



MAGNUSON - STEVENS ACT/NEPA SCOPING DOCUMENT:

**THE SOUTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL'S
SNAPPER GROUPE AMENDMENT 16
(GAG GROUPE AND VERMILION SNAPPER)**

AUGUST 2007

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Scoping meetings are less formal than public hearings and occur prior to the Council taking any position on a management issue. When the Council is considering the need for management, scoping meetings provide an opportunity for members of the public to make suggestions BEFORE the Council has made any decisions.

The purpose of this document is to request that the public provide input on possible options that the Council should examine to end overfishing of gag grouper and vermilion snapper.

I. BACKGROUND

Stock assessments through the Southeast Data Assessment and Review (SEDAR) process have been conducted for gag grouper and vermilion snapper. At their June 2007 meeting, the South Atlantic Council's Scientific and Statistical committee (SSC) reviewed and approved these assessments as based upon the best available science and useful for management purposes.

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) to prepare a plan amendment or proposed regulations to end overfishing within one year of notification of an overfishing status. The Council was notified of overfishing of gag grouper and vermilion snapper on June 12, 2007.

Amendment 16 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (FMP) is being developed to contain management measures to end overfishing of gag grouper and vermilion snapper. Other measures to be included are:

- Specification of Maximum Sustainable Yield, Optimum Yield, and Annual Catch Limits
- Designation of the commercial and recreational allocation percentages for future harvest

The Council is holding a series of scoping meetings (locations and dates below) and collecting written comments on potential actions for Amendment 16. **Written comments must be received by 5 pm on September 17, 2007.** Comments can be mailed to the Council at the address on the cover or they can be emailed to: SGAm16Scoping@safmc.net

This scoping document is being distributed prior to the scoping meetings to give everyone a chance to prepare comments. Copies of the scoping document will also be available at the following scoping meetings (detailed location information is shown on page 9 of this document):

Scoping Meeting Dates and Locations (all meetings begin at 6 pm)

Wilmington, NC	September 4, 2007
Marathon, FL	September 4, 2007
Atlantic Beach, NC	September 5, 2007
Daytona Beach, FL	September 6, 2007
Charleston, SC	September 10, 2007
Myrtle Beach, SC	September 17, 2007

Schedule for Snapper Grouper Amendment 16 (Gag grouper & Vermilion snapper):

- Scoping through September 17, 2007
- Council reviews Options Paper & provides direction to Staff/Team – September 17-21, 2007 meeting
- Scientific & Statistical Committee reviews Amendment/Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) at their December 2-4, 2007 meeting
- Council approves Amendment/DEIS for public hearings – December 2-7, 2007 meeting
- Public hearings – January/February 2008
- Council reviews public hearing input and approves actions – March 3-7, 2008 meeting
- Council reviews and approves final Amendment/FEIS for formal review by the Secretary of Commerce – June 8-13, 2008 meeting
- Intent to have regulations in place – January 1, 2009

II. GAG GROUPE

Stock Status

The gag grouper stock in the Atlantic is undergoing **overfishing** as of 2004 (last year of data in the stock assessment). This means fish are being removed more quickly than the stock can replace them such that the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) cannot be achieved. The Council compares the current fishing mortality rate (F) to the level of fishing mortality that would result in overfishing (maximum fishing mortality threshold or MFMT) and if the current F is greater than the MFMT, overfishing is occurring. For gag the most recent estimate of the fishing mortality rate is from 2004 and was = 0.31. The Council is using the fishing mortality rate that would produce the maximum sustainable yield ($F_{msy} = 0.237$) as the maximum fishing mortality threshold. Comparing these two numbers:

- $F_{2004}/MFMT = 0.31/0.237 = 1.31$

This comparison is referred to as the **overfishing ratio**. If the ratio is greater than 1, then overfishing is occurring.

