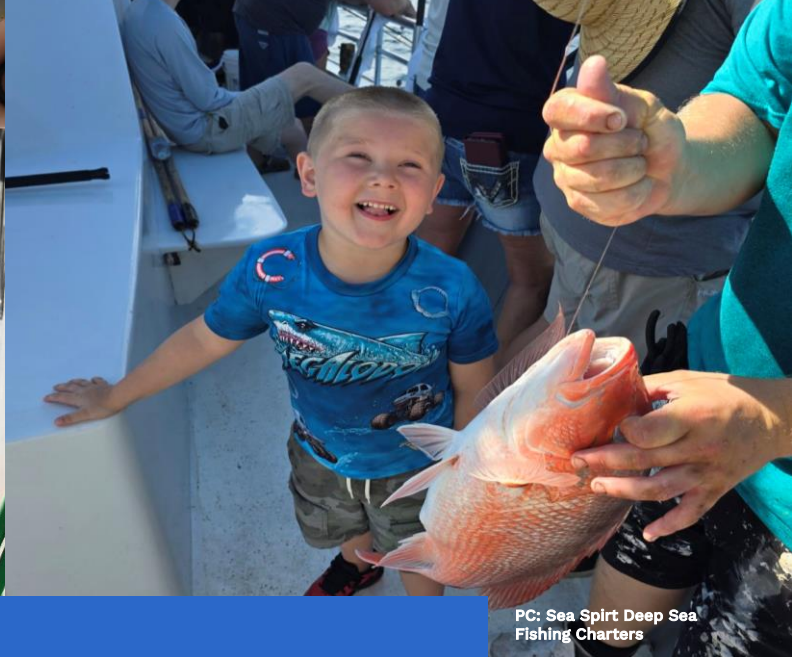




PC: Sea Spirit Deep Sea Fishing Charters

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 38

Revising headboat vessel limits for gag and black grouper, and establishing vessel limits for scamp and yellowmouth grouper

Decision Document, June 2026

Amendment Background

In December 2025, the Council requested an exploratory analysis of the impact of changing from a **per vessel limit** for **gag, black grouper, scamp, and snowy grouper** to a **one fish limit per every 6 passengers**. Vessel limits were established for gag and black grouper in 2023 (Amendment 53) and revised in Regulatory Amendment 36 (under review), scamp and yellowmouth grouper in 2024 (Amendment 55 under review), and snowy grouper in 2015 (Regulatory Amendment 20).

The **Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (SG AP)** recommended that the Council consider vessel limits in proportion to the number of anglers for federally permitted headboats. The AP noted that this would benefit vessels larger than 6-pack charters (~7-20 anglers) and larger headboats (20+ anglers). The AP suggested exploring the following:

- 4 fish per 10-30 passengers.
- 6 fish for 30 passengers, 30% of the passenger count, maximum of 10 fish per vessel.

In **December 2024** staff presented a [description of the headboat fishery](#), trends in effort, commonly caught species, and catch per unit effort (CPUE) for select species. After that report the Council requested additional, more detailed information including vessel capacity, discards, etc. be provided for review in June 2025. In June 2025 staff presented [highlights from a report](#) prepared by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) and the SG Committee expressed the intent to continue the discussion, focusing solely on snapper grouper species.

The full SEFSC document can be found [HERE](#).

In **September 2025** the Council directed staff to investigate vessel limits and catch rates for **gag, black grouper, scamp/yellowmouth grouper, and snowy grouper**, provide the regulatory definition of a headboat, and to gather feedback from the Law Enforcement AP (LE AP) on the enforceability of vessel limits per 6 passengers. The **LE AP provided the following in January 2026**:

- Enforceability depends on clear, simple rules and ability to verify passenger counts and fish onboard.
- Avoid percentage-based limits.
- Require headboats to maintain passenger records that can be reviewed at boarding to facilitate verification of allowable catch.
- Multiple vessel sizes and capacities may complicate management, any specific enforcement (based on COI or permit) would require accessible information for LE to be effective.
- Vessel-based limits could effectively increase total catch.

