



**NOAA
FISHERIES**



St. Thomas/St. John Grouper Seasonal Closure Reviewing Management Effectiveness

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Reviewing Management Objectives Grouper-related Closures in St. Thomas/St. John

ACTION OBJECTIVE & REGULATORY EVALUATION

- Review the effectiveness and necessity of the seasonal closure for black, red, tiger, yellowfin (Grouper Unit 4 [GU4]) and yellowedge groupers (GU5) in federal waters around St. Thomas/St. John, considering other management measures in place that restrict harvest of the stocks and protect the habitat supporting their spawning aggregations such as the Hind Bank MCD and Grammanik Bank.
 - Determine if the closure could be eliminated or adjusted to reduce administrative and economic burdens on domestic fishing while boosting industry productivity.

APPROACH TO GUIDE THE MANAGEMENT REVIEW PROCESS:

Strategic Conservation Framework

- Review and incorporate new scientific data
- Adapt and adjust regulations, as needed
- Fully safeguard essential spawning aggregations and marine habitats

E.O. 14276 DIRECTIVES

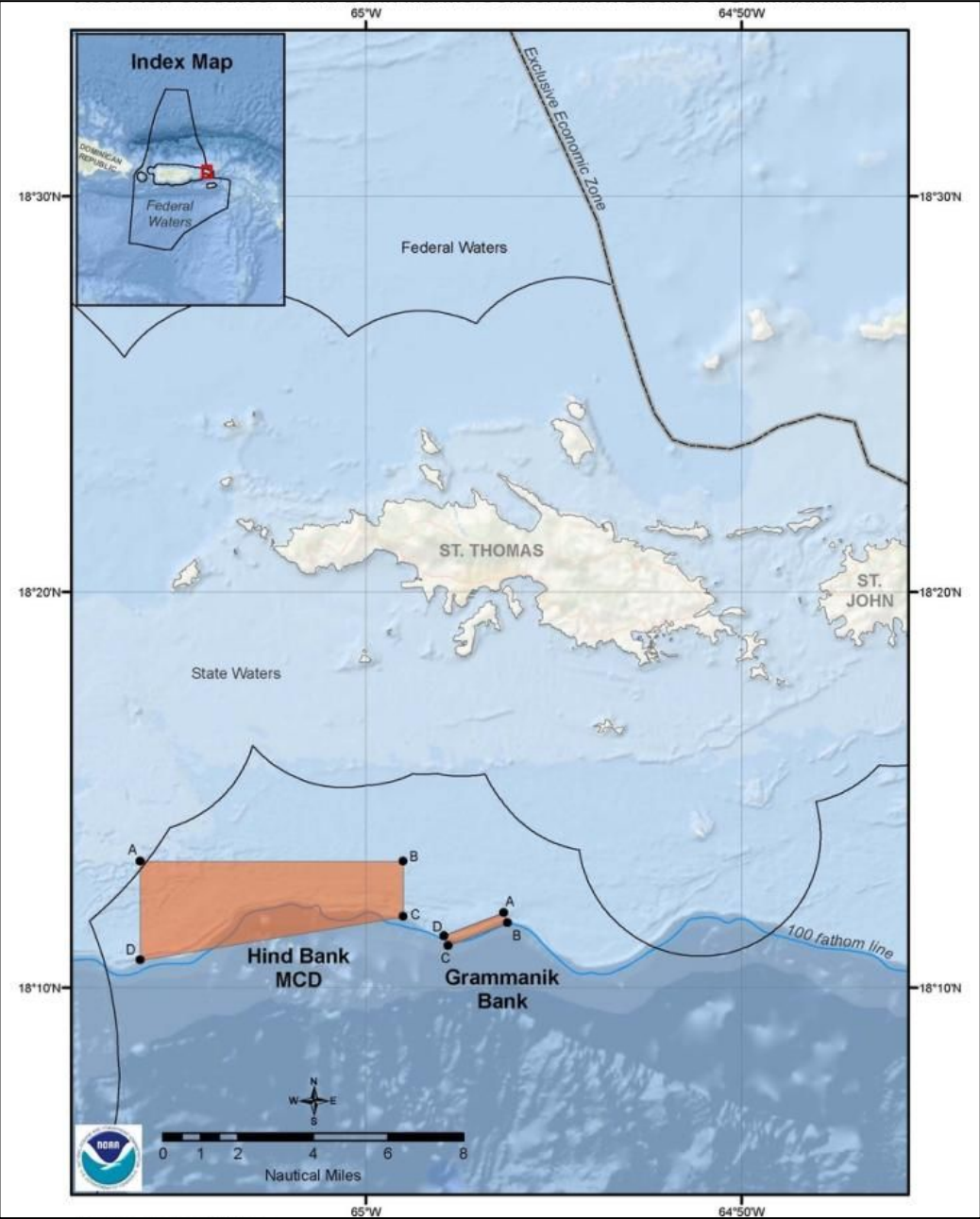
Restoring Seafood Competitiveness

- Stabilize regional seafood markets.
- Improve sustainable access for domestic fisheries.
- Enhance overall economic profitability for local fishers.
- Prevent unnecessary or prolonged regulatory closures.

St. Thomas Marine Protected Areas & Closures Comparison

Area / Closure	Establishment & Scope	Regulations & Gear	Objectives / Purpose
Hind Bank Marine Conservation District	Established: 1990 (originally a Dec 1- Feb 28 seasonal closure) to protect red hind grouper (Amendment 1 Reef Fish FMP) Area: ~ 45 km² (38 km² EEZ fishable habitat) Year-Round: Since 1999 (Amendment 1 Coral FMP)	Full Closure: Year-round fishing closure and anchoring prohibition to protect critical habitats.	• Conserve marine habitats & biodiversity. • Protect spawning aggregations (e.g., red hind, yellowfin grouper). • Restore extinct spawning aggregations (e.g., Nassau grouper). • Protect unique coral habitat/species <i>Orbicella annularis</i> coral. • Area is designated Essential Fish Habitat for both reef fish and corals.
