers opening the federal for-hire red snapper season earlier in the year. The Council selected to open the federal for-hire red snapper season on the Friday before Memorial Day each year. The duration of the for-hire season has doubled since the implementation of the June 1 season opener in 2015. Fishermen have indicated that opening the season earlier is preferred over extending the season further into the fall, which is typically a lower demand time of year for for-hire fishing. 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 managed with a single annual catch limit for the complex. After hearing a summary of public comments received, the Council took final action on Reef Fish Amendment 58B which considers deep-water grouper status determination criteria, catch limits, sector allocations, and recreational accountability measures. The Council chose to modify the criteria used to define the stock status for the complex. The Council also established catch limits for the complex that represent approximately a 50% reduction in allowable harvest to end overfishing of yellowedge grouper and chose to establish sector allocations and sector-specific annual catch limits. This allocates 10.21% to the recreational sector and 89.79% to the commercial sector and recognizes increasing recreational landings in recent years. The Council created a recreational accountability measure that triggers a reduction in the recreational season duration if average recreational landings exceed the average recreational annual catch limit, and the average total complex landings exceed the average total complex annual catch limit, over a 3-year period. This new recreational accountability measure is expected to correct for consistent overages of the recreational annual catch limit without being overly sensitive to most single-year overages. Newly recommended deep-water grouper catch limits expressed in pounds gutted weight and in MRIP-FES units are:

Overfishing Limit	Acceptable Biological Catch/ Stock Annual Catch Limit	Recreational Annual Catch Limit	Commercial Annual Catch Limit	Commercial Quota
731,035	555,026	56,668	498,358	478,424

These changes are being made in response to the results of a yellowedge grouper stock assessment and recommendations to decrease allowable harvest and end overfishing from the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). Establishing sector allocations and modifying the recreational accountability measure are expected to prevent overfishing in the

future. This Amendment will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for consideration and implementation as soon as practicable.

The Council also asked that a presentation exploring the use of a mandatory reporting system for recreational deep-water grouper be given to the Council during a future meeting. Recreational deep-water grouper landings estimates are very uncertain, and a mandatory reporting system is being considered as a mechanism for improving estimates that inform management decisions.

Shallow-Water Grouper

The Other Shallow-Water Grouper complex is comprised of scamp, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, and black grouper. The Council reviewed Amendment 58A which considers splitting the Other Shallow-Water Grouper complex in two, establishing biological criteria and management benchmarks, catch limits, and accountability measures for each new sub-complex.

The Council selected preferred alternatives to set biological references points and status determination criteria, catch limits, and sector allocations for both complexes. The Council also chose a preferred alternative that would establish a recreational annual catch target 14% below the annual catch limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper. The Council decided not to consider allowing flexibility measures among the deep and shallow-water complexes. The Council also modified alternatives related to recreational accountability measures and decided to reconsider alternatives for distributing IFQ shares for the new catch share categories. The Council will continue work on this document during a future meeting.

Red Grouper

The most recent red grouper stock assessment indicated that red grouper is not overfished or experiencing overfishing, and the resulting catch advice is a significant increase from the current catch limits. The Council worked on draft Reef Fish Amendment 62, which addresses catch limits and allocations based on historical landings in State Reef Fish Survey units and results in new catch limit recommendations. The amendment also considers eliminating the recreational 20-fathom shallow-water grouper closure. The Council selected preferred alternatives that would phase in total annual catch limit increases over a three-year period and would establish 68.2% commercial and 31.8% recreational sector allocations. The revised sector allocations account for a change in the recreational data unit from the federal Marine Recreational Information Program to the State of Florida's State Reef Fish Survey. These catch limits would maintain the current buffers between the annual catch limits and annual catch targets of 5% for the commercial sector and 9% for the recreational sector. The Council also selected a preferred alternative that would eliminate the recreational shallow-water grouper closure beyond the 20-fathom boundary from February 1 – March 31. The Council plans to continue work on this document and expects to take final action in January 2026 after it gathers public comment.

The Council also initiated work on a new document that considers establishing a pilot program that would set aside a portion of the commercial red grouper quota in the future and distribute it in a manner that aids new entrants in the IFQ fishery.

Recreational Reef Fish Management

The Council reviewed a suite of recommendations made by the Recreational Initiative Working Group. The Recreational Initiative 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 Council selected a number of educational and management recommendations that it plans to move forward with. The Council plans to develop a work plan for accomplishing the recommendations during its November 2025 meeting.

Venting and Descending Requirements

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 directed staff to expedite work on an abbreviated framework document to replace provisions in the DESCEND Act to consider during its November 2025 meeting.

Greater Amberjack

The Council discussed the planned start date for the recreational fishing season for greater amberjack (September 1); however, 2024 landings data indicated that the recreational annual catch limit was exceeded. This overage was expected to trigger a reduction in the 2025 annual catch limit and annual catch target, resulting in the season being closed. To date, no clarity has been provided to the public regarding the overage and its effect on the 2025 recreational season which, in the absence of agency action, opened on September 1. NOAA indicated that a closure notice was prepared and sent to NOAA headquarters some time ago, and that closure notice remains under review.

The Council will write a letter to NOAA Fisheries requesting feedback about its concern regarding the lack of compliance with the recreational greater amberjack accountability measures, and request an explanation for the delayed rulemaking, a timeline for implementation, and a plan for ensuring compliance in the future.

Shrimp

The Council worked on draft Shrimp Amendment 19 which considers the upcoming expiration of the shrimp permit moratorium in October 2026. The Council selected a preferred option that will continue the moratorium and require a review of the program in 10 years, or as otherwise deemed necessary by the Council. The Council plans to solicit public comment on this amendment before taking final action during its November 2025 meeting.

The Council also decided to create a Working Group comprised of shrimp harvesting sector representatives, NMFS staff, Council staff, a Scientific and Statical Committee member, researchers, and others to identify workable solutions that aim to reduce interactions with smalltooth sawfish and giant manta ray in the Gulf federal shrimp fishery.

Wahoo

Wahoo is currently unregulated in the federal waters of the Gulf of America. The states of Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi do not regulate wahoo. Florida manages recreational harvest of wahoo in state waters. Louisiana currently regulates wahoo in state waters and notified NOAA of its intention to extend its regulations into federal waters. States may extend their regulations into federal waters adjacent to their state for species not under federal management. NOAA Fisheries acknowledged this notice, and Louisiana will regulate those vessels that are registered with Louisiana and are fishing for wahoo in federal waters.

Commercial Vessel Telecommunication Requirements

The U.S. Coast Guard gave a presentation on the telecommunication safety requirements for commercial fishing vessels that carry observers. Based on current regulations, Starlink is not an approved emergency radio telecommunication method. In recognition of the fleet's growing use and positive experiences with Starlink, the Council decided to write a letter the U.S. Coast Guard requesting that Starlink be certified as an acceptable satellite communication device.

Scientific and Statistical Committee Membership

A seat on the SSC was recently vacated when Dr. Mike Allen was appointed to the Council. The Council appointed Dr. Tom Frazer, to fill that vacancy until all SSC members are reappointed in 2027.