

# South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 29 (Best Fishing Practices and Powerheads)



## Scoping Summary July 2018



Regulatory Amendment 29 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region (Regulatory Amendment 29) addresses the use of best fishing practices and adjusts powerhead regulations.

Written comments on Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 29 will be accepted until 5:00 p.m. on August 17, 2018. Comments may be submitted in writing at the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) address at the end of this document. Comments may also be submitted via fax (843-769-4520) with the subject "SG Reg 29 Scoping" or online using the public comment form that can be found by clicking [HERE](#).

## What is scoping?

Scoping is the first stage of the process to amend a fishery management plan after an issue has been identified (see steps in the process below). Scoping has two main purposes: (1) to inform you that the Council may propose new regulations or change existing ones and (2) to allow you the opportunity to comment on the issue or identify other issues that may need the attention of the Council. You will have more opportunity to provide comments as the amendment is developed; however, **scoping is the first and best opportunity to make suggestions for the Council to consider *before* an amendment is developed.**



**Note:** Public comment prior to final approval of the amendment is the last opportunity for public input during the Council amendment development process. However, additional public input is accepted during the federal review process after the Council has submitted the document for Secretarial Review.

## Why is the South Atlantic Council considering action?

Commercial and recreational fishermen have expressed concern about regulations that result in released fish that do not survive. This has been particularly true for red snapper since 2010. Observations from recent on fishery independent studies show the population of red snapper has increased. As a result, fishermen are reporting an increase in the number of released red snapper. A portion of released fish will die due to foul hooking, injuries caused by barotrauma (injury due to expansion of gas when reeled up from depth), and predation. To reduce the number of released fish and improve the survivorship of released fish, the Council is considering best fishing practices as either mandatory or voluntary options.

Best fishing practices can be effective in reducing bycatch and discard mortality by avoiding non-target species or sizes through fishing techniques and/or gear, using gear that minimizes the impact of capture, and by releasing the fish with minimal handling and time out of the water. Common examples of best fishing practices include recompressing fish, reducing the number of hooks fished, using hooks that reduce or minimize gut hooking or foul-hooking, using knotless landing nets, etc.

Additionally, fishermen have expressed concern regarding inequitable access for the dive component of the snapper grouper fishery. Powerheads, also known as bang sticks (spears with a charge that is fired when in contact with target), are prohibited in federal waters off South Carolina. To allow for more consistent regulations for the dive component of the snapper grouper fishery, the Council is considering removing the powerhead prohibition in federal waters off South Carolina.

## How does this amendment match the 2016-2020 Vision Blueprint for the Snapper Grouper Fishery?

The 2016-2020 Vision Blueprint for the Snapper Grouper Fishery (Vision Blueprint) was approved in December 2015 and is intended to inform management of the snapper grouper fishery through 2020. The Vision Blueprint serves as a “living document” to help guide future management, build on stakeholder input, and illustrate actions that could be developed through the amendment process to address the goals identified during the visioning process. Specifically, the Vision Blueprint is organized into four goal areas: (1) Science, (2) Management, (3) Communication, and (4) Governance. Each goal area has a set of objectives and a set of strategies aimed at meeting each objective. The actions in Regulatory Amendment 29 correspond to different objectives and strategies in the Vision Blueprint. The full Vision Blueprint for the Snapper Grouper Fishery in the South Atlantic can be found [HERE](#).

**Actions 1, 2, and 3** include best fishing practices intended to reduce the number of released fish and improve the survivorship of released fish for snapper grouper species. Some of the alternatives were suggested during Vision Meetings including the use of single hook rigs when targeting deep-water species and requiring descending devices. The circle hook alternatives were developed based on management in other areas and include an option to remove the circle hook requirement. **Action 4** includes alternatives that would provide consistent regulations for the dive component of the snapper grouper fishery. Currently, South Carolina is the only state where powerheads are prohibited. The alternatives include options to remove the powerhead restriction off South Carolina or prohibit powerheads when fishing in federal waters of the South Atlantic EEZ.

## What is barotrauma and why does it happen?

Most marine fishes have a gas-filled organ known as a swimbladder. This organ allows the fish to control its buoyancy and location within the water column. Barotrauma, a condition often experienced by snapper grouper species, occurs when a fish is rapidly reeled up from depth.

The change in pressure causes the fish's swimbladder to expand, and in some cases burst causing air to fill the body cavity. Along with internal damage, this expansion can prevent the fish from swimming back down to the capture depth, decreasing its chances of survival and making it more vulnerable to predators.

Fish experiencing barotrauma, sometimes called floaters, exhibit some identifiable signs, including bulging eyes, swollen abdomen, and stomach or intestines protruding from the mouth (**Figure 1**). Not all fish species react the same way to barotrauma, but if a fish is experiencing any of these symptoms it will likely need some help descending.



