# MAGNUSON – STEVENS ACT/NEPA SCOPING DOCUMENT

## Amendment 31
## to the Fishery Management Plan
## for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region

**NOVEMBER 2013**

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**Blueline tilefish has been assessed and determined to be overfished and undergoing overfishing (SEDAR 32 2013). The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) is mandated to implement regulations to end overfishing immediately and rebuild the stock to sustainable levels. The Council is conducting a process called scoping. Scoping is where the Council first brings proposed changes to management regulations to the public and requests comment.**

**This document outlines the background information and reason for action, the proposed changes to regulations, and how to submit comment and by when. Please note that the document outlines a wide range of changes; no decisions have been made, and your input is important. 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.**

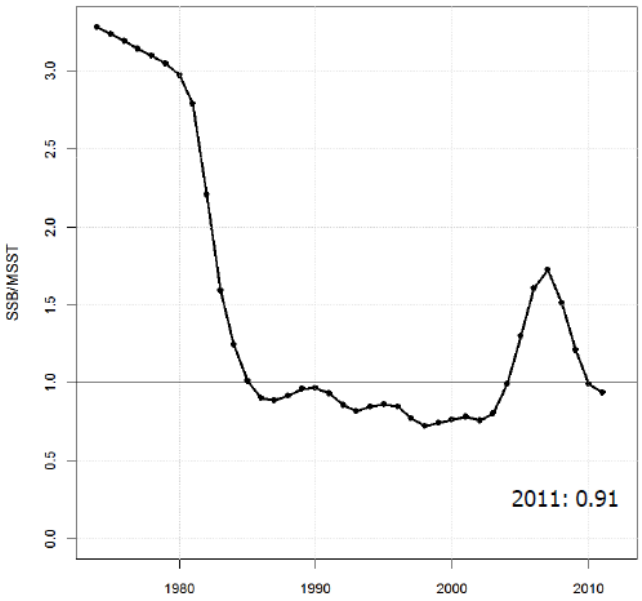
The Council is considering the following actions in Amendment 31:

- Re-define Maximum Sustainable Yield for blueline tilefish
- Re-define Minimum Stock Size Threshold for blueline tilefish
- Establish a rebuilding schedule for blueline tilefish
- Establish a rebuilding strategy and Acceptable Biological Catch for blueline tilefish
- Establish Annual Catch Limits, Optimum Yield, and recreational Annual Catch Target for blueline tilefish
- Establish an Acceptable Biological Catch, Annual Catch Limits, Optimum Yield, and recreational Annual Catch Target for remaining species in the deepwater complex
- Establish blueline tilefish management measures for each sector

## NEED FOR ACTION

Specifically, the Council is considering modifying certain biological benchmarks (Maximum Sustainable Yield and Minimum Stock Size Threshold) according to results of the new blueline tilefish stock assessment (SEDAR 32 2013); establishing a rebuilding plan if needed; adjusting the Acceptable Biological Catch, Annual Catch Limits, Optimum Yield, and recreational Annual Catch Target; and establishing commercial and recreational management measures to end overfishing of blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic region.

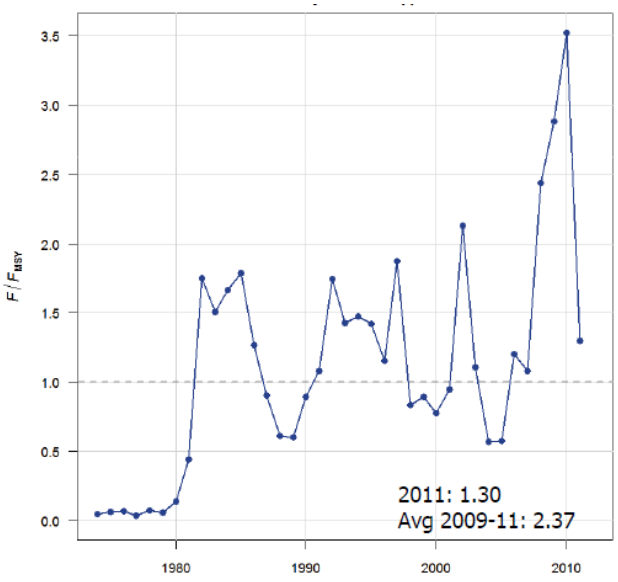
The recent stock assessment concluded blueline tilefish are overfished (**Figure 1**) and overfishing is taking place (**Figure 2**).