The gag grouper stock in the Atlantic was not **overfished** as of the start of 2005. This means that the spawning stock biomass (pounds of spawning fish in the water) has not been reduced below the level that could produce the maximum sustainable yield. The Council compares the current spawning stock biomass (SSB) to the level of spawning stock biomass that could be rebuilt to the level to produce the MSY in 10 years. This is referred to as the minimum spawning stock biomass or MSST. For gag the estimated level of spawning stock biomass in 2005 was 7,468,000 pounds gutted weight (gw). The Minimum stock size threshold (MSST) = 6,816,000 pounds gw. Comparing these two numbers:

- $SSB_{2005}/MSST = 7,468,000/6,816,000 = 1.10$

This comparison is referred to as the **overfished ratio**. If the ratio is less than 1, then the stock is overfished.

Spawning stock biomass increased after 1999 corresponding to implementation of the 24 inch minimum size limit. Fishing mortality has been decreasing since 1992. However, recruitment (small fish entering the population) in the last three years has been lower and these fish are just entering the fishery. The fishing mortality rate was above F_{msy} such that the stock could become overfished. The stock assessment model projections show the stock becoming overfished in 2007.

Annual Catch Limits

Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) are numerical target catch levels that must be set each year by the Council for each managed stock. They must be set at a level that ensures overfishing does not occur. ACLs must be implemented in fishing year 2010 for fisheries determined to be subject to overfishing and in fishing year 2011 for all other species. The Council will specify ACLs for gag grouper in Amendment 16 based upon information from the SEDAR Assessment (2007) and recommendations from the SSC. Preliminary ACLs, based upon the Council’s definition of Optimum Yield, are provided in Table 1. (Note: The Council’s SSC will provide their recommendations on setting catch levels to prevent overfishing at their December 2-4, 2007 meeting.)

Table 1. Preliminary annual catch limits for gag grouper.

Year	Annual Catch Limit (gutted weight)
2008	694,000
2009	716,000
2010	768,000
2011	840,000
2012	916,000
2013	976,000

Allocations

The Council must specify the future commercial and recreational percent allocations in order to determine the annual catch levels by sector. The allocation percentages ultimately specified by the Council, in addition to the Annual Catch Limits, will provide an annual harvest amount (in pounds) to each sector. In the past, the Council has utilized historical catch information to determine future allocations. As an example, using the same time periods as the Council has proposed for vermilion snapper, the following commercial and recreational allocations would result:

Years 1999-2003 = 51% commercial & 49% recreational

Years 1986-2005 = 61% commercial & 39% recreational

The Council is seeking input from the public on allocation alternatives.

Applying these percentages to the annual catch limit in each year results in the commercial quotas and recreational allocations shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Preliminary commercial quotas and recreational allocations for gag grouper.

		Allocation Alternative 1. 51%C/49%R		Allocation Alternative 2. 61%C/39%R	
		Commercial Quota (gutted weight)	Recreational Allocation (gutted weight)	Commercial Quota (gutted weight)	Recreational Allocation (gutted weight)
Year	Annual Catch Limit* (gutted weight)				
2008	694,000	353,940	340,060	423,340	270,660
2009	716,000	365,160	350,840	436,760	279,240
2010	768,000	391,680	376,320	468,480	299,520
2011	840,000	428,400	411,600	512,400	327,600
2012	916,000	467,160	448,840	558,760	357,240
2013	976,000	497,760	478,240	595,360	380,640

*These figures may be modified based on the SSC’s deliberations in December 2007.

Percent Reductions

Historical landings in Table 3 can be compared to the future Annual Catch Limits (Table 2) to determine the percent reductions required to end overfishing of gag grouper. The percent reductions to each sector will change depending on the percent allocation alternatives.

Table 3. Historical gag grouper landings.

