

# Vision Blueprint Commercial Regulatory Amendment 27 for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region

## Scoping/Decision Document



The Vision Blueprint Commercial Regulatory Amendment 27 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region would address specific action items in the 2016-2020 Vision Blueprint for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region.

February 16, 2017

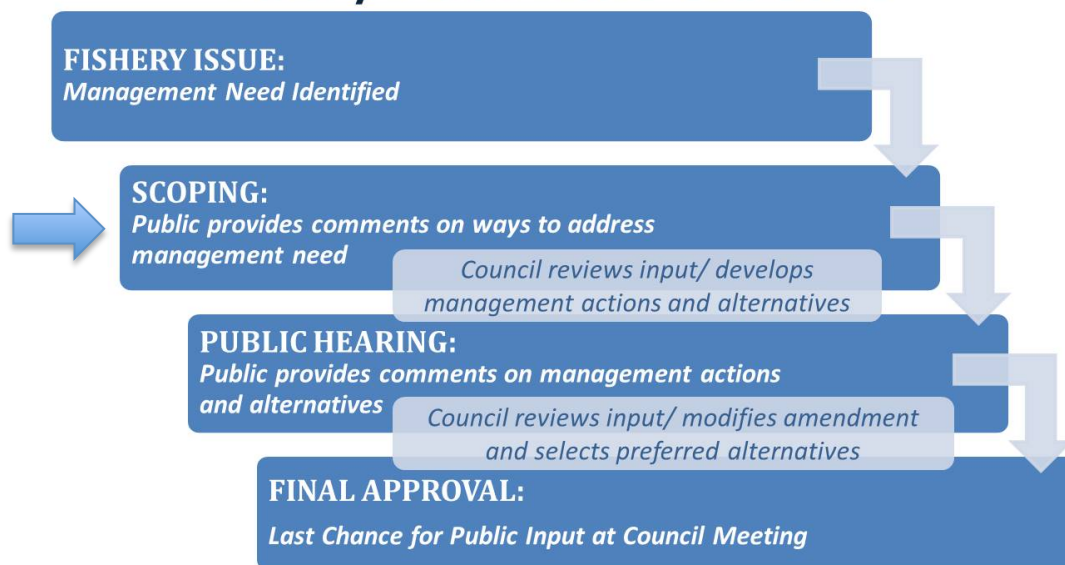
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council  
4055 Faber Place Drive; Suite 201  
North Charleston, SC 29405

Award Number FNA15NMF4410010

# 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 Council's attention. 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.

## Council Process – *FMP/Plan Amendment*



## Background

The 2016-2020 Vision Blueprint for the Snapper Grouper Fishery constitutes the long-term strategic plan for managing the fishery. The Council began developing the strategic plan in 2012 through the Visioning project, which included extensive outreach to stakeholders throughout the region and across both sectors in the fishery. The Vision Blueprint identifies the goals, objectives, strategies, and actions that support the vision for the snapper grouper fishery and centers around four goal areas - Science, Management, Communication, and Governance. During 2015, the Council prioritized action items that would be addressed through amendments to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan over the next 5 years. The Council is

considering the following items for inclusion in Vision Blueprint Commercial Regulatory Amendment 27:

- Split seasons for deep-water species, red porgy, and greater amberjack.
- Trip limits and step-downs (i.e., geared towards “traditional bandit boats”; lower vermilion trip limit in second season; trip limit for Jacks Complex).
- Re-evaluation of the shallow-water grouper closure
- Fishing year changes (i.e., golden tilefish hook-and-line)
- Removal of minimum size limits for deep-water species (Note: this action is being considered in Vision Blueprint Recreational Amendment 26 and has been added here for completion)
- Modification of the commercial minimum size limit for gray triggerfish off east Florida (Note: this item was added just prior to scoping).

Additional action items from the Vision Blueprint are being considered in Amendment 43 (red snapper management and recreational reporting) that could affect the commercial sector. Scoping for that amendment is also being conducted at this time.