Stock is ***overfished*** if SSB/MSST < 1

$SSB_{2011}/MSST = 0.909$

**Figure 1.** Stock assessment output for the current biomass of the blueline tilefish stock in the South Atlantic.
Source: Figure 3.15 (SEDAR 32 2013).




Stock is ***undergoing overfishing*** if $F/F_{MSY} > 1$

$F_{2009-2011}/F_{MSY} = 2.37$

**Figure 2.** Stock assessment output for the current rate of exploitation for the blueline tilefish stock in the South Atlantic.
Source: Figure 3.28 (SEDAR 32 2013).

## POSSIBLE ACTIONS

### Action 1. Re-define Maximum Sustainable Yield for Blueline Tilefish

Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY) is the largest long-term average catch that can be taken continuously (sustained) from a stock or stock complex under average environmental conditions.

MSY for blueline tilefish was established through Amendment 11 to the Snapper Grouper FMP (SAFMC 1999). At that time, a stock assessment had not yet been conducted on the stock to obtain an MSY estimate. Therefore, the South Atlantic Council used a "proxy", or substitute, value for MSY at 30% of the Spawning Potential Ratio (SPR). Now that a stock assessment has been conducted that provides an estimate of MSY, the Council needs to take action to adopt the new value and continue to adopt recommended MSY values as they are obtained from the Southeast Data, Review, and Assessment (SEDAR) process and the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC).

| | Equation | $F_{MSY}$ | MSY Values (lbs whole weight) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Current** | Do not change the current definition of MSY for blueline tilefish. Currently, MSY equals the yield produced by $F_{MSY}$. $F_{30\%SPR}$ is used as the $F_{MSY}$ proxy. | $F_{30\%SPR}$=0.356 | not specified |
| **Proposed** | MSY equals the yield produced by $F_{MSY}$ or the $F_{MSY}$ proxy. MSY and $F_{MSY}$ are recommended by the most recent SEDAR/SSC. | 0.302 | 226,500 |

## Action 2. Re-define the minimum stock size threshold (MSST) for Blueline Tilefish

The Minimum Stock Size Threshold (MSST) is the biomass level below which a stock would be considered overfished. The MSST is typically calculated as one minus the natural mortality (M) times the Spawning stock biomass at MSY ($SSB_{MSY}$). The blueline tilefish stock in the South Atlantic was assessed through the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) process in 2013 with data through 2011 (SEDAR 32 2013). The current blueline tilefish stock biomass is shown in **Figure 1**. When M is relatively small, such as 0.10 for blueline tilefish, the current definition of MSST would trigger a rebuilding plan if biomass fell slightly below $SSB_{MSY}$. Natural variation in recruitment could cause stock biomass to frequently alternate between an overfished and rebuilt condition. To avoid this, the South Atlantic Council has redefined the MSST level for some species with low natural mortalities, such as red grouper, snowy grouper, and golden tilefish. The MSST can be set at 75% of $SSB_{MSY}$ and thus provide a more appropriate buffer between the level at which the stock is considered to be at equilibrium ($SSB_{MSY}$) and the overfished level (MSST).

$MSST = 1\text{-}M*SSB_{MSY} = 0.90 * 246.60$ mt
MSST = 221.94 mt = 489,294 lbs ww

$MSST = 75\%*SSB_{MSY} = 0.75 * 246.60$ mt
MSST = 184.95 mt = 407,745 lbs ww

In this amendment, the South Atlantic Council will consider setting MSST at 75% $SSB_{MSY}$ for blueline tilefish. In that case, the blueline tilefish stock in the South Atlantic would not be considered overfished and a rebuilding plan would not be necessary. If the change to the definition of MSST is not approved, then a rebuilding plan would be needed and the South Atlantic Council would need to specify a rebuilding strategy and a rebuilding schedule.