**Figure 1.** Red snapper experiencing barotrauma. Photo: Brendan Runde, Department of Applied Ecology, NCSU

## How do best fishing practices help reduce number of released fish and improve survivorship for released fish?

### *Venting Devices and Descending Devices*

Standard practice to improve survivorship of released fish is to reduce handling and the amount of time a fish is out of the water. However, fish experiencing barotrauma (floaters) may not survive without some assistance. There are two types of tools that can be used to treat barotrauma: venting devices (**Figure 2**) and descending devices (**Figure 3**). Note: not all fish will require venting or descending, it is important to look for the signs of barotrauma described above.



**Figure 2.** Venting a fish experiencing barotrauma. Photo: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission



**Figure 3.** Descending device. Photo: Florida SeaGrant

Venting devices are sharp, hollow tools that can be used to release gases that have overexpanded due to barotrauma. Once the gases have been released, organs can return to their original positions and the fish should be able to swim down. Fishermen should hold the fish on its side and insert the venting tool at a 45-degree angle. The venting tool should be inserted into the fish approximately one to two inches behind the base of the pectoral fin. The venting tool should be

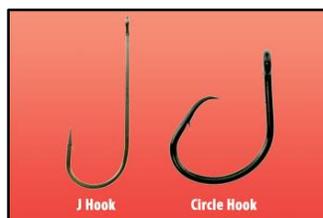
inserted just deep enough to release the gases. Please note, instruments that are not hollow, such as fishing hooks or knives are *not* appropriate for venting fish and will cause more harm.

Descending devices are tools that will quickly send a fish back to the depth where it was caught. Rapidly sending the fish back down to depth will cause gases in the swim bladder to recompress, allowing the fish to swim away. Descending devices can be purchased or made by hand, but are generally some kind of weighted device that is attached to fishing line or rope and has a clamp or hook to attach to the mouth of the fish.

### ***Circle Hooks***

Circle hooks are a type of fishing hook designed such that the point turns back towards the shank creating a circle or oval shape (**Figure 4**). Typically used with natural baits, circle hooks are more likely to hook a fish in the mouth because the circular shape allows the hook to move toward the jaw without catching on the fish's gut or throat. Furthermore, non-offset or inline circle hooks (where the point is turned back perpendicular to the shank) are less likely to injure a fish. On the other hand, offset circle hooks are more likely to result in the hook catching before the fish's jaw, lodging in the gills or gut.

In addition to avoiding internal damage, fish hooked in the mouth are easier to dehook decreasing the amount of time the fish is being handled. Since circle hooks will set as you reel in the line, they are great for inexperienced anglers as well as bottom fishing.



**Figure 4.** J-hook vs. Circle hook  
Photo: Florida Sea Grant/UF IFAS

### **Want to learn more about best fishing practices? Check out these resources!**

- Florida Sea Grant and the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences collaborated on [Catch & Release Fishing](#), a website that details sustainable fishing practices for recreational fishermen. It includes articles and videos on handling practices, dehooking, and venting and descending devices.
- Organized by sportfishermen, [FishSmart](#) is a group working to develop fishing techniques that reduce bycatch and discard mortality. Their website includes information on best fishing practices as well as information about upcoming workshops.
- Many state agencies and Sea Grant offices provide information on best fishing practices:
  - [Ethical Angling: A Guide to Responsible Fishing](#)
  - [Catch & Release: Ways You Can Help Saltwater Fish Survive](#)
  - [Seven Tips for Successful Catch and Release](#)
  - [Venting: A Guide to Releasing Reef Fish with Ruptured Swimbladders](#)
  - [How to Treat Barotrauma](#) (Video)
  - [Circle Hooks](#)

## What Actions have been proposed for inclusion in Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 29?

### Action 1. Specify requirements for the use of descending devices and/or venting devices when possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit.

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** Do not require a descending device and/or venting device to be onboard a vessel possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit.

**Alternative 2.** Require a *venting device* be onboard a vessel possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit.

**Sub-alternative 2a.** recreational vessels.

**Sub-alternative 2b.** commercially permitted South Atlantic snapper grouper vessels.

**Alternative 3.** Require a *descending device* be onboard a vessel possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit.

**Sub-alternative 3a.** recreational vessels.

**Sub-alternative 3b.** commercially permitted South Atlantic snapper grouper vessels.

**Alternative 4.** Require a venting device *or* a descending device be onboard a vessel possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit.