## Commercial Split Seasons

The use of split seasons for the commercial sector is addressed under the Vision Blueprint’s Strategy 2.3 - *Support development of management approaches that account for the seasonality of the snapper grouper fishery*. One of the priority actions under that strategy states *Expand the use of split seasons for the commercial fishery*. The intent is to “line up” harvest for species that are often caught together to level out accessibility in different areas and to reduce regulatory discards. Factors such as distance to fishing grounds and weather/temperature affect availability of some species to the commercial fleets in different parts of the Council’s jurisdiction.

### Deep-water species

The Council is interested in exploring concurrent commercial seasons for deep-water species (snowy grouper, blueline tilefish, golden tilefish, yellowedge grouper, silk snapper, misty grouper, queen snapper, and blackfin snapper). The fishing year for the commercial sector for deep-water snapper grouper species is currently the calendar year. While these deep-water species are often caught together, some areas report a very “clean” harvest of a single species. The Council is considering establishing seasons of equal or varying length and split the commercial annual catch limit (ACL) for each species in different ways (i.e., 50/50, 60/40, etc.) to optimize benefits for fishermen and consumers. Stock assessments have been conducted only on snowy grouper, blueline tilefish, and golden tilefish and these species are managed under their own ACLs. The remainder of the deep-water species (yellowedge grouper, silk snapper, misty grouper, queen snapper, and blackfin snapper) is managed as a complex under a complex ACL.

### Red Porgy

Restrictions on the harvest of red porgy were initially put in place in 1999 to address the overfishing and overfished status of red porgy. Sale and purchase of red porgy were prohibited January through April with a 1-fish per person/day possession limit for both sectors to minimize

discards. A 50-pound commercial trip limit was put in place for the remainder of the year. In 2006, the possession limit was increased to 3-fish per person per day/trip and the commercial trip limit was increased to 120 fish during May-December.

The Council and the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) have held discussions on a possible commercial split season for red porgy that would mirror the existing seasons for vermilion snapper and gray triggerfish. The Council currently manages commercial harvest of these species under two six-month seasons, January-June and July-December. The commercial ACL is split equally between the two seasons, and there is a rollover provision to allow the unused portion of the commercial ACL from Season 1 to roll over to Season 2. There is no rollover provision from Season 2 to the following fishing year.

Commercial harvest of red porgy is still prohibited annually from January-April. Gray triggerfish and vermilion snapper are two species that can be harvested during this time. There is concern that commercial harvest of vermilion snapper and gray triggerfish is resulting in significant discards of red porgy. The expectation is that implementing a commercial split season for red porgy, together with removing the annual closure for red porgy, would minimize discards. In addition, splitting the red porgy commercial ACL into two seasons may extend commercial harvest of this species and impart economic benefits to fishermen and communities.

At their April 2015 meeting, the Snapper Grouper AP approved a motion recommending a commercial split season for red porgy as well as a commercial trip limit.

#### Greater Amberjack

In 2014, the fishing year for greater amberjack was changed from May 1 through April 30 to a fishing year of March 1 through the end of February. This was done to allow the commercial sector access to greater amberjack during the Lenten season, when there is an increase in demand for fish. Commercial harvest is still prohibited annually during the month of April. The Council is interested in whether stakeholders would also support a commercial split season for greater amberjack.

# How do you think commercial split seasons should be structured and for which species?

## **Possible options for deep-water species:**

1. Allocate the commercial ACLs for deep-water species into two quotas: 50% to the period January 1 through June 30 and 50% to the period July 1 through December 31. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward.
  - Only for some deep-water species or all of them?
2. Allocate the commercial ACLs for deep-water species into two quotas: ??% to the period January 1 through June 30 and ??% to the period July 1 through December 31. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward.
  - Only for some deep-water species or all of them?
3. Allocate the commercial ACLs for deep-water species into two quotas: ??% to the period January 1 through \_\_\_\_\_ and ??% to the period \_\_\_\_\_ through December 31. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward.
  - Only for some deep-water species or all of them?