## Action 3. Specify a Rebuilding Schedule for Blueline Tilefish

One component of the rebuilding plan is a determination of the number of years it will take to rebuild the stock. The Magnuson-Stevens Act mandates that the rebuilding timeframe be as short as possible, taking into account the status and biology of any overfished stocks of fish and the needs of fishing communities, while not exceeding 10 years. If the stock cannot be rebuilt in 10 years, then the maximum allowable rebuilding time is 10 years plus one generation. The South Atlantic Council would consider a range of years to rebuild blueline tilefish. If a shorter timeframe were used, then the corresponding catch levels would change to meet the probability of rebuilding success during that time period.

## Action 4. Specify a Rebuilding Strategy and Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) for Blueline Tilefish

The rebuilding strategy is another component of a rebuilding plan and specifies the maximum fishing mortality rate throughout the rebuilding timeframe. The rate of fishing is associated with a particular probability of rebuilding success. The Council would consider a range of rebuilding strategy alternatives including those recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC).

The SSC has recommended two P* (p-star) values for blueline tilefish. A P* is the risk that overfishing is occurring. The probability of rebuilding success = 100 – P*. The value of P* changes, however, with how the MSST is calculated. Hence, based on the existing definition of MSST, the SSC is recommending that the South Atlantic Council choose a rebuilding plan with a 30% probability of overfishing (P* = 0.30) and a 70% chance or better of rebuilding to the target within a specified rebuilding timeframe. Based on the re-defined MSST value, the P* would be set at 0.275. Under this recommendation, the probability of success would increase to 72.5% over the time it takes for the stock biomass to increase to the biomass at maximum sustainable yield. Both of these values assume a 10-year rebuilding timeframe.

The stock assessment contains preliminary Acceptable Biological Catch (ABC) levels under various fishing mortality rates. The South Atlantic Council is required by law to take action to end overfishing immediately, adjusting catch levels and implementing management measures as necessary to attain the required reduction in harvest. Preliminary ABC values corresponding to the fishing mortality rate that would rebuild the stock in 10 years starting in 2013 are shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1.** Projection results with fishing mortality rate fixed at F= Frebuild starting in 2013. Landings are in pounds whole weight.

| Year | F rate | ABC (landings only) |
|---|---|---|
| 2013 | 0.3 | 178,000 |
| 2014 | 0.3 | 193,000 |
| 2015 | 0.3 | 202,000 |
| 2016 | 0.3 | 209,000 |

Source: Table 3.15 (SEDAR 32 2013).

The Council has asked the NMFS Science Center to provide projections based on the SSC's recommended P* values. The Council will review the projections at their December 2013 meeting and consider including them in the draft amendment for analysis. *Note that the projected ABC values using the SSC recommended P* values are expected to be below those presented in **Table 1**.*

## Action 5. Adjust Annual Catch Limits, Optimum Yield, and recreational Annual Catch Target for Blueline Tilefish

The 2013 assessment of the blueline tilefish stock (SEDAR 32 2013) indicated the stock is undergoing overfishing. The trend in fishing mortality rate during the assessment period and the current exploitation status are shown in **Figure 2**.

Based on the ABC value that is ultimately set, the Council will adjust other catch levels accordingly. The Council has consistently set Annual Catch Limits (commercial and recreational) and Optimum Yield at the same level as the ABC. The recreational Annual Catch Target for other managed species has been specified as ACL* (1-PSE) or ACL*0.5, whichever is greater. The PSE is the Proportional Standard Error of the recreational landings estimates produced by the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP). Using PSE, which is a measure of the variability of the estimate of the recreational catch, provides the best approach to keep catches below the ACL as long as the necessary management measures are specified to limit the recreational catch.

## Action 6. Adjust Annual Catch Limits, Optimum Yield, and recreational Annual Catch Target for the Deepwater Complex

The South Atlantic Council, through the Comprehensive ACL amendment (SAFMC 2011), established a Deepwater Complex including the following species: yellowedge grouper, blueline tilefish, silk snapper, misty grouper, sand tilefish, queen snapper, black snapper, and blackfin snapper. The Council has not included SEDAR assessed species in a complex and will remove blueline tilefish from the Deepwater Complex in Amendment 31. Once the Council removes blueline tilefish from the Deepwater Complex, the Council would need to revise the ACL, ACT, and OY for the remaining species in the complex in Amendment 31.