Headboat Definition:

50 CFR 622.2 ([LINK](#)): Means a vessel that holds a valid Certificate of Inspection (COI) issued by the USCG to carry more than six passengers for hire.

(1) A headboat with a commercial vessel permit, as required under this part, is considered to be operating as a headboat when it carries a passenger who pays a fee or—

(i) In the case of persons aboard fishing for or possessing South Atlantic snapper-grouper, when there are more persons aboard than the number of crew specified in the vessel's COI; or

(ii) In the case of persons aboard fishing for or possessing coastal migratory pelagic fish, when there are more than three persons aboard, including operator and crew.

At Your Last Meeting (March 2026)

- During the [March 2026](#) meeting, the Council initiated work on this amendment. The Council determined that sufficient scoping has been conducted since the topic has been discussed over several meetings and two advisory panels have provided feedback.

- Based on discussion from the committee and recommendations from public comment representing the headboat sector, snowy grouper was removed from consideration within this amendment.

Objectives for this Meeting (June 2026)

- Review amendment timeline.
- Review Purpose & Need statements.
- Review draft actions and alternatives and modify if necessary.

Tentative Amendment Timing

June 2026	Review draft actions and alternatives
September 2026	Review draft document and preliminary analysis and make any modifications
December 2026	Review public hearing document, select preferred alternatives and approve for public hearings
Early 2027	Conduct public hearings
March 2027	Review public hearing comments
June 2027	Review final draft and consider for final approval

Bag and Vessel Limit Background

Follow along in **Attachment 6b** in your briefing book.

Purpose and Need Statements

Purpose: The **purpose** of this framework amendment is to revise the for-hire vessel limit for gag and black grouper, and establish a vessel limit for scamp/yellowmouth grouper that would allow vessels with a federal South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Open Access permit and a valid US Coast Guard-issued certificate of inspection (COI) to retain a per passenger limit of gag, black grouper, and scamp/yellowmouth grouper.

Need: The **need** for this framework amendment is to allow for greater efficiency for federally permitted headboats while minimizing, to the extent practicable, adverse social and economic effects.

Committee Action

- REVIEW THE PURPOSE AND NEED AND SUGGEST ANY CHANGES

Proposed Action and Alternatives

Action 1. Revise the for-hire vessel limits for gag and black grouper.



Alternative 1 (No Action). Within the 3-fish combined grouper and tilefish aggregate bag limit, the daily bag limit is one gag or black grouper, combined. The for-hire vessel limit for gag and black grouper is 2 fish per trip in any combination; the more restrictive limit applies. Captain and crew may not retain gag or black grouper.

NOTE: *This No Action alternative assumes the implementation of Regulatory Amendment 36, which is currently (as of June 2026) in the proposed rule phase of rulemaking.*

Alternative 2. Revise the for-hire vessel limit to **1 gag or black grouper, combined per 6 passengers** for vessels with the South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Open Access permit and a valid US Coast Guard-issued certificate of inspection. The maximum number of gag or black grouper combined that can be retained per vessel is **12 fish**. Any vessel that does not hold a valid US Coast Guard issued certificate of inspection would have a vessel limit of 2 gag or black grouper combined per vessel per day. Captain and crew may not retain gag or black grouper.

Alternative 2. Revise the for-hire vessel limit to **2 gag or black grouper, combined per 6 passengers** for vessels with the South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Open Access permit and a valid US Coast Guard issued certificate of inspection. The maximum number of gag or black grouper combined that can be retained per vessel is **12 fish**. Any vessel that does not hold a valid US Coast Guard issued certificate of inspection would have a vessel limit of 2 gag or black grouper combined per vessel per day. Captain and crew may not retain gag or black grouper.

