



# *South Atlantic Fishery Management Council*

## *News Release*

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CONTACT: Kim Iverson  
Public Information Officer  
Toll Free 866/SAFMC-10 or 843/571-4366  
kim.iverson@safmc.net

### **Federal Fishery Managers Approve Measures to Protect Spawning Areas** *Designated Spawning Special Management Zones designed to protect habitat and snapper grouper species*

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council has approved the designation of five offshore areas as Spawning Special Management Zones (SMZs) to help protect spawning fish and unique habitat associated with spawning activities in the South Atlantic, including portions of an elbow-shaped ledge off the coast of South Carolina and a deep sinkhole in the ocean floor just off the Florida Keys. The designation, through Amendment 36 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan, would protect important spawning habitat and associated species of fish within the Council's snapper grouper management complex by limiting specific fishing and anchoring activity within the sites. If approved by the Secretary of Commerce, the five areas ranging in size from three square miles to five square miles, would be the first such Spawning SMZs designated in federal waters off the South Atlantic coast.

"The selection of the Spawning SMZs has been a long and deliberative process, focusing on sites that are most beneficial for spawning snapper grouper species such as speckled hind and warsaw grouper while balancing impacts to fishermen," said Council Chair Dr. Michelle Duval. "The Council chose these areas based on scientific recommendations, input from its advisory panels, a great deal of public input, and the results from cooperative research with fishermen familiar with the unique habitat attracting species at selected sites."

The five Spawning SMZs approved by the Council are: a 5.1 square mile area off the coast of North Carolina known as the South Cape Lookout site; a 3.03 square mile area off the coast of Georgetown, South Carolina within an area called "Devil's Hole" or "Georgetown Hole"; two experimental artificial reef areas established by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources known as "Area 51" and "Area 53", each approximately 3 square miles in size off the coast of South Carolina; and a 3.6 square mile area off the east coast of the Florida Keys referred to as the "Warsaw Hole" (50 Fathom Hole) for the number of warsaw grouper associated with the area.

Fishing for species in the snapper grouper fishery management complex and anchoring would be prohibited within the proposed Spawning SMZs; anchoring is allowed in the experimental artificial reef areas. Fishermen would be allowed to troll for pelagic species such as dolphin, tuna, and billfish in the areas. Restricting bottom fishing is designed to help protect habitat and fish that gather there to spawn, resulting in the production of more eggs and larvae that could help recruitment of juvenile fish. The areas would also help reduce bycatch and bycatch mortality for snapper grouper species, including speckled hind and warsaw grouper, two species that have been candidates for listing as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. A transit provision is also included in the amendment.

In January 2011, fishing for deepwater species such as blueline tilefish and snowy grouper was banned in federal waters greater than 240 feet deep in the entire South Atlantic region in an effort to help protect speckled hind and warsaw grouper. The ban was lifted in 2012 after it was determined it would not achieve its goal for protecting the two species. The Council began development of Amendment 36 after reviewing recommendations from its Marine Protected Area Workgroup and considering the biological benefits shown from protecting spawning areas, including those in the Dry Tortugas and Riley's Hump in the Gulf of Mexico. "Recent cooperative research conducted on candidate sites for Spawning SMZs has been very helpful in the Council's decisions," explained Council Chair Duval. "We look forward to additional cooperative research and to incorporating Citizen Science into the monitoring of these areas, working collaboratively to evaluate the effectiveness of the areas and ensure they are appropriate."

In addition to designating the Spawning SMZs, the amendment includes a sunset provision that would require the areas be reauthorized after a period of 10 years, based on their effectiveness. A System Management Plan for the Spawning SMZs was approved in conjunction with Amendment 36, outlining research/monitoring, law enforcement, and outreach needs. The amendment would also move the existing Charleston Deep Artificial Reef Marine Protected Area to match the boundary of the currently permitted site.

### **Recreational Cobia Closure in 2016:**

NOAA Fisheries announced during the Council meeting that the recreational fishery for cobia will close on June 20, 2016 in federal waters (greater than 3 miles offshore) from Georgia to New York. The length of the fishing season and the closure date is determined by NOAA Fisheries and not by the Council. The recreational annual catch limit for Atlantic migratory group cobia was exceeded in 2015 by 149% triggering accountability measures to help ensure that it is not exceeded in 2016 and resulting in the June closure. In an effort to prevent a closure of the cobia fishery in the future and ensure that fish are available throughout the management area, the Council will begin a framework amendment that includes options to implement vessel limits, reduce the current 2 fish per person/day bag limit, increase the minimum size limit, combinations of the previous measures, and changes to the fishing year. The cobia fishery occurs primarily in the spring/summer months as the fish migrate northward. Fishermen and others affected by the recreational closure have expressed strong concerns about the negative economic impacts, especially to those in North Carolina and Virginia, where the majority of landings occur from both state and federal waters. The Council is also considering options for working with the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission to allow more management flexibility.

### **Other Actions:**

The Council approved Amendment 26 to the Joint Coastal Migratory Pelagic Fishery Management Plan to implement measures for **king mackerel**. The Gulf of Mexico Council will review the joint amendment during its April meeting. The Oculina Team Report was also approved as part of the evaluation plan for the **Oculina Experimental Closed Area** off the east coast of Florida. The Council continued to modify proposed management measures for **hogfish** and **mutton snapper** stocks in the South Atlantic after reviewing public comment received during public hearings held earlier this year. A recent assessment for hogfish identified a Florida Keys/East Florida stock and a Georgia/North Carolina stock. Snapper Grouper Amendment 37 contains measures to end overfishing for the FL Keys/East Florida stock including increasing size limits, decreasing bag limits, limiting the season for the recreational fishery, and establishing commercial trip limits. The Council is coordinating with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission to address measures for mutton snapper, including options to reduce harvest during spawning season aggregations.

The Council approved measures to move forward with its **Citizen Science Initiative** following recommendations from a regional Citizen Science Program Design Workshop held January 19-21, 2016 in Charleston. Learn more at: <http://www.safmc.net/citizen-science-initiative>.

Committee reports for the March 2016 meeting are now available at [www.safmc.net](http://www.safmc.net). The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council is scheduled for June 13-17, 2016 in Cocoa Beach, FL. Details for the meeting and meeting materials will be posted online as they become available.

**The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.**