



THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper

Commercial Sub-Committee

Discussion Document, June 2025

PG: AVH

Background

In March 2024, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) established the Snapper Grouper Commercial Sub-Committee (Sub-Committee) and tasked them with identifying and developing potential management responses to issues in the commercial sector of the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery.

Last Meeting (March 2025)

In [March 2025](#), the Sub-Committee reviewed previous analyses of economic and social characteristics of the snapper grouper commercial fishery. The Sub-Committee also reviewed commercial landings and trip data for the top ten snapper grouper species by weight from 2019-2023. These species accounted for ~85% of annual snapper grouper commercial landings during this time period.

The Sub-Committee identified two major objectives to be addressed through an amendment: 1) commercial permit issues, and 2) increasing commercial trip efficiency. The Council initiated an amendment to address these objectives. The Sub-Committee also requested an expansion of the provided catch and trip analyses, a draft timeline and methods to address the amendment objectives, as well as continued communication with the NOAA Fisheries Permit Office on the availability of recent permit information.

Objectives for this Meeting (June 2025)

- Review additional analyses of commercial catch and trips (*Attachment 1a* in the June 2025 Briefing Book).
- Review potential actions that could address the directed amendment objectives.

- Review a potential amendment timeline and consider recommending approval for scoping.

Potential Commercial Management Actions

The following objectives and draft actions were compiled based on previous Sub-Committee discussions. These do not necessarily represent comprehensive language for actions in Amendment 60, as some of the actions may require sub-components to address specific regulatory needs. However, these draft actions are intended to capture the main objectives being addressed through Amendment 60. Each draft action includes questions that could potentially be used in scoping to elicit feedback from stakeholders. Some draft actions include additional information that was requested by the Council or provided by the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP).

Objective 1. Commercial Snapper Grouper Unlimited (SG1) Permit Issues

Draft Action 1. Revise the 2-for-1 snapper grouper commercial unlimited permit policy

- Is the 2-for-1 policy for the commercial snapper grouper unlimited permit still necessary?
- Should the 2-for-1 policy continue for a specific time period or until a threshold maximum number of permits has been met?
 - If the 2-for-1 policy continues, what are appropriate evaluation criteria to determine when this policy is no longer needed and should be removed (this may be more appropriately addressed through economic analysis by the SEFSC)?

Draft Action 2. Establish a maximum limit on the number of permits that each entity may own

- Should entities be limited to a maximum number of permits? If so, what maximum limit numbers should be considered?

Draft Action 3. Revise the requirements to acquire or retain a snapper grouper commercial permit

- Sub-actions may include establishing requirements for a minimum amount of income or reported fishing activity to acquire or retain a permit

Examples of Commercial Income or Fishing Activity Requirements for Other South Atlantic Fisheries

- **SG Amendment 4 (implemented in 1992):**

To exceed bag limits in the snapper grouper fishery, an owner or operator of a vessel that fishes in South Atlantic federal waters is required to obtain an annual vessel permit. For individuals to qualify for a permit they must have **at least 50 percent of their earned**

income, or \$20,000 in gross sales, derived from commercial, charter, or headboat fishing. For a corporation to be eligible for a permit, the corporation or shareholder or officer of the corporation or the vessel operator would be required to have at least \$20,000 in gross sales derived from commercial fishing. For partnerships, the general partner or operator of the vessel is required to meet the same qualifications as a corporation.

Note: The 50% income requirement was chosen to maintain consistency with what was in place for Gulf Reef Fish.

- **SG Amendment 5 (implemented in 1992);** this amendment rejected an alternative that considered income or production requirements with the following rationale:

There is little evidence to suggest that income or production requirements would limit entry to the wreckfish fishery to any substantial degree because, according to an informal survey of the wreckfish fleet, wreckfish fishermen are typically full time fishermen earning close to 100% of their income from commercial fishing, and wreckfish makes up a substantial percentage of their total annual fish harvest (by either weight or value). For this reason, income or production requirements cannot be used to limit entry or accomplish the objectives of limited entry. One speaker at the scoping sessions pointed out that if the required percentage of wreckfish to all fishery products was high, then shrimp boats might be effectively kept out of the wreckfish fishery. Because there are probably already too many vessels that target wreckfish without counting shrimp boats, percentage product requirements would probably not effectively control access to the wreckfish fishery in accordance with stated objectives.