## **Possible options for red porgy:**

4. Remove the annual January 1 to April 30 spawning season closure for red porgy. Allocate the directed commercial red porgy ACL into two quotas: 50% to the period January 1 through June 30 and 50% to the period July 1 through December 31. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward.
5. Remove the annual January 1 to April 30 spawning season closure for red porgy. Allocate the directed commercial red porgy ACL into two quotas: ??% to the period January 1 through June 30 and ??% to the period July 1 through December 31. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward.
6. Remove the annual January 1 to April 30 spawning season closure for red porgy. Allocate the directed commercial red porgy ACL into two quotas: ??% to the period January 1 through \_\_\_\_\_ and ??% to the period \_\_\_\_\_ through December 31. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward.

## **Possible options for greater amberjack:**

7. Allocate the commercial ACL for greater amberjack into two quotas: ??% to the period March 1 through August 31 and ??% to the period September 1 through the end of

February. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward. Commercial harvest would still be prohibited in April each year.

8. Allocate the commercial ACL for greater amberjack into two quotas: ??% to the period March 1 through June 30 and ??% to the period July 1 through the end of February. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward. Commercial harvest would still be prohibited in April each year.
9. Allocate the commercial ACL for greater amberjack into two quotas: ??% to the period March 1 through March 31 and ??% to the period May 1 through the end of February. Any remaining quota from Season 1 would transfer to Season 2. Any remaining quota from Season 2 would not be carried forward. Commercial harvest would still be prohibited in April each year.

### **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Comments & Recommendations (Fall 2016):**

- Golden tilefish are caught separately from other deep-water species so it may be appropriate to exclude.
- Yellowedge grouper is currently in the deep-water complex and has not been assessed.
- Consider a split season for snowy along with a reduction in the trip limit to 100 pounds.
- Consider including sub-alternatives for each species to allow flexibility in harvest or management.

### **Summary of Public Scoping Comments:**

- Most commenters supported a commercial split season for red porgy to coincide with that of vermilion and gray triggerfish to minimize discards.
- Some opposition/uncertainty about a commercial split season for greater amberjack. Some commenters expressed support for exploring the option. One suggested a Sept-Feb at 70% & Mar-Oct at 30%.
- Consider a commercial split season for shallow-water groupers in order to allow access to fishermen in Florida early in the year.
- Some support for commercial split season for deep-water species to ameliorate derby fishing conditions in certain areas but opposition for it in other areas.
- Suggest using a commercial ACT to implement trip limit-step downs as “bycatch allowance” and project opening dates to coincide with the step-down occurring during that specie’s spawning season.

**COMMITTEE ACTIONS:**

- APPROVE/DISAPPROVE INCLUSION OF ACTION(S) TO IMPLEMENT COMMERCIAL SPLIT SEASONS FOR RED PORGY, DEEWATER SPECIES, AND GREATER AMBERJACK IN VISION BLUEPRINT REGULATORY AMENDMENT 27
- PROVIDE GUIDANCE ON A RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES FOR ANALYSIS

## Commercial Trip Limits and Trip Limit Step-Downs

The use of trip limits for the commercial sector is addressed under the Vision Blueprint's Strategy 2.1 – *Support development of management approaches that address retention of snapper grouper species*. The first priority action under this strategy is to consider bag limit and trip limit adjustments for the recreational and commercial sectors, respectively. Another priority under this strategy is to consider alternative approaches to managing traditional multi-day bandit boats/fishery (e.g., permit stacking, multi-day trip endorsement, sector/community shares, etc.).

### Vermilion Snapper

The Snapper Grouper AP has discussed lowering the trip limit for vermilion snapper in the second season (July-December). Currently, a 1,000-pound (gw) commercial trip limit is in effect until 75% of the commercial ACL is met or projected to be met. Thereafter, the trip limit is reduced to 500 pounds. Some AP members, however, are concerned that, unless there is a restriction placed on the number of trips, a lower trip limit in the second season would be ineffective in extending the harvest since some commercial operations (i.e., “day boats”) would simply increase their effort.

### “Traditional Bandit Boats”

Similar concerns have prompted discussions among Council members on possibly tailoring the management approach (trip limits and possibly other management elements) to the needs of “traditional bandit boats” vs. “day boats”. Arguably, characterizing what constitutes a “traditional bandit boat” and a “day boat” would have to be the first step if the Council were to follow this approach.