Grammanik Bank Closure	Established: 2005 (Amendment 3, Reef Fish FMP) to protect yellowfin grouper Area: 1.5 km² Seasonal: Feb 1 – Apr 30	Seasonal Closure: No fishing for or possession of any species of fish, except HMS, within the area. Gear Restrictions: No pots, traps, gillnets, trammel nets, or bottom longlines year-round.	• Protect documented yellowfin grouper and Nassau grouper spawning aggregations. • Area is designated Essential Fish Habitat for reef fish.
Grouper Unit 4 Seasonal Closure	Established: 2005 (Amendment 3, Reef Fish FMP) as part of rebuilding plan Area: Regional (STT/STJ EEZ) of which 567 km² is fishable habitat. Seasonal: Feb 1 – Apr 30	Target Species: Closure covers black, red, tiger, yellowfin, and yellowedge groupers.	• Eliminate directed fishing mortality during peak spawning periods. • Rebuild overfished stocks, targeting a ~24% catch reduction annually.

St. Thomas Marine Protected Areas & Closures



Estimates of fishable habitat areas (less or equal 100 ftms) in the U.S. Caribbean

Region	Total Fishable Habitat Area	Fishable Habitat in EEZ Waters	Fishable Habitat in Territorial Waters
U.S. Caribbean (EEZ and Territorial Waters combined)	7594 Km ² (2214.1 Nm ²)	1045 Km ² (304.7 Nm ²)	6549 Km ² (1909.4 Nm ²)
USVI (total)	1771 Km ² (516 Nm ²)	635 Km ² (185 Nm ²)	1136 Km ² (331 Nm ²)
St. Thomas/St. John	1396 Km ² (407 Nm ²)	567 Km ² (165 Nm ²)	829 Km ² (241.7 Nm ²)

(Source: NMFS-SERO 2015)

In STT/STJ, 40.6% of fishable habitat occurs in the EEZ

Refining GU4 Management Strategy: Overview and Rationale

Purpose: Shift from regional prohibition to a targeted spatial management approach focusing on protected banks.