Gag Grouper Landings (gutted weight)				Total	Total
Year	Commercial	Headboat	MRFSS	Recreational	Landings
2001	532,000	53,000	455,000	508,000	1,040,000
2002	534,000	51,000	266,000	317,000	851,000
2003	560,000	32,000	519,000	551,000	1,111,000
2004	551,000	82,000	517,000	599,000	1,150,000
2005	568,681	71,736	468,814	540,550	1,109,231
2006	568,681	46,537	437,493	484,031	1,052,711
Avg 04-06	562,787	66,758	474,436	541,194	1,103,981

Note: 2001-2004 data are from the SSC based on gutted weight in the SEDAR Assessment; 2005 & 2006 from NMFS landings provided by McGovern and converted to gutted weight.

Allocation Alternative 1 results in a 37% reduction from the average of 2004-2006 landings for both the commercial and recreational sectors in the first year. Allocation Alternative 2 results in a 25% commercial reduction and 50% recreational reduction from the average of 2004-2006 landings in the first year.

Potential Management Regulations

Current Regulations:

- (i) Current gag grouper commercial regulations = 24 inch size limit; March & April - no harvest above bag limit & no sale; vessels with longlines may only possess deepwater species; limited entry program with 2 for 1 provision.
- (ii) Current gag grouper recreational regulations = 24 inch size limit; within 5 grouper bag limit only 2 may be gag or black grouper; March & April – no sale.

Potential New Regulations:

The Council will consider modifying these measures as well as potential new measures (e.g., closed seasons during spawning and/or cold water events, recreational boat limits, commercial trip limits, etc.) to achieve the necessary reductions. The public is urged to comment and to provide suggestions during the scoping process.

III. VERMILION SNAPPER

Stock Status

The vermilion snapper stock in the Atlantic is undergoing **overfishing** as of 2006 (last year of data in the stock assessment update). This means fish are being removed more quickly than the stock can replace them such that the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) cannot be achieved. The Council compares the current fishing mortality rate (F) to the level of fishing mortality that would result in overfishing (maximum fishing mortality threshold or MFMT) and if the current F is greater than the MFMT, overfishing is occurring. For vermilion snapper the most recent estimate of the fishing mortality rate is from 2006 and was = 0.729. The Council is using the fishing mortality rate that produces the greatest yield per fish (Fmax = 0.355) as the maximum fishing mortality threshold. Fmax is being used as a proxy for Fmsy (Fmsy = Fishing mortality rate that would produce maximum sustainable yield) because the SSC did not have confidence in the calculated biomass reference points. The SSC does have confidence in the fishing mortality rate estimates from the SEDAR assessment. Comparing these two numbers:

- $F_{2006}/MFMT = 0.729/0.355 = 2.05$

This comparison is referred to as the **overfishing ratio**. If the ratio is greater than 1, then overfishing is occurring.

Whether the vermilion snapper stock in the Atlantic is currently **overfished** is unknown because the SSC did not have confidence in the biomass reference points from the SEDAR assessment.

Annual Catch Limits

Annual Catch Limits (ACLs) are numerical target catch levels that must be set each year by the Council for each managed stock. They must be set at a level that ensures overfishing does not occur. ACLs must be implemented in fishing year 2010 for fisheries determined to be subject to overfishing and in fishing year 2011 for all other species. The Council will specify ACLs for vermilion snapper in Amendment 16 based upon information from the SEDAR Assessment Update #3 (2007) and recommendations from the SSC. A preliminary ACL, based upon the Council's definition of Optimum Yield as the harvest from fishing at 75% of Fmsy, has been developed. The SSC provided an estimate of this value based on the yield per recruit at the geometric mean of the 2004-2006 fishing mortality rates compared to that at 75% of Fmax (proxy for Fmsy). In order to lower the fishing mortality rate to 75% of Fmax, a 61% reduction in total catch is required. This results in a total harvest (recreational and commercial) of 628,459 pounds whole weight. (Note: The Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee will provide their recommendations on setting catch levels to prevent overfishing at their December 2-4, 2007 meeting.)