### Golden Tilefish

Commercial harvest of golden tilefish and black sea bass is managed with gear endorsements and trip limits. There has been interest in exploring whether restrictions on the number of trips or trip frequency could be used to lengthen the season for the longline component of the golden tilefish fishery. Through implementation of Amendment 18B, 23 vessels obtained endorsements to fish for 75% of the commercial golden tilefish ACL using longline gear under a 4,000 trip limit with no step-down. The remaining 25% of the commercial ACL was allocated to the hook-and-line component under a 500-pound trip limit.

### Jacks Complex

In December 2014, the Council directed staff to explore alternatives for an almaco jack commercial trip limit. During discussions, Council members agreed that the commercial ACL for almaco jack was being caught very early and the species is encountered very frequently when fishing commercially for other species in the management unit. Draft alternatives were included in the Options Paper for Regulatory Amendment 24, which was not developed. Currently, the commercial ACL for the Jacks Complex (almaco jack, banded rudderfish, and lesser amberjack) is 189,422 pounds (whole weight).

In April 2015, the Snapper Grouper AP approved the following motion:



*Motion: Recommend that the Council consider commercial trip limits of 300-500 pounds for almaco jack.*

## **Do you think new trip limits and step-downs should be implemented or existing ones modified?**

1. Modify the vermilion snapper trip limit for Season 2 (July-Dec)
  - What should the trip limit be lowered to in Season 2?
  - Should there be a set number of trips per week or month for vessels with a commercial unlimited snapper grouper permit during Season 2?
2. Evaluate and tailor management approaches to address the needs of “traditional bandit boats”
  - What constitutes a “traditional bandit boat”? – Vessels engaging in multi-day trips?
  - Consider aggregate trip limits for such vessels?

**NOTE: items suggested during scoping hearings such a permit stacking and multi-day trip endorsements, would have to be developed through a plan amendment.**
3. Consider specifying trip frequency for vessels with golden tilefish longline endorsements
  - Should there be a set number of trips per month or days at sea?
  - Should a trip limit step-down be established for the longline component?
4. Consider trip limits for the Jacks Complex and/or its component species
  - Should the Council specify a commercial trip limit for almaco jack? What would be appropriate trip limit options?
  - Should there be an aggregate trip limit for the Jacks Complex only (almaco jack, banded rudderfish, and lesser amberjack)? What would be appropriate trip limit options?
  - Should greater amberjack be included in an aggregate trip limit? What would be appropriate trip limit options?
5. Specify a commercial Annual Catch Target (below the ACL) to trigger trip limit step-downs?
  - For all species where step-downs are currently used (vermilion snapper, gag, etc.)?
  - For what species?

**NOTE: specification of a commercial ACT may have to be developed through a plan amendment.**

### **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Comments & Recommendations (Fall 2016):**

- “Traditional bandit boat” = vessel that stays out more than 48 hours.
- Fishermen are changing their behavior: is the Council trying to manage to keep traditional vessels or do they want to allow fishery change?

- Explore lowering commercial trip limit for vermilion in second season to 750 pounds and retain the existing step-down to 500 pounds when 75% of the commercial ACL has been landed.
- Explore trip limits for the Jacks Complex of 300 to 500 pounds.
- There is demand for banded rudderfish throughout the year so there is a need to extend availability.

