

Gulf Fishery Management Council

January 2026 Liaison Report



The Gulf Council met in New Orleans, Louisiana, from January 26-28, 2026. The Council began the meeting by deciding to readvertise for membership on its Red Drum and Coastal Migratory Pelagic Advisory Panels. A solicitation for applicants will be sent out in the next few weeks. The following is a summary of the Council's other actions:

Red Grouper

The Gulf Council took final action on Reef Fish Amendment 62 which considers increasing red grouper catch limits and eliminating the recreational shallow-water grouper closed season. For red grouper, the Council decided to phase in total annual catch limit increases over a three-year period, establish 68.2% commercial and 31.8% recreational sector allocations, and maintain the current 5% commercial and 9% recreational buffers between their respective annual catch limits and annual catch targets. The Council also decided to eliminate the February 1 – March 31 recreational shallow-water grouper closure beyond 20-fathoms. This amendment will be transmitted to the Secretary of Commerce for consideration and implementation as soon as practicable.

Shallow-Water Grouper

The Other Shallow-Water Grouper complex includes scamp, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, and black grouper. The Council developed Reef Fish Amendment 58A to split the shallow-water grouper complex into two separate complexes because a stock assessment was conducted on scamp and yellowmouth grouper separate from the other species. After hearing public comment, the Council decided to delay final action on the amendment based on uncertainty associated with private recreational landings estimates generated by the federal recreational data collection program, the Marine Resource Information Program's Fishing Effort Survey (MRIP-FES). The Council is hesitant to base sector allocations for the Scamp Complex (scamp and yellowmouth grouper) on MRIP-FES estimates before its Scientific and Statistical Committee can review the results of a pilot study being conducted to address MRIP-FES overestimation issues. In the meantime, the Council expects that the framework action finalized by the Council in June 2025 will be implemented this year. That framework will set the annual catch limit for the other-shallow water grouper complex at 322,000 pounds gutted weight and the recreational season will be open from July 1 through December 31.

For-Hire Electronic Reporting

The Council resumed work on a draft amendment that considers developing a new federal for-hire data collection program. The Council's current preferred alternatives would require

owner/operators of federal for-hire vessels to submit a trip declaration for each for-hire fishing trip, and complete electronic reports for each trip before offloading. Additionally, a portion of vessel owner/operators would 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. During this meeting, the Council primarily focused its discussions on economic data reporting requirements and the availability of funding to implement the program. The Council plans to review a public hearing draft of this document during its June 2026 meeting and expects to gather public comment through virtual public meetings and written comments over the summer before taking final action.

Recreational Reporting of Deep-Water Grouper

The Council began discussing the potential use of a mandatory reporting system for the recreational deep-water grouper fishery to reduce uncertainty in estimates used to make management decisions. The Council anticipates that collecting and validating recreational deep-water grouper data will be difficult because of varying compliance with other recreational reporting programs and because recreational deep-drop fishermen are difficult to intercept for validation by dockside samplers. The Council will continue discussion on this at a future meeting.

Commercial Individual Fishing Quota Program

Red Grouper

The Council heard a presentation on consideration of establishing a pilot program that would establish an IFQ quota pool for red grouper and distribute the annual allocation to participants of the Grouper/Tilefish IFQ program. The quota pool would be established using a percentage of the quota increase that is expected to be distributed from Reef Fish Amendment 62. The Council expects to review a draft of this amendment during its April 2026 meeting. The Ad Hoc Red Snapper / Grouper Tilefish IFQ Advisory Panel will also have an opportunity to review the document and provide feedback to the Council.

Permit Requirements

The Council resumed work on Reef Fish Amendment 59A, which addresses participation requirements in the IFQ programs. Participation requirements being considered include requiring ownership of a valid or renewable commercial reef fish permit or dealer permit to obtain and maintain an IFQ shareholder account, obtain IFQ shares, or obtain annual allocation. The amendment also considers allowing shareholders time to divest before shares are reclaimed if they do not meet requirements for participation. The Council expects to review a public hearing draft of this amendment during its June 2026 meeting.

Greater Amberjack Regional Management

The Council heard a presentation on key decision points on recreational regional management of greater amberjack. The Council decided to develop a draft document with the intent to incorporate new information from the anticipated interim analysis for greater amberjack and results of the Greater Amberjack Count as it becomes available. The Council expects to continue work on this during its June 2026 meeting.

Recreational Working Group Reef Fish Management Priorities

The Council reviewed the background and workplan for achieving the six prioritized recommendations resulting from the Recreational Initiative, an effort to evaluate past and current recreational reef fish management and explore innovative management approaches for the future. The Council identified that of the six goals, two of them are already incorporated into the Council process and the remaining four are on the Council's priority list for future work. The Council will continue work on state or regional management for greater amberjack, aligning with working group recommendation 4.3 and initiated work to modify recreational accountability measures, aligning with working group recommendation 3.2.

Proposed NOAA Shark Regulation Changes

The Council decided to request an extension of NOAA's Atlantic Highly Migratory Species comment period on a [proposed rule](#) that would reduce the recreational bag limit for Atlantic sharpnose shark and bonnethead sharks from one per person per trip to one per vessel per trip. The Council would like an opportunity to provide input given the abundance of those species and since the reduction does not appear to be related to any recent stock assessment. The Council will also request a presentation from Atlantic HMS during its April 2026 Council meeting.

Regulatory Streamlining

The Council reviewed a draft work plan to streamline regulatory processes and improve climate readiness. The Council discussed the use of Exempted Fishing Permits to test novel management changes and using Categorical Exclusions to quickly develop minor management changes. The Council also considered designating low priority species as ecosystem component species, so they no longer require annual catch limits or annual quota monitoring. The Council plans to continue work on this effort during a future meeting.

Red Snapper

For-Hire Red Snapper Management

The Council initiated a document that would consider allowing NOAA Fisheries to modify federal for-hire fishing regulations for red snapper, such as the bag limit, size limit, and season dates, on an annual basis. This could allow for greater flexibility in federal for-hire management.

Private Recreational Red Snapper

The Council initiated work on a document that explores options to enhance flexibility for private recreational red snapper management by allowing uncaught quota to be carried over to the following year within a state and to allow transfer of uncaught quota between states within a fishing year. This action was inspired by Recreational Initiative recommendation 3.2.

Lane Snapper

The Council initiated work on a document to increase lane snapper catch limits based on an interim analysis and resulting advice from its Scientific and Statistical Committee. Interim analyses are health checks performed in between full stock assessments help the Council stay informed and respond more quickly if conditions change. The lane snapper analysis was optimistic and resulted in new catch advice that will allow harvest to increase by about 200,000 pounds.