

SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

SCIENTIFIC AND STATISTICAL COMMITTEE



SSC Meeting Report
Final Report
August 12, 2026

Webinar Meeting

VERSION
FINAL
8/27/26

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*Indicates materials not available for briefing book at time of posting. These materials will be added to the recent materials section when available.

SAFMC PUBLIC COMMENT PROCESS

Written comment:

Written comment on SSC agenda topics is provided to the Committee through an online form, similar to all other Council briefing materials. Written comment can be submitted at [this link](#). For this meeting, the deadline for submission of written comment is 12 p.m., August 12, 2026.

Verbal comment:

Two opportunities for comment on agenda items will be provided at set times during SSC meetings. The first will be at the beginning of the meeting, and the second near the conclusion. Those wishing to comment should indicate such in the manner requested by the Chair, who will then recognize individuals to provide comment.

An opportunity for comment on specific agenda items will also be provided as each item comes up for discussion. Comments will be taken after all the initial presentations are given and questions from the SSC are answered, but before the SSC starts making recommendations to address the action items. As before, those wishing to comment should indicate such in the manner requested by the Chair, who will then recognize individuals to provide comment. All comments are part of the record of the meeting.

Meeting Format:

This meeting will be held via webinar. Online registration for the meeting can be found at the Council's website: <https://safmc.net/scientific-and-statistical-committee-meeting/>

1. INTRODUCTIONS

1.1 Documents

Attachment 1a. August 2026 SSC Agenda

Attachment 1b. April 2026 SSC Meeting Minutes

1.2 Action

- Introductions
- Review and approve agenda.
 - *Agenda approved.*
- Approve minutes from April meeting.
 - *Minutes are approved with minor typographical corrections.*

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

The public is provided with this comment period for any general comments pertaining to any items on the agenda. There will also be time provided for public comment during each specific agenda item as they are discussed. Those wishing to make public comment should indicate their desire to do so to the Committee Chair.

- *No public comments were provided.*

3. SPAWNING SPECIAL MANAGEMENT ZONES: EVALUATION

3.1 Documents

Attachment 3a. SSMZ System Management Plan Update

Attachment 3b. Evaluation Background Presentation

Attachment 3c. [Pre-Meeting Survey Link](#)

*Attachment 3d. Survey Results (provided at meeting)

3.2 Presentation

Dr. Chip Collier, SAFMC Staff

3.3 Overview

The Council established Spawning Special Management Zones (SSMZs) in 2017 to protect spawning snapper grouper species by prohibiting the fishing for, harvest of, and/or possession of snapper grouper species within these areas. During development of the SSMZs, the Council also approved a System Management Plan to guide the evaluation of the areas over time and System Management Plan Workgroup to develop a report on the areas. The System Management Plan Update (Attachment 3a) summarizes activities conducted since 2017, highlights research and monitoring completed within each SSMZ, and documents progress toward the objectives and action items identified in the System Management Plan.

Based on the information in the System Management Plan Update and the supporting materials, the SSC is asked to review the available scientific information and complete the Evaluation Tool to facilitate discussion of the effectiveness of the SSMZs. The Evaluation Tool includes questions addressing the SSMZ program as a whole as well as questions specific to each of the five SSMZs. The tool is intended to provide a structured framework for discussion and to help identify the strengths, limitations, and remaining scientific uncertainties associated with the evaluation of each area.