### **Summary of Public Scoping Comments:**

- Suggestion of 500-pound commercial trip limit for all species with a daily limit of no more than 3,000 or 4,000 pounds. This would prevent some vessels from catching more than their share of any one species and force them to fish for other species, which in turn would create longer seasons.
- Trip limits for all species should be lowered so that when 75% of the ACL is met to extend the season for the majority of the fishermen.
- Some support for reducing the vermilion snapper trip limit for Season 2 (July-Dec) to 750 lbs. and maintaining the 500 lbs. step-down when 75 percent of the ACL has been met.
- A slightly lower trip limit on vermilion snapper would help extend the fishing season. However, a lower trip limit the second season would tremendously hurt NC fisherman because of the weather and current issues early in the year.
- Consider a 500-pound trip limit in the July opening of vermilion snapper since there are so many other fisheries open during that time. This would diminish discards of triggerfish and red porgy and possible make the season last until November.
- Trip limits – the vermilion snapper trip limit for the second season should start at 750 pounds, then lower it to 250 or 300 pounds when 75% of the ACL is met.
- Consider a trip limit for almaco and take the species out of the Jack Complex. Explore 300 to 500 pounds trip limits.
- Remove almaco jacks from the Jack Complex and specify its own ACL or implement a trip limit.
- Consider a trip limit for the Jacks Complex.
- Support removing almaco jack from the Jacks Complex and establishing a 300 to 500 lbs. almaco trip limit.
- Some opposition to almaco trip limit.
- Number of trips per week or month would also hurt NC fisherman because of the weather and current issues.
- Consider the following management options below for traditional bandit boats. Several commenters supported permit stacking and multi-day trip endorsements.
  - Permit Stacking - Allow fisherman/boat owners the option to have multiple Snapper Grouper Permits aboard one vessel in order to have multiple trip limits aboard that vessel. There would be a maximum number of permits per vessel.
  - Multi Day Trip Endorsement - A Multi Day Trip Endorsement would allow vessels on extended trips the availability to retain multiple day/trip limits. Use log book catch history to determine numbers of days the endorsement would be issued for each vessel.

- Weekly Limits - Smaller, faster vessels can go out every day and catch a trip limit seven days a week. A weekly limit, whether it was caught in three days or seven days, would level the playing field as well as maximize efficiency for all vessels.
- Separate snapper grouper commercial fishery into management zones (like for king mackerel) because distance to fishing grounds is very different in different areas.
- There is no need to tailor a management approach, trip limits and possibly other management measures, to the needs of traditional bandit boats versus day boats. The fishermen should decide what size and type of boat they should operate, based on the state of the fisheries.
- It would make more sense not to differentiate day boats and “traditional bandit boats” but to state how many trip limits can be offloaded per week. That way a traditional boat can stay out for their trip to get their limit and a day boat can still work on their limit on a different day.
- Step downs – trip limit step-downs need to be kept high enough to keep the traditional bandit boats able to fish. These bigger, slower boats cannot make trips without a minimum of 500 lbs each of vermilion, trigger, etc.

#### **COMMITTEE ACTIONS:**

- APPROVE/DISAPPROVE INCLUSION OF ACTION(S) TO IMPLEMENT NEW OR MODIFY EXISTING TRIP LIMITS AND TRIP LIMIT STEP-DOWNS IN VISION BLUEPRINT REGULATORY AMENDMENT 27.
- PROVIDE GUIDANCE ON A RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES FOR ANALYSIS

## Shallow-water Grouper Closure

The use of seasonal closures to manage the snapper grouper fishery is addressed under the Vision Blueprint's Strategy 1.3 - *Consider use of alternative sub-regional management strategies that are not quota-based*. The first priority under this strategy is to use staggered spawning season closures to address latitudinal differences in spawning activity. In addition, under "Hot Topic" items, the Vision Blueprint identifies adjusting the seasonal spawning closure for shallow-water groupers. The Council is considering making modifications to the shallow-water grouper closure for the recreational sector in the Vision Blueprint Recreational Regulatory Amendment 26.

The annual closure on the possession (commercial and recreational) of shallow-water groupers from January through April was established in 2009 in response to needed modifications to end overfishing of gag and to protect spawning fish. Species included in the closure are: gag, black grouper, scamp, yellowfin grouper, red grouper, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, graysby, and coney. This action was taken prior to implementation of ACLs; avoiding overfishing of gag is now achieved with the ACLs. However, the annual closure protects gag and other shallow-water groupers during important spawning times.

The current regulation is as follows: During January through April each year, no person may fish for, harvest, or possess in or from the South Atlantic EEZ any South Atlantic shallow-water grouper (gag, black grouper, red grouper, scamp, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney). In addition, for a person on board a vessel for which a valid Federal charter vessel/headboat permit for South Atlantic snapper grouper has been issued, the provisions of this closure apply in the South Atlantic, regardless if fish are caught in state or Federal waters.