Need: Evaluate whether the localized benefits of the protected Hind Bank MCD and Grammanik Bank effectively protect the grouper stocks (including the ESA-listed Nassau) or if the broader EEZ closure provides protection that the localized areas cannot.

01

Reduced Regulatory Burden

Aligns with E.O. 14276 to reduce domestic fishing burdens while maintaining sustainability.

Removing the EEZ-wide closure grants fishers access outside protected banks, potentially increasing production and stabilizing markets without sacrificing critical spawning protections.

*MSA requires ACLs to prevent overfishing. Action must ensure catches are constrained to the ACL and ensure accountability.

02

Targeting *de minimis* Impacts

Landings data (2012–2024) show black, tiger, and yellowedge grouper landings in St. Thomas/St. John are extremely low.

- Averages run **under 1,000 lbs per year**.
- Seasonal closure should be evaluated in light of other spatial management areas that may be more effective at accomplishing Council's objectives.

03

Essential Fish Habitat Focus

Grammanik Bank and Hind Bank MCD are critical, high-density spawning sites. Because most spawning occurs here, targeted protection may be more effective than broad regional closures.

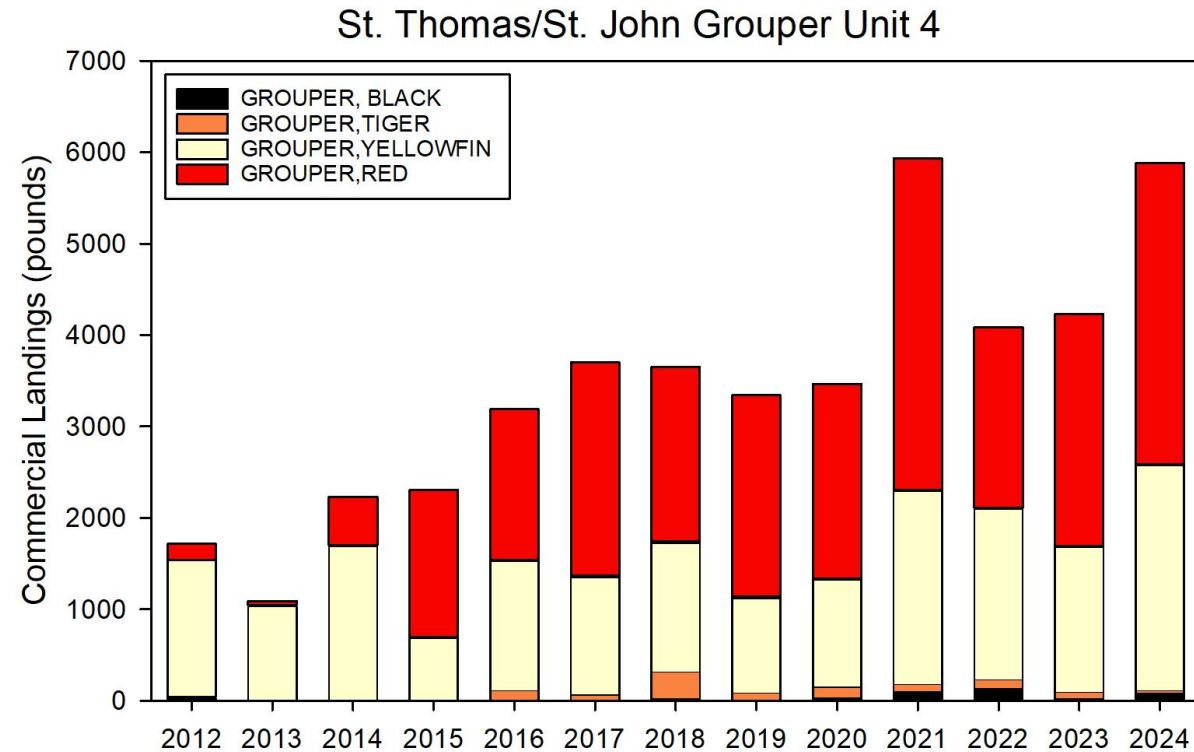
St. Thomas/St. John Commercial Landings of Grouper Unit 4 (2012-2024)

3,447 lbs

Average Annual Landings (2012-2024)

This represents approximately **9%** of the total annual landings of all grouper species combined in the St. Thomas and St. John region.

