



THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Amendment 61

Evaluation of the Fishery Management Unit

October 2025

Scoping Document

Online Scoping Session

Scoping information, including this document and a video presentation, are posted on the Council's website. Clarifying questions about the posted materials can be directed to John Hadley at john.hadley@safmc.net or Allie Iberle at allie.iberle@safmc.net. Comments can be posted online, by mail, or by fax, using the information at the end of this document.

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Background

In December 2024, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) requested information to begin evaluating the need for federal conservation and management of species in the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Unit (FMU). Since then, the Council has identified 17 species to examine more in-depth to determine whether the species should be removed from the FMU or designated as ecosystem component (EC) species. These species are misty grouper, margate, sailor's choice, tomtate, white grunt, bar jack, jolthead porgy, knobbed porgy, saucereye porgy, scup, whitebone porgy, banded rudderfish, blackfin snapper, cubera snapper, queen snapper, Atlantic spadefish, and sand tilefish.

In June 2025, the Council reviewed information that included federal guidelines to facilitate a discussion of whether the 17 selected snapper grouper species are in need of federal conservation and management, noting the following:

- The Council concluded that all 17 species should be considered for either designation as EC species or removal from the FMU through an amendment.
- Several Council members noted that they do not want most of this group of species to be completely unregulated but also recognized that the need for conservation and management of these species may not rise to the same level as other species in the FMU.
- Council members also noted that some state-level regulations for these species, particularly in North Carolina and South Carolina, are currently dependent on federal regulations.

At their September 2025 meeting, the Council reviewed Amendment 61, refined the potential measures, and approved the amendment for scoping.

What is scoping?

Scoping is an early step in the development of an amendment, in which the Council solicits public input on what actions and alternatives should (or should not) be considered in an amendment. Amendment actions are typically developed with several alternatives, all of which include a no-action alternative that would keep the status quo. Comments on why an action or alternative is or is not necessary are critical to inform the Council of the fishery's needs.



Later in the process, during the public comment period, the Council will again solicit public input on which of the considered alternatives should be selected as the preferred management actions.

What is the Council considering?

The Council has begun to evaluate the need for federal management for 17 Snapper Grouper species. If federal management is no longer needed for some or all of the species, the Council is considering either:

- Removing the selected species from the Fishery Management Unit.

OR

- Designating the selected species as ecosystem component species.

Species being considered for removal from federal management

The species being considered for evaluation of the need for federal conservation and management are listed with their sector annual catch limits (ACLs) in Table 1. Species that are part of a complex are listed with their complex sector ACLs as well. Species in each complex that are not being considered for further evaluation are shaded in gray and provided for context. Complexes are managed under a single, collective ACL for all species in the complex. Commercial and recreational ACLs for individual species within complexes are shown in italics to indicate expected distributions of catch within complexes at the time that the ACLs were set. Figure 1 is included to help visualize the proportion of a complex ACL that is accounted for by each species in Table 1.



The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

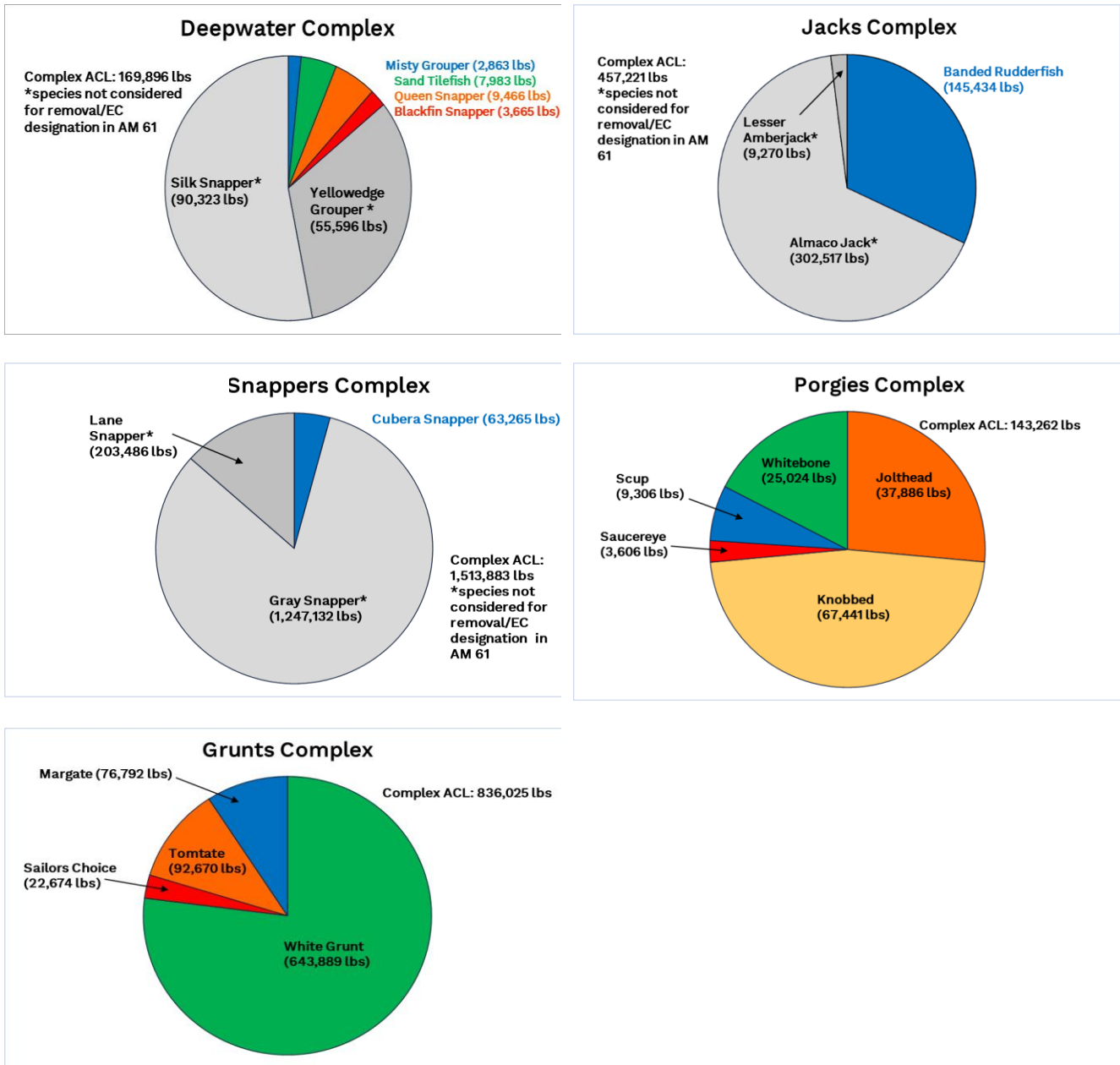
Table 1. Sector and total ACLs for Snapper Grouper species requested by the Council for further evaluation of the need for conservation and management*.