At their April 2015 meeting, the Snapper Grouper AP made the motions below regarding the shallow-water grouper closure.

*Motion: AP recommends Alternative 1, no action, on removing the spawning season closure for shallow-water groupers.*

*Motion: the AP recommends that the Council move forward with identifying spawning areas for shallow-water groupers that may be appropriate, at some point, to designate as spawning SMZs. \*\*\*intent is to eventually remove the spawning season closure once spawning areas are identified and protected\*\*\*\**

## Do you think the shallow-water grouper closure should be changed?

**The Council would like your input on red grouper and scamp, in particular, as stakeholders have expressed concern over the status of those species. How should the seasonal closure be modified for those species?**

1. Should the Council retain the annual prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers from January 1 through April 30 but exclude one or more species? Which ones?
2. Should the annual closure be adjusted by area? For example:
  - East Florida: closure applies January – February (or some other time period?)
  - Georgia and South Carolina: closure applies March – April (or some other time period?)
  - North Carolina: closure applies May – June (or some other time period?)

*NOTE: Sub-alternatives would be refined based on scientifically determined spawning seasons of affected species.*

*NOTE: Options below were suggested during development of the Joint South Florida Draft Amendment in 2013 (the amendment was not completed).*

3. Remove the annual prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers for all affected grouper species south of 28° North latitude (approximately off Palm Bay, Florida).
4. Modify the timing of the annual prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers for all affected grouper species south of 28° North latitude (approximately off Palm Bay, Florida).
  - January – March
  - February – March
  - February – April
  - February – May
5. Exclude black grouper from the annual prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers and establish a separate seasonal closure for black grouper.
  - January – March
  - January
  - February
  - March
6. Exclude gag from the annual prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers south of 28° North latitude (approximately off Palm Bay, Florida).
7. Exclude gag from the annual prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers south of 28° North latitude (approximately off Palm Bay, Florida) and establish a separate seasonal closure for gag in that area.
  - January – March
  - January
  - February

- March
  - March – April
8. Exclude red grouper and scamp from the annual prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers south of 31° North latitude (approximately off St. Andrew Sound, Georgia).
  9. Exclude red grouper from the annual prohibition on commercial harvest and possession of shallow-water groupers south of 31° North latitude (approximately off St. Andrew Sound, Georgia) and establish a separate seasonal closure for red grouper in that area.
    - February – April
    - February – May
    - March – April
    - March – May

### **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Comments & Recommendations (Fall 2016):**

- Shallow-water grouper closure is working fine as it is.
- AP acknowledges there are specific needs for South Florida.

*Motion: AP recommends taking no action on removing or modifying the shallow-water grouper closure.*

### **Summary of Public Scoping Comments:**

- Most commenters recommended no action.
- Few suggestions to remove the closure.
- The annual spawning season prohibition should be maintained and extended to continue to allow the species to rebound until monthly catch surveys or other data-driven metrics indicate a sufficient recovery.
- Evaluate after better science is available to determine the correct timing of spawning for affected species.
- Commenters (in Florida) expressed frustration at not having access to shallow-water grouper early in the year when the fish are off the east coast of Florida. Also, consider that the closure applies to the recreational sector yet the recreational ACLs for shallow-water groupers have never been met.
- Consider a commercial split season for all shallow-water groupers in order to allow access to fishermen in Florida early in the year.
- One commenter stated that grouper stocks are suffering and have not rebounded with the four-month closure and reduced bag limits and ACLs. Therefore, consider making no changes that will increase mortality on these species. In addition to the four-month closure, consider extending the closure time to May or June for scamp and red grouper, which appear to be really suffering.

