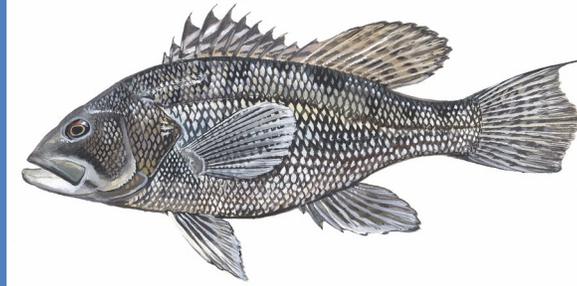


Black Sea Bass Management



Decision Document
September 2023

Background

In April 2023, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) reviewed the Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 76 stock assessment of South Atlantic black sea bass. This assessment included data through 2021 and determined the stock to be overfished and undergoing overfishing. The SSC determined the assessment is consistent with the best scientific information available and reliably informs stock status. The SSC also requested additional reference point and projection information prior to recommending future overfishing limits (OFL), acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels, and a rebuilding schedule. The SSC reviewed additional projection information at their July 2023 meeting and had additional questions that will require more extensive discussion prior to developing OFL, ABC, and rebuilding recommendations. Therefore, a technical workgroup has been tasked with evaluating reference points or proxies that could be applied to South Atlantic black sea bass and incorporated into projections of future catch.

In June 2023, the Council initiated an amendment to the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region (Snapper Grouper FMP) that would respond to the black sea bass assessment results.

In August 2023, a workshop was held to discuss the experimental use of on-demand pot gear in the black sea bass commercial fishery. On-demand gear is not currently listed as an allowable gear in the FMP, and the Exempted Fishing Permit (EFP) that has allowed experimental use of this gear expires on April 30, 2025. In June 2023, the Council briefly discussed the need to consider adding this gear to the list of allowable gear in the FMP prior to the expiration of the

EFP. A report on the August 2023 workshop will be presented to the Council at the September 2023 meeting.

Objectives for this Meeting

- Provide direction to staff on the timeline for amendment development.
- Provide direction to staff on actions to include for consideration in this amendment.

Potential Actions

1. Establish a rebuilding plan for South Atlantic black sea bass.

- This action needs to be done through a plan amendment.
- Additional work by the SSC technical workgroup is needed to inform potential rebuilding timelines and probabilities of rebuilding.

2. Revise ABC, optimum yield (OY), and total annual catch limits (ACL).

- This action can be done through a framework amendment, although because of the overfished status, catch levels would need to be consistent with rebuilding of the stock.
- Additional work by the SSC technical workgroup is needed to inform ABC.
- Current levels were specified in Abbreviated Framework Amendment 2 to the Snapper Grouper FMP (Abbreviated Framework 2).
 - Current ABC: 643,000 lbs ww
 - Current Total ACL: 643,000 lbs ww
 - OY was not specified in Abbreviated Framework 2. MSY was estimated by SEDAR 76 (2023) to be 960,000 lbs ww. Sustainable catch levels that would allow rebuilding of black sea bass are being evaluated by the SSC technical workgroup.

3. Revise sector allocations and sector annual catch limits.

- This action needs to be done through a plan amendment.
- SEDAR 76 (2023) is the first black sea bass stock assessment to use Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES) catch estimates. Current catch levels are based on and monitored using recreational catch estimates calibrated to the MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS).
- Current allocation percentages were specified in Amendment 13C to the Snapper Grouper FMP and sector ACLs were most recently specified according to these percentages through Abbreviated Framework 2.
 - Commercial (43%): 276,490 lbs ww
 - Recreational (57%): 366,510 lbs ww

4. Establish on-demand (also called ‘ropeless’) pots as an allowable gear type for the commercial black sea bass pot component of the fishery.

- This action can be done through a framework amendment.
- Reference report from Georgia Sea Grant On-Demand Gear Workshop (to be included in September 2023 Briefing Book Recent Materials).

5. Other management measures?

- In June 2023, the Council had some brief discussion about reducing the recreational bag limit for black sea bass from 7 fish to 5 fish.
 - This action can be done through a framework amendment.
- Management-related Advisory Panel comments and recommendations from the [2022 Fishery Performance Report](#):
 - Some previous interest in considering commercial gear allocations.
 - No formal gear allocations currently, although different gear trip limits and seasons:
 - ◆ Hook-and-line component:
 - January - April = 300 lbs gw (354 lbs ww)
 - May - December = 1,000 lbs gw (1,180 lbs ww)
 - ◆ Pot fishery component:
 - May - October = 1,000 lbs gw (1,180 lbs ww)
 - November - April = Seasonal prohibition on pot fishing in some areas.
 - Gear management differences have been less of an issue recently due to harvests not approaching the commercial ACL.
 - Management can have different priorities for the commercial hook-and-line and pot components. The pot component can operate over a shorter time frame during the winter, but maximizing season length is more important for the hook-and-line component.
 - Some interest in reducing the recreational minimum size limit, but not at the expense of season length. Maximizing season length is recommended as the highest priority for recreational management.
 - Effects of circle hook requirements since 2011 should be evaluated.

Tentative amendment timing

Two timelines are presented below. Each of these timelines shows the fastest typical process for the type of amendment described.

If the Council wants to develop a plan amendment, which could include any of the actions noted above, scoping would need to wait until after the SSC has recommended OFL and ABC values in January 2024.

September 2023	Preliminary amendment discussion
January 2024	SSC Recommendations for OFL/ABC available
March 2024	Approve for scoping
Spring 2024	Conduct scoping hearings
June 2024	Review scoping comments and preliminary analyses
September 2024	Select preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings
Fall 2024	Conduct public hearings
December 2024	Review public comment and approve all actions
March 2025	Consider approval for formal review
Late 2025-Early 2026	Regulations effective

If the Council wants to develop a framework amendment, which could move faster and only include some of the actions noted above (not rebuilding plan or allocations), scoping could occur prior to the SSC recommendations on OFL and ABC expected in January 2024. A plan amendment including the rebuilding plan and any allocation considerations would still need to be completed through a separate process after OFL and ABC recommendations are available.

September 2023	Preliminary amendment discussion
December 2023	Approve for scoping
January 2024	SSC Recommendations for OFL/ABC available
Winter 2024	Conduct scoping hearings
March 2024	Review scoping comments and preliminary analyses
June 2024	Select preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings
Summer 2024	Conduct public hearings
September 2024	Review public comment and approve all actions
December 2024	Consider approval for formal review
Mid-Late 2025	Regulations effective

Committee Action:

- What type(s) of amendment(s) should be developed in response to SEDAR 76?
 - A plan amendment to potentially include a rebuilding plan, catch level adjustments, allocations, gear changes, and management measures?
 - A framework amendment to adjust allowable gear and management measures and address other actions (rebuilding plan, catch levels and allocations) later?
- Provide guidance on timeline of development based on chosen approach.