## Action 7. Management Measures for Blueline Tilefish

Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 13 (SAFMC 2013) adjusted the blueline tilefish ACL to incorporate recreational landings estimates based on MRIP. The current ACL for blueline tilefish is 631,341 pounds whole weight. Based on the preliminary ABC for 2014 (193,000 pounds) in **Table 1**, harvest of blueline tilefish (commercial and recreational) would need to be reduced by 69.4%. *Note: Final projections from the P* analyses will likely indicate a greater reduction is necessary.*

In addition to reducing the ACL, the Council would consider implementing management measures for each sector to reduce landings. The Council may change, but is not limited to, the following actions:

### Commercial

- Change in the fishing year – the current fishing year is the calendar year. Because the bulk of the commercial landings come from north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, modifying the start of the fishing year to begin later in the season, when weather conditions are more favorable, would benefit commercial fishermen. For example, the fishing year could start April 1 and end March 31.
- Commercial trip limits – implementing trip limits and a step-down at some level of landings would have the effect of spreading out harvest over the length of the season.
- Management areas – the bulk of commercial landings originate north of Cape Hatteras, NC, and south of Cape Canaveral, FL. Dividing the commercial ACL according to management area may result in a more equitable distribution of the resource. Examples include:
    - (i) North & South of Cape Hatteras, NC
    - (ii) North of Hatteras, Hatteras to Canaveral, and south of Canaveral

### Recreational

- Change in the fishing year - the Council could consider a change in the recreational fishing year to match any change in the commercial fishing year. For example, the fishing year could start April 1 and end March 31.
- Modify the bag limit – blueline tilefish are currently included in the 3-grouper aggregate. The Council may consider removing blueline tilefish from the aggregate and specifying a new, lower bag limit.
- Management areas – if the Council were to establish management areas, each with its own ACL, then a recreational allocation would also be specified for each management area using the existing sector allocation.
- Recreational season – the Council recently approved an action to establish a recreational season for black sea bass. The black sea bass fishing season would start on April 1 and end on the date NMFS projects the recreational ACL will be

met. A similar measure could be considered for recreational harvest of blueline tilefish.

Blueline tilefish landings (commercial, recreational, and total) from 1974 to 2012 are show in **Figure 3** and **Table 2**.

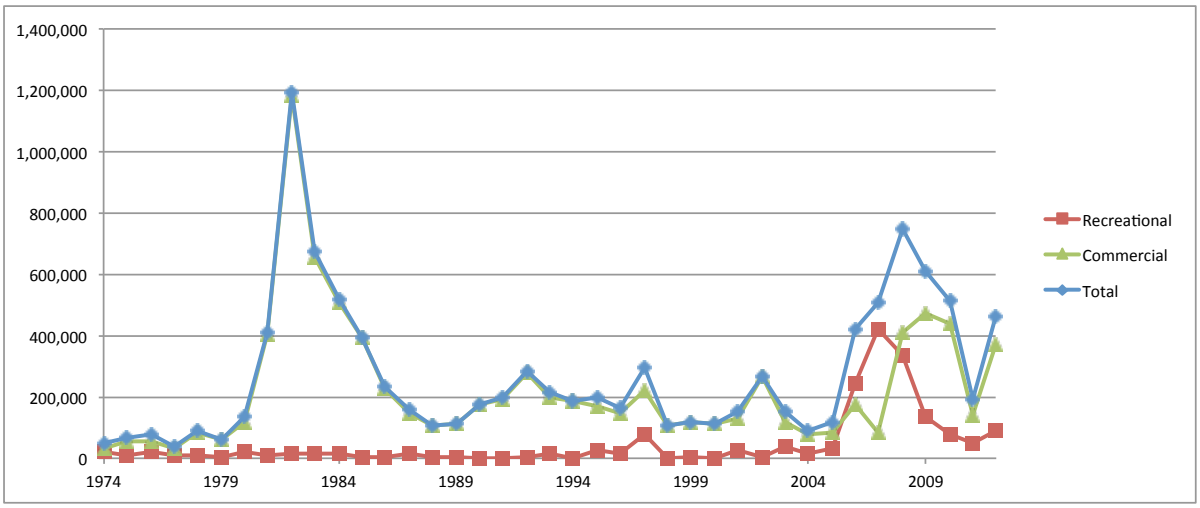



**Figure 3.** Observed blueline tilefish landings by sector in the South Atlantic region, 1974-2012.
Source: SAFMC 2013.

**Table 2.** Observed blueline tilefish landings by sector in the South Atlantic, 1974-2012. Landings in pounds whole weight.