**Sub-alternative 3a.** recreational vessels.

**Sub-alternative 3b.** commercially permitted South Atlantic snapper grouper vessels.

### *Public Comment Questions*

- ❖ How often have you seen fish with barotrauma when fishing for snapper grouper species?
- ❖ Are you familiar with venting devices? Descending devices? Do you use them while fishing? If not, why?
- ❖ Are many recreational and commercial fishermen using these devices?
- ❖ Should the South Atlantic Council require recreational and/or commercial fishermen to carry descending devices and/or venting devices on board?
- ❖ If so, how should venting devices and descending devices be defined?

## **Action 2. Modify the requirement for the use of non-stainless-steel circle hooks when fishing for and/or possessing snapper grouper species with hook-and-line gear.**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** Require the use of non-stainless-steel circle hooks when fishing for and/or possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit with hook-and-line gear and natural baits north of 28 degrees north latitude.

**Alternative 2.** Require the use of non-stainless-steel circle hooks when fishing for and/or possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit with hook-and-line gear and natural baits in federal waters:

**Sub-alternative 2a.** north of 25° 09' north latitude on the east coast of Monroe County (approximately Key Largo, Florida).

**Sub-alternative 2b.** of the South Atlantic exclusive economic zone.

**Alternative 3.** Require the use of *non-offset*, non-stainless-steel circle hooks when fishing for and/or possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit with hook-and-line gear and natural baits in federal waters:

**Sub-alternative 3a.** north of 28 degrees north latitude (approximately 25 miles south of Cape Canaveral, Florida).

**Sub-alternative 3b.** north of 25° 09' north latitude on the east coast of Monroe County (approximately Key Largo, Florida).

**Sub-alternative 3c.** of the South Atlantic exclusive economic zone.

**Alternative 4.** Require *non-offset*, non-stainless-steel circle hooks be *onboard* a vessel possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit when fishing in federal waters:

**Sub-alternative 4a.** north of 28 degrees north latitude (approximately 25 miles south of Cape Canaveral, Florida).

**Sub-alternative 4b.** north of 25° 09' north latitude on the east coast of Monroe County (approximately Key Largo, Florida).

**Sub-alternative 4c.** of the South Atlantic exclusive economic zone.

**Alternative 5.** Remove the requirement for use of non-stainless-steel circle hooks for when fishing for and/or possessing species in the snapper grouper fishery management unit with hook-and-line gear north of 28 degrees north latitude:

**Sub-alternative 5a.** commercially permitted snapper grouper vessels South Atlantic snapper grouper vessels.

**Sub-alternative 5b.** recreational vessels.

### **Why does the Council use a latitude boundary for requiring the use of circle hooks?**

Amendment 17A to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan required the use of non-stainless-steel circle hooks when fishing for and/or possessing snapper grouper species with hook-and-line gear and natural baits north of 28 degrees north latitude (**Figure 5**).

Studies on the effects of circle hooks and J-hooks on retention and survival have been limited to a handful of snapper grouper species. Many studies indicate circle hooks can reduce discard and bycatch mortality for some snapper grouper species, particularly red snapper, while studies for other species are inconclusive. Not all species in the snapper grouper complex have the same mouth morphology and it is possible that circle hooks could negatively impact survival. Additionally, analysis for Amendment 17A showed that requiring the use of circle hooks could substantially reduce harvest of some species south of 28 degrees latitude resulting in social and economic impacts on fishermen dependent upon the species being targeted.

## Public Comment Questions

- ❖ Should the South Atlantic Council require fishermen to use circle hooks when fishing for snapper grouper species?
- ❖ Are there species or areas that wouldn't benefit from circle hooks?
- ❖ Should the Council require non-offset circle hooks?
- ❖ Where should circle hook use be required?
  - North of Cape Canaveral?
  - North of Key Largo?
  - Some other line?
  - All federal waters in the South Atlantic?



— South Atlantic Council Circle Hook Boundary (28° N)  
— Gulf Council Circle Hook Boundary (25° 09' N)  
— South Atlantic EEZ

**Figure 5.** South Atlantic Council and Gulf Council Circle Hook Requirement Boundaries

**Action 3. Specify the allowable rigs when fishing for snapper grouper species with hook-and-line gear in the recreational sector.**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** Do not prohibit the use of multiple hook or multiple leader rigs.

**Alternative 2.** Require the use of single hook rigs (one hook per line).

**Alternative 3.** Require the use of a single leader.

Why is the Council considering specifying the number of hooks that can be fished at one time?  
Requiring the use of single hook rigs and/or the use of a single leader could result in fewer regulatory discards and subsequent mortality for snapper grouper species, resulting in long-term benefits to the fishery.

<p><i><b>Public Comment Questions</b></i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ Should the South Atlantic Council specify allowable rigs for the recreational snapper grouper fishery?</li><li>❖ Is there a certain depth at which using single hook rigs would help avoid dead discards?</li></ul>
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## Action 4. Adjust powerhead prohibitions in the South Atlantic Region.