Allocations

The Council must specify the future commercial and recreational percent allocations in order to determine the annual catch levels by sector. The allocation percentages ultimately specified by the Council, in addition to the Annual Catch Limits, will provide an annual harvest amount (in pounds) to each sector. In the past, the Council has utilized historical catch information to determine future allocations. The Council has chosen allocation alternatives for vermilion snapper based on landings data. The allocation alternatives are as follows:

Alternative 1 (no action). Do not define allocations for vermilion snapper.

Alternative 2. Define allocations for vermilion snapper based upon landings from the NMFS landings (ALS), NMFS Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey (MRFSS), and NMFS headboat databases.

Alternative 2a. The allocation would be based on landings from the years 1999-2003. The allocation would be 69% commercial and 31% recreational

Alternative 2b. The allocation would be based on landings from the years 1986-2005. The allocation would be 68% commercial and 32% recreational.

Using the landings data (in pounds whole weight) and the allocations for the two time periods shown below results in the commercial quotas and recreational allocations shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Preliminary commercial quotas and recreational allocations for vermilion snapper.

Vermilion Snapper		Allocation Alternative 2a. 69%C/31%R		Allocation Alternative 2b. 68%C/32%R	
	Annual	Commercial	Recreational	Commercial	Recreational
Year	Catch Limit* (whole weight)	Quota (whole weight)	Allocation (whole weight)	Quota (whole weight)	Allocation (whole weight)
2008	628,459	433,637	194,822	427,352	201,107
2009	628,459	433,637	194,822	427,352	201,107
2010	628,459	433,637	194,822	427,352	201,107
2011	628,459	433,637	194,822	427,352	201,107
2012	628,459	433,637	194,822	427,352	201,107
2013	628,459	433,637	194,822	427,352	201,107

*The harvest based on 75% of Fmax is being used as an initial annual catch limit. This number may be modified based on the SSC’s deliberations in December 2007.

Percent Reductions

Historical landings in Table 5 can be compared to the future Annual Catch Limits (Table 4) to determine the percent reductions required to end overfishing of vermilion snapper. The percent reductions to each sector will change depending on the percent allocation alternatives.

Table 5. Historical vermilion snapper landings.

Vermilion Snapper Landings (pounds whole weight)				Total	Total
Year	Commercial	Headboat	MRFSS	Recreational	Landings
2001	1,685,431	402,620	284,539	687,159	2,372,590
2002	1,367,488	326,447	208,626	535,073	1,902,561
2003	755,716	287,444	274,961	562,405	1,318,121
2004	1,120,613	361,562	311,274	672,836	1,793,449
2005	1,122,432	311,977	146,132	458,109	1,580,541
2006	813,605	321,858	372,304	694,162	1,507,767
Avg 04-06	1,018,883	331,799	276,570	608,369	1,627,252
Note: 2001 thru 2006 from SEDAR Update (2007).					

Note: Headboat data for 2006 were not available for the SEDAR vermilion snapper assessment update; average headboat landings from 2002-2005 were used as a proxy for 2006 headboat landings.

Allocation Alternative 2a results in a 57% commercial reduction and 68% recreational reduction from the average of 2004-2006 landings. Allocation Alternative 2b results in a 58% commercial reduction and 67% recreational reduction from the average of 2004-2006 landings.

Potential Management Regulations

Current Regulations:

- (i) Current vermilion snapper commercial regulations = 12 inch size limit; commercial quota = 1,100,000 pounds gutted weight (1,221,000 pounds whole weight); vessels with longlines may only possess deepwater species; limited entry program with 2 for 1 provision.
- (ii) Current vermilion snapper recreational regulations = 12 inch size limit; 10 vermilion snapper bag limit.

Potential New Regulations:

The Council will consider modifying these measures and potential new measures (closed seasons, recreational boat limits, commercial trip limits, etc.) to achieve the necessary reductions. The public is urged to comment and to provide suggestions during the scoping process.

**SNAPPER GROUPE AMENDMENT 16
PUBLIC SCOPING MEETING SITES AND DATES**

All scoping meetings begin at 6 p.m.