- The shallow-water grouper closure should be replaced with a 50-pound by-catch allowance that shifts north over a three-month period that works best for each state.
- Consider seasonal closure by area as long as the total duration of closure in each area is of equal four-month duration the individual areas should be adjusted to match the spawning seasons by area to achieve highest possibly efficacy of the closure.
- Commercial harvest of shallow-water groupers species should be concurrent by area as bycatch will have a detrimental effect on even the protected species if anglers are targeting a species that are open during the same period. The only changes that should be made to the commercial closure for shallow-water groupers is the identification of spawning areas and aligning the 4 month closure to correspond with the time of year where it would have the greatest effect in each area.

#### **COMMITTEE ACTIONS:**

- APPROVE/DISAPPROVE INCLUSION OF ACTION TO MODIFY THE ANNUAL SHALLOW-WATER GROUPER CLOSURE IN VISION BLUEPRINT REGULATORY AMENDMENT 27.
- PROVIDE GUIDANCE ON A RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES FOR ANALYSIS

## Modification to the Fishing Year for the Commercial Golden Tilefish Hook-and-Line Component

At the request of the Snapper Grouper AP, the Council included an action to consider changing the start date of the fishing year for the hook-and-line component of the commercial golden tilefish fishery in Regulatory Amendment 23. However, the amendment was not developed pending an update to the golden tilefish stock assessment and the conclusion of the Visioning Project. In September 2016, the Council requested that the action be again included for consideration in the Options Paper for the Vision Blueprint Commercial Regulatory Amendment 27.

The rationale behind such a modification is to avoid market flooding early in the year when the longline vessels set out to harvest their portion of the commercial ACL. The longline fishery for golden tilefish is short-lived, however, and the abundance of product on the market tends to drive prices down early in the year. Commercial fishermen who harvest golden tilefish with hook-and-line gear would prefer to have their fishing year begin after the longline fleet has landed their ACL to spread out availability of product and optimize prices. Because the longline fleet is concentrated off central Florida, however, a shift in the fishing year may present benefits to one area at the expense of another. For instance, hook-and-line fishermen who target golden tilefish elsewhere in Florida would prefer a January 1 start date whereas fishermen off the Carolinas might benefit from a springtime start date due to weather. In addition, hook-and-line fishermen who target other deep-water species in addition to golden tilefish are concerned that different fishing years for deep-water species would result in increased discards. Commercial split seasons for deep-water species, as proposed earlier in this Scoping Document, may be an avenue to address the concerns of hook-and-line fishermen who target golden tilefish.

At their April 2015 meeting, the Snapper Grouper AP approved a motion to request that the Council consider a start date for the golden tilefish hook-and-line sector of March 15. In addition, AP members stated that the intent of modifying the fishing year start date for the hook-and-line sector would be to bring back the fall fishery.

## Do you think the fishing year for the commercial golden tilefish hook-and-line sector should be changed?

1. Change the fishing year for the hook-and-line sector of the commercial golden tilefish fishery to:
  - March 1 to February 28/29
  - April 1 to March 31
  - May 1 to April 30



### **Summary of Public Scoping Comments:**

- Most commenters recommended no action.
- One commenter disagreed with changing the year for the hook-and-line golden tilefish fishery. If it were to change, consider a start date in September or October, to keep the winter fishery open, and bring back the fall fishery. Opening the hook-and-line component of golden tilefish in the spring would disadvantage fishermen in south Florida and create more discards.
- Consider modifying the start date for the hook-and-line golden tilefish fishery to after the longline fleet has landed their portion of the commercial ACL. This would help keep prices high.
- Strong opposition to change in fishing year for hook-and-liners because the Deep-water Complex, Snowy Grouper, and Blue Line/Gray Tilefish all open January 1st (currently along with Golden Tilefish). All of these species are caught in deep water. If they do not open together, then there will be much more dead discards of these species.
- Support for management options that would result in extending the longline fishery (monthly limit instead of trip limit).
- Allow catch history to remain with golden tilefish longline endorsement.
- Suggestion to change start date of fishing year to September 1.

