

From: [SAFMC Administrator](#)
To: [Myra Brouwer](#)
Subject: FW: Reef Fish Amendment 61
Date: Thursday, February 19, 2026 8:16:59 AM

From: Ben Hartig <mackattackben@att.net>
Sent: Wednesday, February 18, 2026 4:49 PM
To: SAFMC Administrator <administrator@safmc.net>; McCawley, Jessica <jessica.mccawley@myfwc.com>; James Hull Jr <hullsseafood@aol.com>
Subject: Reef Fish Amendment 61

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on Amendment 61 to the Reef Fish Plan. My name is Ben Hartig I have spent my life in, under and around the waters off SE FI for over 60 years and have been a commercial fisherman in the same region for over 50. I also have a background in marine science with a BS in Zoology and almost finished a Masters Degree from FAU. I had completed collecting data for my thesis; Age, Growth, and Reproduction in Mutton Snappers when I switched gears and started commercial fishing and never looked back. The data I collected has been used in stock assessments completed by both the Beaufort Lab and FMRI. I also spent 15 years on the SA Council and have spent much of my life involved in fisheries management at many levels.

I support the council's effort to remove a number of species from the Reef Fish Plan. Spadefish; The only fishery I am aware of occurs off North or South Carolina which is a very specialized fishery targeting them with pieces of jellyfish. They are abundant where I fish although I have never heard of anyone targeting them. Either remove from federal management or define as an ecosystem component species (ecs). Bar Jack; This species does not occur much farther north than Jupiter, FL. The center of abundance is in the Florida Keys and I have not heard of anyone targeting them. Juvenile almaco jacks are also incorrectly identified as bar jacks as you move north through the SA region and is most likely where the landings numbers are derived.

Misty Grouper; I have only caught 2 mistys in my career and they are exceedingly rare in the SA. I believe that they occur here as "larval wafts" that come from sources in the Caribbean or Bahamas and there is no self supporting population in the SA. I also believe this to be the case for Nassau grouper as well, as the prohibition on harvest has yielded little result in trying to increase a population that has never been self sustaining in the SA and that depends on recruitment from outside federal jurisdiction. From that perspective both could be removed from federal management.

Queen Snapper and Blackfin snapper; I catch blackfin snapper incidentally while targeting vermilion in 300-500 feet of water. And I know fishermen who target them off FT Lauderdale. Queen snappers are primarily in the Keys and they are targeted there. There is a notable population of queens on Pulley Ridge in the Gulf that may support the fish in the Keys. I support maintaining these two species under the s/g plan under the reef fish permit.

Banded rudderfish; This species is critically important to the reef fish permit holders off SE FI. The fishery begins in mid-March and lasts until the end of May. It occurs at a time when Spanish mackerel and winter king mackerel have left our area, and when amberjacks, gag, grouper, and mutton snapper are closed or severely limited which are the 3 main species that support the S/G fishery in our area off SE FI. It also has added management regulations(?) a 500 pound trip limit which was implemented when the fishery was showing a decrease in abundance. I would urge you to keep this important fishery under federal management under the permit requirement.

Cubera Snapper; This is our apex predator of the reef fish fishery. As such, the stock does not support a high level of abundance. I catch a couple most years and they are also caught by other fishermen both recreational and commercial. We used to be able to target them on some higher relief areas but the substantial recovery of goliath grouper no longer allows that to happen as they now eat the bait before a cubera has a chance. The recreational fishery does target them in a specialized fishery using live lobsters for bait on wrecks. While the commercial and recreational regulations are the same with a 2 fish bag limit removing this fish from the plan or designating it as an ECS would allow more effort on a species that is

designed as a limited effort species. Please maintain current management for this iconic species. The porgies should either all be managed or none in the plan. We have a little head porgy that is almost identical to the knobbed porgy very hard to tell apart and we also have the grass porgy that is common here. They could be ECS or removed from the plan.

Grunts: I would suggest removing all except white grunt as it has 3/4 million pounds of landings which is substantial enough to continue under current regulations.

I am curious as to why lesser amberjack is not on your list? It has by far the lowest ACL in the Jacks Complex. I catch a few every year incidental to vermilion fishing and I see no reason to keep it in the S/G plan.

You might also consider removing yellow fin grouper (if you haven't already) as I believe similar to misty and Nassau that recruitment comes from outside the EEZ and does not support a self sustaining population.

Thank you, that's my 2 cents for now.