Complex/Species	Com ACL (lbs ww)	Rec ACL (CHTS lbs ww)	Total ACL (lbs ww)	Percent of Total Complex ACL
Atlantic Spadefish	150,552	661,926	812,478	-
Bar Jack	13,228	49,021	62,249	-
Deepwater Complex	131,268	38,628	169,896	-
Misty Grouper	2,388	475	2,863	1.7%
Sand Tilefish	1,770	6,213	7,983	4.7%
Queen Snapper	8,756	710	9,466	5.6%
Blackfin Snapper	1,096	2,569	3,665	2.2%
Yellowedge Grouper	50,464	5,132	55,596	32.7%
Silk Snapper	66,794	23,529	90,323	53.2%
Jacks Complex	189,422	267,799	457,221	-
Banded Rudderfish	37,829	107,605	145,434	31.8%
Almaco Jack	147,322	155,195	302,517	66.2%
Lesser Amberjack	4,270	5,000	9,270	2.0%
Snappers Complex	344,575	1,169,308	1,513,883	-
Cubera Snapper	12,381	50,884	63,265	4.2%
Gray Snapper	302,180	944,852	1,247,132	82.4%
Lane Snapper	30,014	173,472	203,486	13.4%
Porgies Complex	36,348	106,914	143,262	-
Jolthead Porgy	1,571	36,315	37,886	26.4%
Knobbed Porgy	34,515	32,926	67,441	47.1%
Saucereye Porgy	0	3,606	3,606	2.5%
Scup	0	9,306	9,306	6.5%
Whitebone Porgy	262	24,762	25,024	17.5%
Grunts Complex	217,903	618,122	836,025	-
White Grunt	203,405	440,484	643,889	77.0%
Sailor's Choice	0	22,674	22,674	2.7%
Tomtate	0	92,670	92,670	11.1%
Margate	14,498	62,294	76,792	9.2%

* Species in each complex that are not being considered for further evaluation are shaded in gray and provided for context.



Figure 1. Complex ACLs for snapper grouper species requested by the Council for further evaluation of the need for federal conservation and management.





What does removal from federal management entail and what does the Council consider when making such a determination?

The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) section 302(h)(1) requires that a Council prepare a FMP for each fishery under its authority that requires conservation and management. Not every fishery, species, or stock requires federal management. Stocks that are predominately caught in federal waters and are overfished or subject to overfishing, or likely to become overfished or subject to overfishing, are considered to require conservation and management (50 CFR § 600.305(c)(1)). Beyond such stocks, Councils may determine that additional stocks require “conservation and management.” To make this determination a Council should consider the following non-exhaustive list of factors when deciding whether additional stocks require conservation and management:

- i. The stock is an important component of the marine environment.
- ii. The stock is caught by the fishery.
- iii. Whether an FMP can improve or maintain the condition of the stock.
- iv. The stock is a target of a fishery.
- v. The stock is important to commercial, recreational, or subsistence users.
- vi. The fishery is important to the Nation or to the regional economy.
- vii. The need to resolve competing interests and conflicts among user groups and whether an FMP can further that resolution.
- viii. The economic condition of a fishery and whether an FMP can produce more efficient utilization.
- ix. The needs of a developing fishery, and whether an FMP can foster orderly growth.
- x. The extent to which the fishery is already adequately managed by states, by state/Federal programs, or by Federal regulations pursuant to other FMPs or international commissions, or by industry self-regulation, consistent with the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act and other applicable law.