- **Shrimp Amendment 7 (implemented in 2009):**

Through this amendment the Council was considering management measures to address the ability of vessels to retain their South Atlantic rock shrimp limited access endorsements. Concern existed regarding the provision to require vessels with endorsements to land a minimum of 15,000 lbs of rock shrimp in at least one calendar year during four consecutive calendar years. The Council also considered the reinstatement of endorsements lost due to either not meeting the landing requirement by December 31, 2007 or failing to renew the endorsement within the specified timeframe. The Council was also concerned about confusion with the rock shrimp “limited access endorsement” as implemented in the final rule versus the “limited access permit” as specified in Amendment 5. Several individuals seemed to have not renewed their endorsements when they renewed their rock shrimp permits because they did not understand they needed both an open access permit and a limited access endorsement. Action 6 required all SA shrimp permit holders to provide economic data if randomly selected to do so. The non-preferred alternative would have required all SA shrimp permit holders to provide economic data regardless of whether they were selected to provide this information. Also of note, in 2005 NOAA Fisheries attempted to gather these data on a voluntary basis but the response rates were not sufficient for analyses.

- **Spiny Lobster Amendment 1 (implemented in 1990):**

A commercial permit requirement was established for harvest of lobster. The Councils included a requirement that at least 10% of the applicant's (owner or operator) income must come from commercial fishing during the previous calendar year. The permit was implemented because the Councils felt that the Florida permit system did not adequately identify the various user groups harvesting lobster in either State or Federal waters because anyone could enter the federal fishery at no cost and could enter the Florida commercial fishery for a \$50 permit fee. Any consideration of a future limited entry program would require identification of participants in the fishery and their associated user groups. The commercial permit requirement and associated income requirement remains in place to receive a federal spiny lobster permit.

- **Coastal Migratory Pelagics (CMP) Amendment 1 (implemented in 1985):**

A commercial permit requirement was established for Gulf king mackerel. The Councils included a requirement that at least 10% of the applicant's income must come from commercial fishing during the previous calendar year. The purpose was to:

- limit recreational fishermen from entering the fishery,
- require new entrants to establish at least a small amount of income from participation in another commercial fishery.

The Councils felt 10% of earned income from commercial fishing was sufficient to include those who may be partially dependent on social security, retirement benefits, or investments. New entrants in the king mackerel fishery could establish eligibility with a record of income from other commercial fisheries and bag limit sales. For-hire vessels were excluded from permit eligibility because of the probability that many would elect to cross over to permit fishing, thus either utilizing the commercial quota or exceeding the TAC with unreported (unsold) catches.

- **CMP Amendment 2 (implemented in 1987):**

Commercial permits were required for king mackerel and Spanish mackerel (covering both migratory groups). All fishermen who applied for the commercial permits had to be able to show they derived more than 10% of their earned income from commercial fishing during the previous calendar year.

A for-hire permit was required for all coastal migratory pelagic species. For-hire vessels may be eligible to obtain a commercial permit to fish under the commercial quota when not on charter. The annual catch by this major group and relation to commercial sales was not well understood. The Councils felt a permit system for this group would identify the users and make an estimate of their use of the resources possible.

- **CMP Amendment 6 (implemented in 1992):**

Income requirement to be eligible for a commercial king and Spanish mackerel permit were modified. To be eligible for a permit, the owner or operator had to be able to show that at least 10% of their earned income was derived from commercial fishing during one of the three preceding calendar years. The previous requirement had caused undue

hardship on some individuals who would normally qualify as commercial fishermen (illness, loss and rebuilding of vessel, military duty, etc.).

- **CMP Amendment 8 (implemented in 1998):**

Income requirement to be eligible for a commercial king and Spanish mackerel permit was modified. To be eligible for a permit, the owner or operator had to be able to show that during one of the three previous calendar years at least 25% of their earned income or at least \$10,000 was derived from commercial sale of catch or for-hire fishing. Under the previous requirement, recreational fishermen with income only from dividends, annuities, pensions, etc., were able to qualify to fish under the commercial quota with the sale of very few fish. The Councils felt the increase in the earned income requirement would preclude some recreational sales and more clearly allocate the commercial quota to commercial fishermen; however, it would be not so restrictive as to preclude sales by for-hire vessels.