3.4 Public Comment

- *Consider incorporating shallower depths (e.g. start at 120 feet) in south of cape lookout SSMZ (for red grouper).*

3.5 Action

- Review information summarized in the SSMZ System Management Plan Update and identify any gaps and improvements for the report.
 - *Work accomplished to date to evaluate effectiveness of SSMZs is a good start (e.g., evidence of spawning within SSMZs), considering the limitations in data availability.*
 - *The data presented for spawning fish was for all available samples. The objectives for sampling pre-2017 may have differed from the objectives of 2023-2025 as the latter objective was more focused on collecting spawning fish during the spawning season. The SSC asked if there was a comparison done of pre-2017 data for the same sampling season as 2023-25. Staff clarified that this analysis was not done (yet) since the purpose of the analysis was to look at the occurrence of spawning fish. Furthermore, sample sizes are relatively small, possibly hindering a useful comparison.*
 - *From a biological scientific point of view, the SSC recommend that the SSMZs should remain in place, at minimum with the current size.*
- Complete the SSMZ Evaluation Tool and discuss the strengths, limitations, and uncertainties associated with available information.
 - *The SSC reviewed the survey results and made several comments regarding the survey design.*
 - *The survey was a good tool to evaluate the SSC's thoughts prior to the SSC meeting, but there may have been more responses if the purpose of the evaluation was more clearly stated. The SSC recommended clearly identifying survey purposes, intended audiences, and end-result for the gathered information at the beginning of any information-gathering tool such as this one. Staff stated that the intent of this survey was a "straw-man" to stimulate SSC discussion that would be captured on the meeting record.*
 - *There was discussion on the ability to determine who was taking the survey given it was published in the briefing book, which is publicly available. Identification of the respondent's affiliation with SAFMC (i.e. SSC member, Council member, stakeholder, etc.) or restricted access would help with this concern.*

- Provide comments on whether the available scientific information indicates that the SSMZs are meeting the objective of protecting spawning snapper grouper species and identify important information gaps.
 - *The SSC noted that there is high uncertainty regarding the available data to evaluate the effectiveness of the SSMZs in supporting spawning and protecting spawners at this time. The SSC noted that the limited/small size of the SSMZ makes gathering information and assessing effectiveness challenging/difficult.*
 - *Challenging to assess the effectiveness of SSMZs with the existing information – highlights the need for more life history information in these areas for evaluation. Further data needed to scientifically justify changes to SSMZs is necessary before any consideration in changing spatial footprints of SSMZs should occur. Currently, there are insufficient resources to conduct a true evaluation.*
 - *Collecting social and economic information to supplement existing and future biological information should be considered.*
 - *Compliance within SSMZs is highly uncertain, as these sites are publicly identified but there are limited resources for enforcement due to their remote nature. Consistent monitoring (where possible) would be beneficial to assist with evaluation.*
- Provide guidance on the scientific considerations for future evaluations of the SSMZs.
 - *Tagging studies, and possibly longer-term egg/ichthyoplankton and acoustic monitoring to confirm spawning, could be a valuable addition in future evaluation efforts.*
 - *AIS information (and other monitoring) to ascertain coarse level of effort in the SSMZs.*
 - *Include sampling/simulation to evaluate the appropriateness of the size of the SSMZs.*
 - *Collect information on the socioeconomic impacts of the SSMZs.*

4. SPAWNING SPECIAL MANAGEMENT ZONES: AMENDMENT DEVELOPMENT

4.1 Documents

Attachment 4. SSMZ Amendment Overview Presentation

4.2 Presentation

Allie Iberle, SAFMC Staff

4.3 Overview

The Council established five Spawning Special Management Zones (SSMZs) in 2017, where fishing for, harvest of, and/or possession of snapper grouper species is prohibited. Three of these SSMZs (South Cape Lookout, Devil's/Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole) are natural sites with a sunset provision on regulations after 10 years, while two artificial-reef SSMZs did not have the sunset

provision (Area 51 and Area 53). The Council intended to use the 10-year period to gather additional information to determine whether the natural sites are functioning as effective spawning areas for the focal species listed in the System Management Plan for the SSMZs. In March, the Council initiated work on a framework amendment to modify the sunset provision for those SSMZs that have the provision. In June, the Council reviewed an initial set of actions and alternatives that would extend the sunset provision by 7, 10, or 20 years or remove it all together, making the areas and applicable regulations permanent.