| Year | Recreational | Commercial | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1974 | 18,519 | 33,000 | 51,519 |
| 1975 | 11,112 | 56,456 | 67,568 |
| 1976 | 19,560 | 55,774 | 75,334 |
| 1977 | 7,216 | 30,995 | 38,211 |
| 1978 | 9,547 | 82,713 | 92,260 |
| 1979 | 2,004 | 59,799 | 61,803 |
| 1980 | 19,049 | 118,264 | 137,313 |
| 1981 | 7,256 | 403,605 | 410,861 |
| 1982 | 15,934 | 1,180,617 | 1,196,551 |
| 1983 | 17,455 | 656,690 | 674,145 |
| 1984 | 13,602 | 506,472 | 520,074 |
| 1985 | 2,596 | 392,055 | 394,651 |
| 1986 | 2,179 | 228,678 | 230,857 |
| 1987 | 13,982 | 145,070 | 159,052 |
| 1988 | 1,200 | 107,083 | 108,283 |
| 1989 | 1,200 | 112,612 | 113,812 |
| 1990 | 757 | 175,125 | 175,882 |
| 1991 | 802 | 194,854 | 195,656 |
| 1992 | 2,782 | 279,529 | 282,311 |
| 1993 | 13,509 | 200,204 | 213,713 |
| 1994 | 146 | 188,238 | 188,384 |
| 1995 | 26,466 | 170,881 | 197,347 |
| 1996 | 15,306 | 148,246 | 163,552 |
| 1997 | 78,196 | 219,988 | 298,184 |
| 1998 | 259 | 107,654 | 107,913 |
| 1999 | 3,718 | 116,243 | 119,961 |
| 2000 | 419 | 112,433 | 112,852 |
| 2001 | 23,836 | 127,824 | 151,660 |
| 2002 | 3,352 | 265,558 | 268,910 |
| 2003 | 36,122 | 119,079 | 155,201 |
| 2004 | 12,813 | 76,709 | 89,522 |
| 2005 | 32,349 | 83,936 | 116,285 |
| 2006 | 246,511 | 173,002 | 419,513 |
| 2007 | 422,938 | 85,103 | 508,041 |
| 2008 | 332,915 | 412,178 | 745,093 |
| 2009 | 137,860 | 474,844 | 612,704 |
| 2010 | 76,059 | 438,049 | 514,108 |
| 2011 | 51,779 | 141,502 | 193,281 |
| 2012 | 88,803 | 370,729 | 459,532 |

**What Next?**

**A scoping webinar for Amendment 31** will be held at 6:00 p.m. on Thursday, November 7, 2013. To register, please visit the Council's website at www.safmc.net A video presentation will also be made available on the Council's website prior to the webinar.

**Written comments must be received by 5 P.M. on November 20, 2013**. All comments will be considered by the Council in drafting Snapper Grouper Amendment 31. There will be a number of opportunities to provide public input if the Council moves forward to develop an amendment. A simplified schematic of the Council process is presented in Appendix B.

At their December 2013 meeting, the Council will review scoping comments and decide which actions to include in Amendment 31 to take out to public hearings in January 2014. The Council could also choose to request that the National Marine Fisheries Service take **emergency action** to adjust landings in 2014.

**References**

SAFMC (South Atlantic Fishery Management Council). 1999. Comprehensive Amendment Addressing Sustainable Fishery Act Definitions and Other Required Provisions in Fishery Management Plans of the South Atlantic Region (Amendment 11 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan). South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 1 Southpark Cir., Suite 306, Charleston, S.C. 29407-4699. 151 pp. Available online at : www.safmc.net

SAFMC (South Atlantic Fishery Management Council). 2011. Comprehensive Annual Catch Limit (ACL) Amendment. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405. Available online at: www.safmc.net

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SEDAR (Southeast Data, Review, and Assessment). 2013. SEDAR 32 – South Atlantic blueline tilefish Stock Assessment Report. SEDAR, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.. 341 pp. Available online at: http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/Sedar_Workshops.jsp?WorkshopNum=32

**Appendix A. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council 2013-2014 Membership**

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**Appendix B. A Simplified Schematic of the Council Process.**