- **CMP Amendment 20A (implemented in 2014):**

The income requirement to be eligible for a commercial king and Spanish mackerel permit was eliminated. Elimination of the income requirement afforded more flexibility to fishermen by allowing them to earn a larger proportion of their income in non-fishing occupations. This added flexibility allowed some fishermen to renew their permits even if they did not have the opportunity to earn enough income from fishing (illness, environmental, natural or man-made disasters, and unforeseen personal circumstances, etc.) The elimination of income requirements would also decrease the administrative burden.

This eliminated other restrictions associated with the income qualification. For example, the existing income qualification could be satisfied by a vessel operator rather than a vessel owner. However, satisfying the income qualification based on an operator's income placed an additional restriction on the use of the permit. Such permits were only valid for use when the qualifying individual was actually operating the vessel and could only be transferred to that individual. Despite this restriction on the use of the permit to authorize fishing activities, the vessel owner was still considered the owner of the permit, and could remove the operator from the permit, subject to the owner meeting the income qualification by the end of the first full tax year after transfer or by immediately adding another operator who can meet the income qualification. Removing the income qualification eliminates the need for the additional restriction based on the vessel operator. Thus, the vessel owner would be free to remove the operator from the permit without having to satisfy an income qualification and the permit would be freely transferable by the vessel owner.

The Councils chose to eliminate the income requirement for renewing commercial permits because the requirement was not serving the function for which it was intended. For example, the requirement can be circumvented by putting the permit in the name of a business entity dedicated to commercial fishing; such a business entity would only have income associated with commercial fishing. On the other hand, a permit held in

the name of an owner-operator may not qualify to renew his permit if he needed to engage in non-fishing activities, such as assisting in the clean-up efforts following the Deepwater Horizon MC252 oil spill. Furthermore, both the Gulf and South Atlantic Councils' mackerel advisory panels recommended elimination of the income requirement.

Objective 2. Increase Trip Efficiency

Draft Action 4. Trip limit increases if landings are below a threshold by a specified date in the season

- Should this policy be species-specific or a general policy for commercially caught species?
- Should exceptions to this policy be established for rebuilding stocks?

Draft Action 5. Establish a non-target or out-of-season allowance for species that are not overfished

- Should this policy be species-specific, or a general (i.e., multispecies) poundage limit?
- Note that out-of-season catches would need to be estimated when monitoring in-season landings or establishing annual seasons (i.e., seasons may be shortened to allow out-of-season harvest to occur and not exceed the annual catch limit).

AP Recommendation:

Draft Action 6. Revise commercial trip limits to allow multiple days' worth of trip limits to be possessed on trips that last for multiple days.

- Should commercial trips that occur for multiple days be allowed to retain multiple trip limits (commensurate with the number of days at sea)?
- Should the number of days at sea be determined by the time lapsed from hail out (less than or equal to 24 hours at sea = 1 trip limit) or reset at a specified time (e.g. 12:00 a.m.)?

April 2025 AP Comments

- Some commercial fishermen may be open to a vessel monitoring system (VMS) or hail in/hail out to validate the number of days at sea.
- The number of days does not necessarily need to equate to the number of limits (e.g. a 3-day trip may only keep 2 days' worth of trip limits)
- Staff noted to the AP that consideration of this topic would likely also require discussions about potentially shorter seasons if this results in increased commercial catches. This would be analyzed through the amendment process.

Sub-Committee Action

Review draft actions and scoping questions and edit as needed. Consider recommending the Snapper Grouper Committee to approve Amendment 60 for scoping.

Potential Amendment Timeline

March 2025	Amendment 60 initiated
June 2025	Review initial actions and consider approval for scoping
Summer 2025	Scoping
September 2025	Review scoping comments; provide direction for actions and alternatives
December 2025	Review available analyses and draft action and alternative language
March 2026	Consider approval for public hearings
Spring 2026	Public hearings
June 2026	Review public comment and approve all actions
September 2026	Final Council approval
Summer/Fall 2027	Regulations effective

Sub-Committee Action

Review the amendment timeline and edit as necessary. Direct staff on whether any future Sub-Committee meetings are necessary.