Discussion

- The gag fishery is currently under a rebuilding plan and after the implementation of Amendment 53 has been meeting its ACL each year.
 - 2023: Recreational closed 10/23/23
 - 2024: Recreational closed 6/15/24
 - 2025: Recreational closed 6/26/25
 - 2026: Recreational season announced, will close 8/2/26
- The 2 fish per 6 passengers was not analyzed in the March 2026 report.
- The maximum vessel limit for each alternative is 12 fish, which was the SG AP recommendation during the development of Regulatory Amendment 36. Does the Committee want to modify this?

Table 1. The number of fish that can be retained per six passengers on USCG-inspected for-hire vessels under **Action 1**, **Alternative 2** and **Alternative 3** as well as the most restrictive limit for each passenger count for private recreational and charter (once Regulatory Amendment 36 is implemented).

Number of passengers	Headboat Limit of 1 fish per 6 passengers (Alternative 2)	Headboat limit of 2 fish per 6 passengers (Alternative 3)	Most Restrictive Private/Charter Limit
1 person	1 fish	2 fish	1 fish bag
2 people	1 fish	2 fish	1 fish bag/2 fish vessel
3 people	1 fish	2 fish	2 fish vessel
4 people	1 fish	2 fish	2 fish vessel
5 people	1 fish	2 fish	2 fish vessel
6 people	1 fish	2 fish	2 fish vessel
12 people	2 fish	4 fish	2 fish vessel
18 people	3 fish	6 fish	2 fish vessel
24 people	4 fish	8 fish	2 fish vessel
30 people	5 fish	10 fish	2 fish vessel
36 people	6 fish	12 fish	2 fish vessel
42 people	7 fish	14 fish	2 fish vessel
48 people	8 fish	16 fish	2 fish vessel
54 people	9 fish	18 fish	2 fish vessel
60 people	10 fish	20 fish	2 fish vessel
66 people	11 fish	22 fish	2 fish vessel
72 people	12 fish	24 fish	2 fish vessel

Analysis Presented in March

- The management scenario of 2 gag or black grouper per vessel limit, which is under review by NOAA Fisheries for implementation (Regulatory Amendment 36), is significantly more restrictive than the previous 1 fish per angler baseline (pre-September 2023 levels).
- The requested scenario of 1 gag or black grouper per 6 anglers would relax restrictions compared to the management scenario under review (2 fish per vessel), recovering catch rates to near levels of harvest under the 1 fish per person limit. The requested scenario (1 fish/6 passengers) shows no significant difference in the distribution of number kept compared to the 1 fish per person ($p = 1.00$) and produces higher retention than 2 gag or black grouper per vessel ($p < 0.001$).
- The management shift would result in a modest 1% increase in total landings relative to the annual catch limit (ACL). While statistically and operationally meaningful in terms of individual trip behavior, the aggregate impact on total headboat landings for gag and black grouper is small relative to the recreational ACL.
- The recreational ACL was exceeded in 2024 (by 142%*) and 2025 (by 106%*) .