Red grouper and yellowfin grouper comprise **91–100%** of these annual landings, consistently representing the vast majority of the Grouper Unit 4 catch.



Key Considerations:

If the Council proceeds with exploring the removal of the grouper regional closure, the following ecological and management scenarios must be addressed to ensure sustainable fish populations.

01

Spatial Mismatch in Spawning:

- Is GU4/yellowedge spawning exclusive to Hind and/or Grammanik Banks?
- If spawning is dispersed, the broad regional closure serves as the primary safeguard.
- Targeted research into potential habitat shifts would be beneficial before action.

02

Intensified Fishing at Boundaries:

- Localized closures inherently create “edge effects” that concentrate fishing pressure.
- Removing the EEZ closure may increase pressure on protected bank perimeters.

03

Regulatory Discards:

- If species-specific regulations remain post-removal, discard rates need to be accounted for as an additional mortality source.
- Will fishers discard high rates of undersized or non-target species in newly opened areas?

04

Connectivity & Stability:

- How much will fishing mortality increase in non-spatially protected areas?
- The original strategy assumed a 24% annual catch reduction; verifying site goals requires modeling.

05

Effects on ESA-Listed Species:

- Will removing the closure increase bycatch of the ESA-listed Nassau grouper?
- Impacts on critical Nassau habitat situated outside protected banks must be evaluated.

06

Optimization & Management Tools:

- Consider optimizing through spatial/temporal modifications based on Ecosystem-Based Fisheries Management.
- Consider minimum size limits to protect grouper species.
- Revise current ACLs based on improved reporting and more recent catches.

Commercial Landings & ACLs

Grouper Unit 4 Stock Complex — St. Thomas / St. John FMP (Values in lbs whole weight)

ACL Monitoring Year	Year(s) of Landings	Landings (lb)	% of GU4 ACL (2,254 lb)
2023	2021	5,915	262%
2024	2022	4,082	181%
2025	2022-2023 average	3,999	177%
2026	2022-2024 average	4,730	210%

ACL Monitoring Outcomes: NMFS determined that the ACL overages for all these years were due to enhanced reporting.

Not all species in GU4 were in the catch report forms during the years used to set ACLs.

Accountability Measure: If NMFS determines the ACL was exceeded because data collection or monitoring improved rather than because landings increased, NMFS does not reduce the length of the fishing season.

ACL Revisions Needed: CFMC has discussed revising these ACLs based on improved reporting and more recent catches.

Suggested Next Steps for Evaluation

01

Council & Advisory Panel Input

- Obtain clarification from the Council about action objectives
- Get early input from the St. Thomas District Advisory Panel, SSC, EBFM TAP
- Get early input from USVI DFW

02

Evaluation of Trade-offs

- Risk of reduced protection from closure removal that could increase fishing pressure
- Potential economic benefits from reducing administrative burdens and removing species from the FMP
- Data-driven decision making to bridge knowledge gaps (e.g. spawning habitats, discard rates, fishing activity) to ensure economic goals do not compromise stock sustainability or recovery of ESA-listed species, including the Nassau grouper

03

Ecosystem & Habitat Use, Fishing

- Prioritize collection/analysis of critical scientific information on localized ecosystem function and species habitat use.
- Quantify discard rates and mortality during seasonal closures.
- Integrate fishery-independent survey datasets (e.g., UVI TCRMP, NCRMP).

Key Evaluation Questions

- Where does fishing for species in the GU4/5 take place?
- Is commercial fishing activity expected to increase if seasonal grouper closure is removed?
- How much recreational activity occurs in the area? What type of recreational fishing and species are targeted?
- Are there concerns about illegal fishing in the areas? If yes, how will removing the grouper closure increase or decrease illegal fishing?
- Are discards being recorded?
- How might the USVI territorial grouper seasonal closure change if the federal regulations change?