Tuesday, 9/4/07

Hilton Wilmington Riverside
301 North Water Street
Wilmington, North Carolina 28401
Phone: 910-763-5900

Tuesday, 9/4/07

Sombrero Cay Clubs
19 Sombrero Boulevard
Marathon, Florida 33050
Phone: 305-743-2250

Wednesday, 9/5/07

Sheraton Atlantic Beach
2717 W. Fort Macon Road
Atlantic Beach, North Carolina 28512
Phone: 252-240-1155

Thursday, 9/6/07

Hampton Inn Daytona Speedway
1715 W. International Speedway Boulevard
Daytona Beach, Florida 32114
Phone: 386-257-4030

Monday, 9/10/07

Holiday Inn Charleston Airport & Convention Center
5264 International Boulevard
North Charleston, South Carolina 29418
Phone: 843-576-0300

Monday, 9/17/07

Avista Resort
300 North Ocean Boulevard
North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina 29582
Phone: 843-249-2521

Written comments must be received by 5 pm on September 17, 2007.

The Council accepts comments sent by mail, fax, or E-mail (SGAm16Scoping@safmc.net).

What Next?

Comments should be provided to the Council by 5 pm on September 17, 2007. All comments will be considered by the Council in drafting Amendment 16 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan. There will be a number of opportunities to provide public input as the Council develops this document.

Timing

1. Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel will review the Amendment 16 options paper at their September 17-18, 2007 meeting in North Myrtle Beach, SC; meeting begins at 1 pm on Monday and ends at noon on Tuesday. The Advisory Panel will develop recommendations to be presented to the Council's Snapper Grouper Committee on September 18th.
2. Final Scoping Meeting beginning at 6 pm on September 17, 2007 in North Myrtle Beach, SC.
3. Snapper Grouper Committee reviews scoping comments and Advisory Panel recommendations at their September 18-19, 2007 meeting in North Myrtle Beach, SC; meeting begins at 1:30 pm on Tuesday and ends at noon on Wednesday. The Committee will also review the Amendment 16 options paper during their meeting. The Snapper Grouper Committee will develop recommendations to be presented to the Council on September 21st. The Council will provide directions to staff and the Council/NMFS/NOAA Team on alternatives to be included in Amendment 16.
4. Council Staff and the Council/NMFS/NOAA Team will prepare the Draft Amendment 16/Draft Environmental Impact Statement document based on direction from the Council.
5. The Council's Scientific & Statistical Committee will review Draft Amendment 16/Draft Environmental Impact Statement and develop recommendations for the Council at their December 2-4, 2007 meeting in Atlantic Beach, NC.
6. The Snapper Grouper Committee and Council will review Draft Amendment 16/Draft Environmental Impact Statement and the recommendations from the Scientific & Statistical Committee at their December 3-7, 2007 meeting in Atlantic Beach, NC. The Committee and Council will revise and approve Amendment 16/Draft Environmental Impact Statement for Public Hearings.
7. Council Staff and the Council/NMFS/NOAA Team will prepare the Public Hearing Amendment 16/Draft Environmental Impact Statement document based on direction from the Council.
8. Public hearings will be held in January and/or February 2008. The public comment period on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement will end prior to the start of the Council's meeting on March 3, 2008. Hearings will be held from North Carolina through the Florida Keys.
9. The Snapper Grouper Committee and Council will review public hearing input and approve final actions at their March 3-7, 2008 meeting in Jekyll Island, Georgia.
10. Council Staff and the Council/NMFS/NOAA Team will prepare the Final Amendment 16/Final Environmental Impact Statement document based on direction from the Council.

11. The Snapper Grouper Committee and Council will review and approve the final Amendment 16/Final Environmental Impact Statement document for formal review by Secretary of Commerce at the June 9-13, 2008 meeting in Florida.
12. Amendment 16/Final Environmental Impact Statement will be sent to NMFS SERO for formal review by June 30, 2008.

APPENDIX A

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council 2007-2008 Membership

The names of the Council Members who serve on the Snapper Grouper Committee appear in bold.

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