### **COMMITTEE ACTION:**

- APPROVE/DISAPPROVE INCLUSION OF ACTION TO MODIFY THE FISHING YEAR FOR THE HOOK-AND-LINE COMPONENT OF THE COMMERCIAL GOLDEN TIELFISH FISHERY IN VISION BLUEPRINT REGULATORY AMENDMENT 27.
- PROVIDE GUIDANCE ON A RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES FOR ANALYSIS

## Removal of Size Limits for Deep-water Species

(NOTE: The Council is seeking input on this action from the recreational sector in Vision Blueprint Amendment 26. The option was also include here for completion.)

Removal of size limits for deep-water species is addressed in the Vision Blueprint Strategy 4.2 (in Appendix B) -- *Consider management approaches that address the impact of depth on bycatch of snapper grouper species.*

Three species currently included in the Deep-water Complex – silk snapper, queen snapper, and blackfin snapper – have a 12-inch total length minimum size limit in federal waters. These size limits were put in place long ago, before estimates of discard mortality were available and long before the creation of the various Complexes. Species in the Deep-water Complex are typically associated with high discard mortality. To curb discard losses, the Council is considering action to eliminate minimum size limit requirements for these deep-water species.

## Do you think the minimum size limits for deep-water species should be removed?

1. Remove the 12” TL minimum size limit for queen snapper.
2. Remove the 12” TL minimum size limit for silk snapper.
3. Remove the 12” TL minimum size limit for blackfin snapper.

### **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Comments & Recommendations (Fall 2016):**

*Motion: AP recommends removing the minimum size limit on all three species.*

### **Summary of Public Scoping Comments:**

- The majority of commenters supported removal of the size limits for deep-water species.

### **COMMITTEE ACTION:**

- APPROVE/DISAPPROVE INCLUSION OF ACTION TO REMOVE COMMERCIAL MINIMUM SIZE LIMITS FOR DEEP-WATER SPECIES N VISION BLUEPRINT REGULATORY AMENDMENT 27.
- PROVIDE GUIDANCE ON A RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES FOR ANALYSIS

## Modification of the Commercial Minimum Size Limit for Gray Triggerfish

The commercial minimum size limit for gray triggerfish was modified in 2015 through implementation of Snapper Grouper Amendment 29. A commercial minimum size limit of 12 inches fork length (FL) was implemented in the EEZ off North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, and a commercial minimum size limit of 14 inches FL was put in place in federal waters off east Florida. The intent of these regulations was to put in place precautionary measures due to concerns about the status of the gray triggerfish stock in the South Atlantic and to align regulations with those in the Gulf. However, since the new minimum size limit went into effect (on July 1, 2015), stakeholders in Florida have voiced concern to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) regarding increasing discards of gray triggerfish in south Florida where the average size of gray triggerfish is smaller than that off northeast Florida. In response, the FWC is working to decrease the recreational minimum size limit to 12 inches FL. This would address the discard issue in South Florida and make the minimum size limit consistent with that in the EEZ off the rest of the South Atlantic states.

### Do you think the commercial minimum size limit for gray triggerfish should be changed?

1. Decrease the commercial minimum size limit for gray triggerfish in Federal waters off the east coast of Florida to:
  - 12 inches FL
  - Others?

#### **Summary of Public Scoping Comments:**

- Consider a minimum size limit of fourteen inches for all the South Atlantic. The twelve inches is too small; yield is too low. Therefore, we should go to the fourteen inches and let the fish that are smaller than that spawn and grow and get larger.
- The majority of commenters supported decreasing the commercial minimum size limit for gray triggerfish in Federal waters off the east coast of Florida to 12”.

#### **COMMITTEE ACTION:**

- APPROVE/DISAPPROVE INCLUSION OF ACTION TO MODIFY THE COMMERCIAL MINIMUM SIZE LIMIT FOR GRAY TRIGGERFISH OFF EAST FLORIDA IN VISION BLUEPRINT REGULATORY AMENDMENT 27.
- PROVIDE GUIDANCE ON A RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES FOR ANALYSIS

## Proposed Timing

- Scoping webinar hearings – January/February 2017
- Review scoping comments and revise actions/alternatives – March 2017
- Review effects analysis and approve for public hearings – June 2017
- Public hearings – August 2017
- Review public hearing comments & approve all actions/alternatives – September 2017
- Final action to approve for Secretarial review – December 2017