4.4 Public Comment

- *No public comment on this topic.*

4.5 Action

- Comment on the range of alternatives the Council is considering for extending or removing the sunset provision for the three natural SSMZs which currently have them.
 - *From a pure biological point of view (without other considerations), typically longer duration is better. However, with other considerations (social, funding opportunities, data collection over multiple years, and analysis of funded projects), the SSC recommends a duration of 10 years.*
- Discuss options for an adequate length of time to collect scientific information to establish whether these areas are meeting the goal of protecting spawning snapper grouper species.
 - *Simulation analysis and more social and economic information would be useful (as above with spatial extent) to inform duration of sunset provisions.*

5. TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR UPCOMING ASSESSMENTS

5.1 Documents

Attachment 5a. Vermilion Snapper Terms of Reference

Attachment 5b. Snowy Grouper Terms of Reference

*Attachment 5c. Red Grouper Terms of Reference

5.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff

5.3 Overview

The upcoming SEDAR stock assessment schedule for South Atlantic species includes Red Grouper, Snowy Grouper, and Vermilion Snapper. Vermilion Snapper is being conducted internally by the NOAA Southeast Fishery Science Center. Snowy and Red Grouper will be conducted through the SEDAR process. Snowy Grouper will include a Topical Working Group to integrate the South Atlantic Deepwater Longline Survey (SADL) as an index of abundance. Red Grouper will include a Stock Identification workshop followed by Data and Review Workshops. The SSC will review and make recommendations on the three Terms of Reference for the upcoming South Atlantic stock assessments. Comments and recommendations will be passed along to the SEFSC for negotiation and then onto the

Council for final approval. Terms of Reference are drafted by SAFMC Staff using recommendations from the approved Statements of Work, SAFMC Research and Monitoring Plan, prior assessment panel recommendations, and SSC review of the prior stock assessment.

5.4 Public Comment

5.5 Action

- Review Terms of Reference for South Atlantic Vermilion Snapper
 - *Given that the South Atlantic Vermilion Snapper assessment will be SEFSC-led (i.e., not SEDAR-led), the SSC expressed concerns that the TORs may be too broad. The SSC decided to leave the TORs as they are and discuss this topic further at a later time with SEFSC representatives.*
 - *Revise the ToR language related to the assessment technical team.*
- Review Terms of Reference for South Atlantic Snowy Grouper
 - *The SSC reviewed the TORs associated with the South Atlantic Snowy Grouper assessment and made minor editorial changes to the document.*
 - *Revise the ToR language related to the assessment technical team.*
- Review Terms of Reference for South Atlantic Red Grouper
 - *The SSC reviewed the TORs associated with each component of the South Atlantic Red Grouper assessment. Several wording changes were suggested to provide clarity. The SSC recommended including CIE reviewers in the review process.*
 - *Revise the ToR language related to the assessment technical team.*

6. **ABC-CR STOCK RISK RATINGS**

6.1 Documents

Attachment 6a. ABC-CR Stock Risk Rating Summary
Attachment 6b. Stock Risk Ratings Tables

6.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff

6.3 Overview

The new Acceptable Biological Catch Control Rule (ABC-CR) categorizes stocks based on the available information and scientific uncertainty evaluation and incorporates the Council's risk tolerance policy through an accepted probability of overfishing (P^*). The Council will specify the P^* based on the relative stock biomass output from an updated stock assessment and a stock risk rating that is developed using a variety of biological, social, economic, and environmental indicators. The new ABC-CR was developed to increase flexibility and adaptability in accounting for uncertainty through both the scientific and management process, to incorporate phase-in and carry-over provisions, and to provide a mechanism for categorizing uncertainty in data-limited and unassessed stocks.

The stock risk rating matrix is compiled from SSC and Advisory Panel input based on available information from SEDAR stock assessment reports, commercial and recreational databases, fishery performance reports, and social and economic indicators. The scoring matrix from the SSC and AP is aggregated and approved by the Council before the completion of a new stock assessment and along with the relative stock biomass estimate provides the accepted probability of overfishing (P*) to inform the ABC.