Potential Options Discussed

The Council is requested to provide guidance on options. These are some options previously discussed.

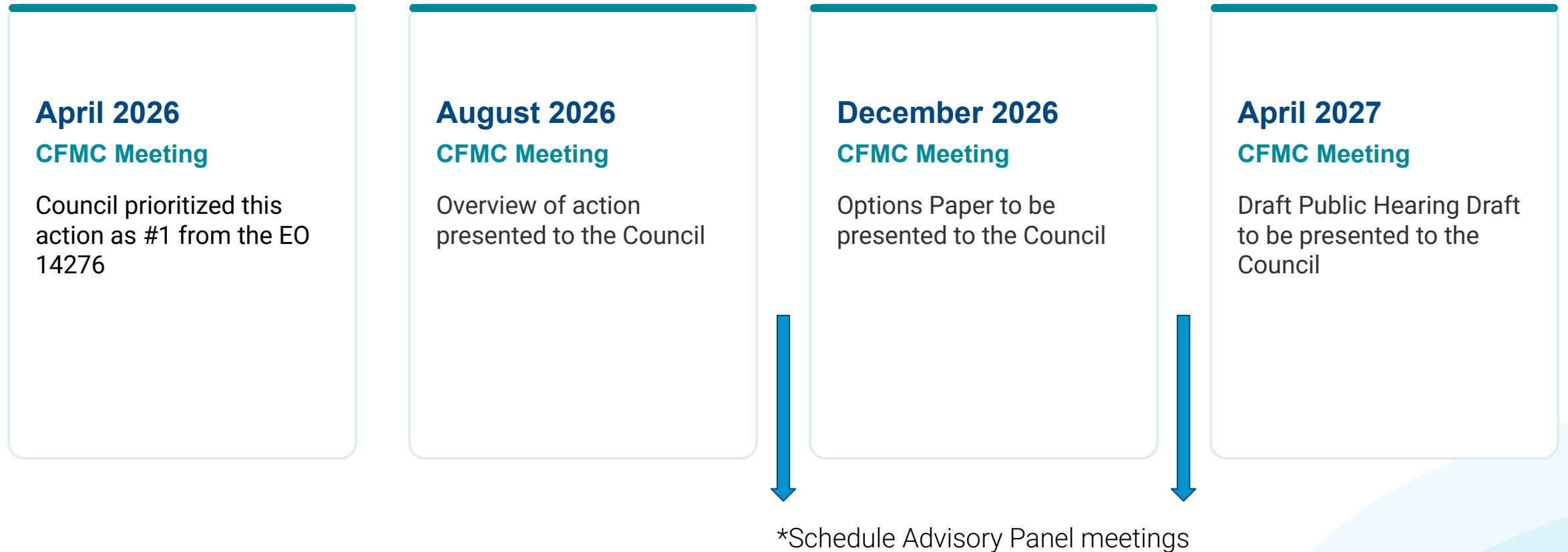
Option 1. Eliminate the seasonal closure for groupers.

Option 2. Eliminate the seasonal closure while adjusting existing area closures as needed to ensure conservation goals are still achieved.

Option 3. Reduce the length of the grouper seasonal closure or apply it only to red grouper because landings of the other species are low.

Option 4. Other

Proposed Timeline



Project Summary

Optimizing Grouper Management in the USVI

Objective

Re-evaluate and optimize spatial and temporal fishing closures for Red Hind, Yellowfin, Tiger, and threatened Nassau grouper along the St. Thomas insular shelf to improve conservation and fishing outcomes.

Approach

Leverage 12 years of existing telemetry data (2007–2019) to model habitat use, stock mixing, and spawning migration patterns, delivering data-driven management alternatives for the CFMC.

Key Deliverables

- Optimization models identifying refined boundaries & seasons.
- Updated assessment of closure effectiveness & stock recovery.
- Reusable evaluation framework for the U.S. Caribbean.

Impact

Ensures protections align with biological realities—such as the recovery of ESA-listed Nassau grouper—maximizing both spawning aggregation recovery and long-term commercial/ recreational fishing opportunities.