*Landings are preliminary, Source: Southeast Region ACL Monitoring

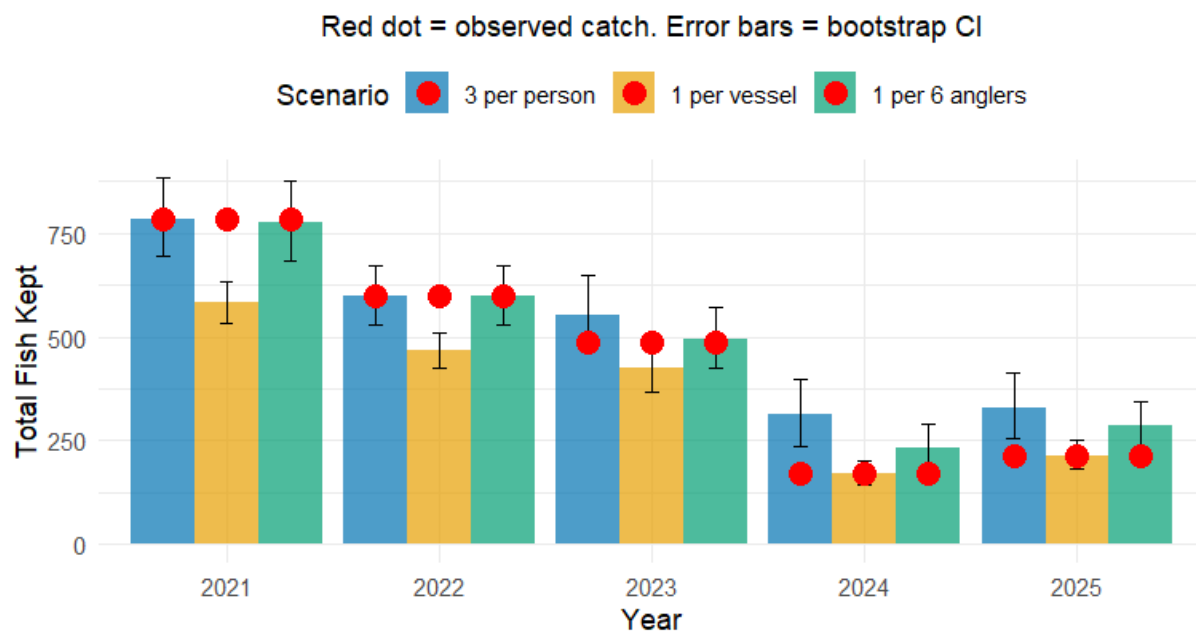


Figure 1. (Figure 5 in the [Estimated Changes in Headboat Landings for Select Species: Comparing Per Angler and Per Vessel Limits report](#)) Estimated total number of gag and black grouper kept under the three management scenarios: 1 fish per person (yellow), 2 fish per vessel (green), and 1 fish per 6 anglers (blue), uncertainty estimates based on parametric bootstraps, and point estimate based on observed catch (red dot). Source: Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS)

Committee Action

- REVIEW/MODIFY THE RANGE OF ALTERNATIVES.

Action 2: Establish a vessel limit for scamp/yellowmouth grouper



Alternative 1 (No Action). Within the 3-fish combined grouper and tilefish aggregate bag limit, the aggregate complex bag limit is 1 fish, either scamp or yellowmouth grouper combined, per person per day. There is no separate vessel limit for private, charter or headboat vessels.

NOTE: *This No Action alternative assumes the implementation of Amendment 55, which is currently (as of June 2026) in the final rule phase of rulemaking.*

Alternative 2. Establish a vessel limit to **1 scamp or yellowmouth grouper, combined, per 6 passengers** for vessels with the South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Open Access permit and a valid US Coast Guard issued certificate of inspection. The maximum number of scamp or yellowmouth grouper, combined, that can be retained per vessel, is 12 fish. Any vessel that does not hold a US Coast Guard issued certificate of inspection would be limited to the bag limit of 1 scamp or yellowmouth grouper combined per person per day.

Alternative 3. Establish a vessel limit to **2 scamp or yellowmouth grouper, combined, per 6 passengers** for vessels with the South Atlantic Charter/Headboat Open Access permit and a valid US Coast Guard issued certificate of inspection. The maximum number of scamp or yellowmouth grouper, combined, that can be retained per vessel, is 12 fish. Any vessel that does not hold a US Coast Guard issued certificate of inspection would be limited to the bag limit of 1 scamp or yellowmouth grouper combined per person per day.