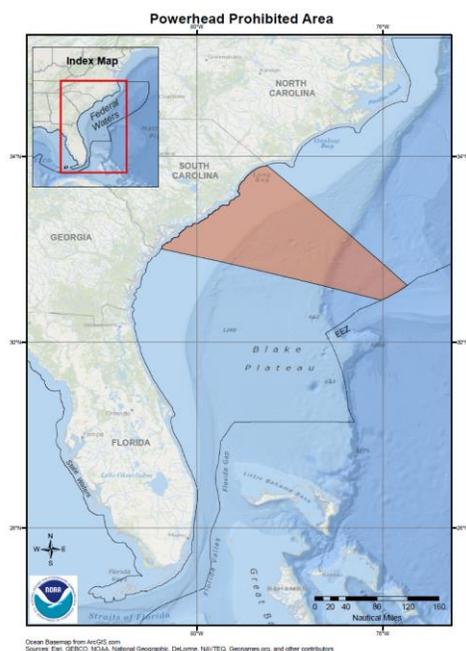
**Alternative 1 (No Action).** A powerhead may not be used in the exclusive economic zone off South Carolina to harvest South Atlantic snapper grouper. The possession of a mutilated South Atlantic snapper grouper species in or from the exclusive economic zone off South Carolina, and a powerhead is prima facie evidence that such fish was harvested by a powerhead.

**Alternative 2.** Allow the use of a powerhead to harvest South Atlantic snapper grouper species in the exclusive economic zone off South Carolina.

**Alternative 3.** Prohibit the use of a powerhead to harvest South Atlantic snapper grouper species in the exclusive economic zone of the South Atlantic Region.

### Why were powerheads banned in the EEZ off South Carolina?

Amendment 7 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan prohibited the use of explosive charges, including powerheads, to harvest snapper grouper species in the EEZ off South Carolina (**Figure 6**). Representatives from the State of South Carolina had expressed concern about their inability to enforcement their ban on powerheads in state waters and in federal special management zones (SMZs) so long as the practice was legal in federal waters. Additionally, fishermen expressed concerns about localized depletion of snapper grouper species resulting from the illegal use of powerheads in SMZs off South Carolina. Finally, a rise in the use of powerheads in the recreational sector was resulting in user conflict between recreational and commercial fishermen, as well as within the recreational sector.



**Figure 6.** Map of the current powerhead prohibited area.  
Source: SERO GIS website

## *Public Comment Question*

- ❖ Should the South Atlantic Council allow powerheads to be used to harvest snapper grouper species in the EEZ off South Carolina?

## Tentative Timing for Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 29

Process Steps		Dates
✓	Review draft options paper	March 2018
✓	Approve for scoping	June 2018
○	Scoping hearings	August 2018
	Review scoping comments, approve actions/alternatives to be analyzed.	September 2018
	Review draft amendment, modify as necessary, select preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings.	December 2018
	Public hearings	January 2019
	Review public hearing comments, approve all actions and alternatives.	March 2019
	Final action to approve for Secretarial review	June 2019

**Opportunities to provide public comment in-person include the scoping webinar, Council meetings, and public hearings. There will also be opportunities to submit written comments via the online comment form throughout the process.**

**Want to learn more about SG Regulatory Amendment 29? Attend a webinar!**  
**Watch a video!**

**Public Hearing Webinars**

Staff presentation and Q&A followed by an opportunity to provide your comments on the record.

**\*\* We will have two sessions, each starting with the staff presentation\*\***

August 7, 2018 – starting at 6 pm (Register [HERE](#))

August 8, 2018 – starting at 6 pm (Register [HERE](#))

**Don't forget! Registration is required!**

Public hearing summary, presentation and video available [HERE](#).

**Can't attend the webinars but still want to submit a comment? Here's how!**

**Submitting Written Comments:**

Comments online:

Use our online public comment form, available [HERE](#).

*Note: The Council requests that written comments be submitted using the online public comment form.*

Comments by mail:

Gregg Waugh, Executive Director, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201  
North Charleston, SC 29405

Comments by fax:

843/769-4520

Comments received by **5:00 PM on August 17, 2018**, will be included in the Scoping Comment Overview under the Snapper Grouper Committee for the September 2018 Council Meeting Briefing Book and included in the administrative record.

Comments received between August 18 and September 20, 2018, at 12:00 noon will still be available for the Council members and public to view on the SAFMC website and included in the administrative record, but will not be included in the Scoping Comment Overview for the Briefing Book.

[Want to connect with the South Atlantic Council? Stay informed, click below!](#)



[Is there something we didn't cover? Do you have more questions? Contact us!](#)

**Questions about SG Regulatory Amendment 29?**

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