If the Council determines that a species is no longer in need of federal conservation and management, the species may be removed from the federal FMP all together. In this scenario, all previously existing federal regulations (e.g., possession limits, permit requirements, reporting requirements, ACLs, etc.) would no longer apply. States would be able to implement regulations for the species if they decided to do so and the state regulations could be extended into federal waters. If states did not take up management of the species removed from federal management, no regulations or management



measures would apply for that species in federal waters (3 to 200 miles offshore).

Alternatively, the species could remain within the FMP but be designated an EC species. Since EC species, by definition, are no longer in need of federal conservation and management, then most federal regulations and management measures for the species such as ACLs, restrictive trip or bag limits, and size limits would be removed in federal waters. Some non-restrictive measures could remain in place such as permitting and reporting requirements and there could potentially be aggregate possession limits put in place that are relatively non-restrictive (i.e., a notably high poundage- or number-based limit).

Parameters for designating EC species

Per the National Standard Guidelines ([50 C.F.R §600 Subpart-D](#)), Councils have the option to establish EC species within a federal FMP if they determine that the species do not require conservation and management, but should be listed in a federal FMP in order to achieve ecosystem management objectives. In such a case, the NS Guidelines provide some guidance on factors that a Council should consider when determining whether species need federal conservation and management as well as whether species can be considered as ECs. The following descriptions provide information on the definition of EC species and how EC species may be considered in a federal FMP.

What are ecosystem component species?

EC species are defined as *“stocks that a Council or the Secretary has determined do not require conservation and management, but desire to list in an FMP in order to achieve ecosystem management objectives”* (50 C.F.R §600.305(d)(13)).

How can a Council designate species as ecosystem components?

Under National Standards General guidelines, *“Councils may choose to identify stocks within their FMPs as ecosystem component (EC) species...if a Council determines that the stocks do not require conservation and management based on the considerations and factors in paragraph (c)(1) of this section. EC species may be identified at the species or stock level, and may be grouped*



into complexes. Consistent with National Standard 9¹, MSA section 303(b)(12)², and other applicable MSA sections, management measures can be adopted in order to, for example, collect data on the EC species, minimize bycatch or bycatch mortality of EC species, protect the associated role of EC species in the ecosystem, and/or to address other ecosystem issues” (50 C.F.R §600.305(c)(5)).

Additional EC species Stipulations the Council has Discussed:

EC species designation can be paired with some requirements or non-restrictive regulations. The options the Council has discussed for these species are:

- Designating them as EC species but not implementing new or retaining any current management measures.
- Designating them as EC species and retaining a reporting requirement.
- Designating them as EC species and retaining a commercial permit requirement, which would likely need to include a commercial permit that is *not* limited entry.
- Designating them as EC species and implementing aggregate limits (per sector) and that would need to be non-restrictive.

¹ National Standard 9 covers bycatch.

² From MSA 303(b)(12) when discussing discretionary provisions of an FMP: “include management measures in the plan to conserve target and non-target species and habitats, considering the variety of ecological factors affecting fishery populations.”



Potential amendment timing

Timing	Council Action
September 2025	Reviewed decision document and approved for scoping.
Fall 2025	Scoping (online).
December 2025	Review scoping comments and provide guidance on draft actions and alternatives.
March 2026	Review analyses and draft actions and alternatives.
June 2026	Review draft amendment, select initial preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings.
Summer 2026	Public hearings.
September 2026	Review public comment and approve all actions.
December 2026	Approve for Secretarial review.
Mid 2026 to Late 2026	Regulation changes effective.

What are your thoughts? The Council wants to hear from you!

The Council wants to hear from you on the proposed changes. The following questions are not prescriptive but may be a helpful tool to organize ideas for comments.

1. Are the species being considered of importance to your fishing business or in your region?
2. Do you think the species being considered require federal management?
3. If species are removed from federal management but remain as ecosystem component species in the Snapper Grouper FMP, what are your thoughts on maintaining or implementing the following:
 - a. A permit requirement?
 - b. A reporting requirement?
 - c. A relatively non-restrictive (i.e., high poundage or high number) aggregate limit?



How Do I Comment?

Comments must be received by **5:00 PM on Friday, November 14, 2025**. There are several ways that you can submit your comment to the Council including:

Written comments

Written comments may be read and submitted on Amendment 61 using the online public comment form at the following links:

Submit Comment

Read Public Comments

Comments by mail

Send comments to: John Carmichael, Executive Director, SAFMC. 4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201. N. Charleston, SC 29405

Comments by fax

843-769-4520