The SSC will receive a refresher on the stock risk ratings process under the new ABC-CR and provide input on the biological and environmental stock risk rating metrics for Florida Hogfish (FLK/EFL), Black Grouper, and Gag Grouper.

6.4 Public Comment

No public comment on this agenda item.

6.5 Action

- Update biological and environmental stock risk ratings for Florida Hogfish (FLK/EFL), Black Grouper, and Gag Grouper.
 - *The SSC reviewed the stock risk rating for hogfish, black grouper, and gag grouper. No changes to the default scores for the biological or environmental attributes were suggested, and those scores were carried over to the SSC scores.*
 - *The SSC emphasized that the original procedural intent of the stock risk ratings was to complete this exercise before the assessment is completed and strongly recommends following this process to the extent practicable. (e.g., the assessment and review workshop for hogfish, for which the SSC reviewed the stock rating at this webinar, had already been completed, and this had also occurred for several other species in the past).*
 - *The SSC recommends there be an opportunity to revisit the stock risk rating after the initial scores are assigned if critical new information becomes available (e.g. during the assessment process).*

7. **SSC WORKGROUP AND SEDAR PANELS**

7.1 Documents

Attachment 7a. SSC SEDAR Appointments
Attachment 7b. SSC Workgroup Appointments

7.2 Presentation

Dr. Judd Curtis, SAFMC Staff

7.3 Overview

Council staff will review the list of SSC workgroups and SEDAR panel membership and provide any updates from recent work accomplished by the workgroups or SEDAR panels, as well as upcoming

needs including populating panels with SSC members. Prior to the October 20-22 SA-SSC meeting on Tuesday morning, a review of the Black Grouper Management Procedure will be conducted comprised of a joint sub-group of Gulf and South Atlantic SSC members.

7.4 Public Comment

7.5 Action

- Review appointments to SSC Workgroups and SEDAR panels.
 - *The SSC asked if there is any progress on the activities of the Joint MSY Proxy Workgroup. Staff explained that they are working on meeting scheduling, but that timing and other logistics have been challenging. The SSC recommended that the committee be provided with an update and an opportunity to discuss this at the upcoming October meeting.*
 - *The SSC asked if there were any updates on the Black Sea Bass and Red Snapper assessment schedules. Staff mentioned that both assessments are progressing as scheduled. The Red Snapper Review is still taking place in December, but there is some uncertainty in the Black Sea Bass schedule because the analysts are waiting for the new recreational data.*
- Recruit SSC members for upcoming SEDAR panels.
 - *SSC members volunteered for vacancies on SEDAR panels and these will be approved by Council at the September Council meeting.*
- Recruit members for Joint Review of Black Grouper Management Procedure (Oct 20, AM)
 - *Jim Gartland*
 - *Marcel Reichert (Chair)*
 - *Genny Nessler*
 - *Wally Buble*
 - *Matt Damiano*
 - *Jason Walsh*

8. OTHER BUSINESS

9. PUBLIC COMMENT

The public is provided with one final opportunity to comment on SSC recommendations and agenda items.

- *No public comment was provided.*

10. CONSENSUS STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee is provided with an opportunity to review its report, final consensus statements, and final recommendations. The Final SSC report will be provided to the Council by noon on Friday, August 28, 2026 for inclusion in the briefing book for the September 2026 Council meeting.

11. NEXT MEETINGS

11.1 Scientific and Statistical Committee Meetings

- October 20-22, 2026 in Charleston, SC
- April 19-22, 2027 in Charleston, SC (SEP/SSC)
- October 26-28, 2027 in Charleston, SC

11.2 South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meetings

- September 14-18, 2026 in North Charleston, SC
- December 7-11, 2026 in Beaufort, NC
- March 8-12, 2027 in Jekyll Island, GA
- June 7-11, 2027 in Daytona Beach, FL

ADJOURNED AT 12:43 PM