



NMFS Raises Gulf Red Grouper Catch Limits Under Amendment 62 and Ends the February–March Deep-Water Grouper Closure

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NOAA Fisheries (NMFS) published a final rule for Amendment 62 to the Gulf Reef Fish plan. It raises red grouper catch limits for 2026 through 2028 and removes the February 1–March 31 recreational shallow-water grouper closure seaward of 20 fathoms. The rule took effect October 2, 2026.

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), part of NOAA, published a final rule in the Federal Register on October 6, 2026 carrying out Amendment 62 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources of the Gulf. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council prepared and submitted the amendment. The rule is effective October 2, 2026.

The rule does two things. It revises red grouper catch limits and sector allocations, and it removes the shallow-water grouper recreational seasonal closure from February 1 through March 31 in Gulf federal waters seaward of the 20-fathom boundary.

New red grouper catch limits (gutted weight)

- Total annual catch limit: 6.62 million lb in 2026 (80% of the acceptable biological catch), 7.45 million lb in 2027 (90%), and 8.28 million lb in 2028 and after. The overfishing limit is 10.64 million lb.
- Commercial ACL: up from 2.94 million lb to 4.51 million lb (2026), 5.08 million lb (2027) and 5.65 million lb (2028+). The commercial quota rises from 2.79 million lb to 4.28, 4.83 and 5.37 million lb.

- Recreational ACL: up from 2.02 million lb to 2.11 million lb (2026), 2.37 million lb (2027) and 2.63 million lb (2028+). The recreational annual catch target rises from 1.84 million lb to 1.92, 2.16 and 2.39 million lb.
- The rule keeps the 5% commercial buffer, tied to the gag multi-use allocation in the IFQ program, and the 9% recreational buffer set in Amendment 53.

Why the limits went up

NMFS says the changes are based on the SEDAR 88 stock assessment and on the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee advice to manage at a more conservative 40% spawning potential ratio. Recreational landings triggered in-season closures every year from 2021 through 2024. NMFS says the bigger recreational limit, plus more precise State Reef Fish Survey data, is expected to prevent future overages.

The closure change

The February–March closure dates to 2013 and protected spawning shallow-water groupers in deeper water. NMFS notes that gag already has a January–August recreational closure. A separate June 2026 rule closes black grouper, yellowfin grouper, scamp and yellowmouth grouper from January through June, starting January 1, 2027. After that, red grouper is the only species affected by removing the old closure. NMFS and the Council say the closure may have pushed effort inshore, toward smaller fish and more discards.

Sources

1. Federal Register, Oct. 6, 2026, Doc. 2026-20435, Reef Fish Fishery of the Gulf of America; Amendment 62 (final rule). <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2026-20435>

2. NOAA Fisheries, Amendment 62 action page:
<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/action/amendment-62-gulf-red-grouper-management-measures>

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