Discussion

- Because a vessel limit is not currently in place, and one was not proposed in Amendment 55, a per 6 passenger vessel limit would be more limiting than the 1/person/day vessel limit.
- Amendment 55 will reduce the bag limit from 3 fish/person/day (3 scamp AND 3 yellowmouth grouper) to 1 fish/person/day (either scamp or yellowmouth).
- Analysis presented in March 2026 analyzed a 3 fish/person day, 1 fish/vessel/day, and a 1 fish per 6 passengers/vessel/day headboat limit.

Analysis Presented in March

- The recreational ACL for scamp and yellowmouth grouper will be reduced when Amendment 55 is implemented (116,369 whole weight for Scamp to 23,678 lbs in 2025 for Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper).
 - Compared to 1 fish per vessel, 1 fish per 6 anglers (requested scenario) was estimated to increase landings relative to the 2025 recreational ACL by 5.2%, with the headboat fishery accounting for 8% of total recreational landings.
- NOTE: Amendment 55 will NOT be implementing a vessel limit for any component of the recreational fishery.

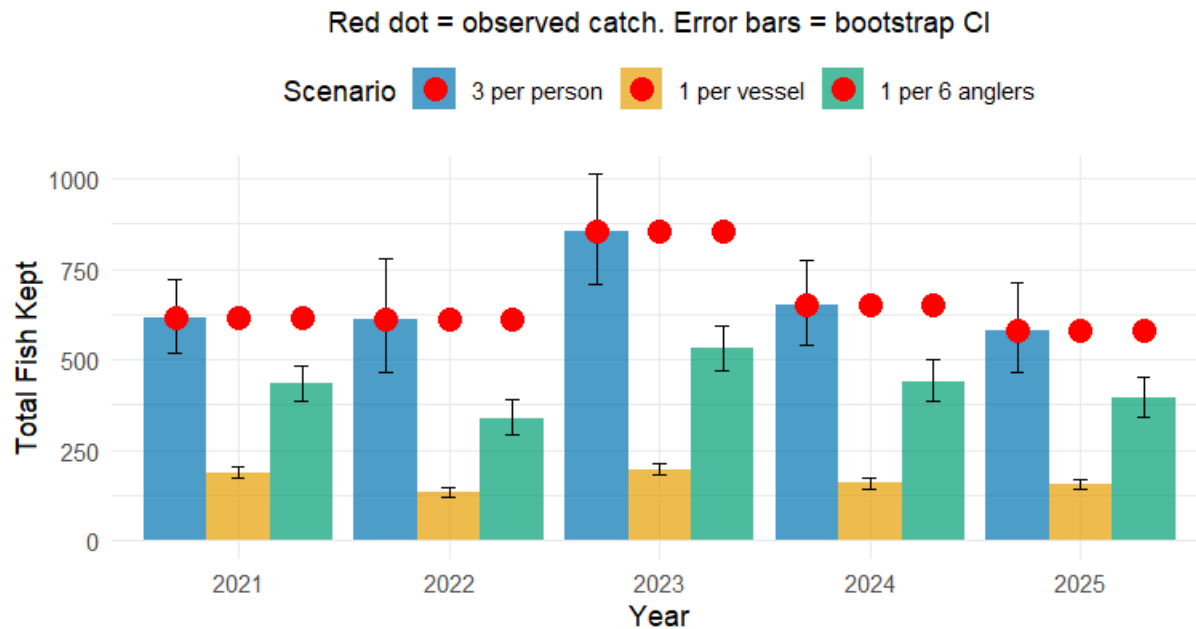


Figure 2. (Figure 10 in the [Estimated Changes in Headboat Landings for Select Species: Comparing Per Angler and Per Vessel Limits](#) report) Estimated total number of Scamp or Yellowmouth Grouper kept under the three management scenarios (3 fish per person, blue, 1 fish per vessel, yellow, and 1 fish per 6 anglers, green), uncertainty estimates based on parametric bootstraps, and point estimate based on observed catch (red dot). Source: SRHS

Committee Action

- DOES THE COMMITTEE WANT TO RETAIN THIS ACTION?