



THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

# Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 37

Annual Catch Targets, Accountability Measures, and Management Measure Modifications for Black Sea Bass

Council Decision Document, September 2025

## Background

The [Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review \(SEDAR\) 76 Update](#) stock assessment of South Atlantic black sea bass was completed in March 2025. The assessment indicated strong declines in black sea bass spawning stock biomass and abundance since 2012. The assessment was reviewed by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and presented to the Council. While the Council agreed with the SSC about the general conclusion of the assessment that black sea bass biomass is low and needs to be increased, in June 2025, the Council requested that the SSC re-evaluate the estimate of maximum sustainable yield, reconsider the high terminal (2023) estimate of fishing mortality rate (F), and reconsider acceptable biological catch (ABC) advice for 2027 and beyond. The Council also requested additional peer review of the SEDAR 76 Update assessment before using it to develop catch levels for management.

While the additional peer review is being conducted, the Council recognizes the persistent, strong declines in biomass and abundance reflected in the SEDAR 76 Update, fishery-independent indices, and landings. To limit these population declines and to increase short-term stock production, the Council is considering actions intended to: 1) reduce fishing mortality from harvest and dead discards, and 2) increase spawning output and recruitment, through Regulatory Amendment 37.

## Purpose and Need

**Purpose:** The purpose of this framework amendment is to establish annual catch targets and modify management and accountability measures for South Atlantic black sea bass as an interim way to immediately address declining landings and abundance while longer-term actions are being developed through a separate process.

**Need:** The need for this framework amendment is to limit further declines in South Atlantic black sea bass abundance by reducing fishing mortality from harvest and dead discards.

## **Objectives for this Meeting (September 2025)**

- Review the draft amendment, notably the actions and alternatives.
- Consider selection of initial preferred alternatives to allow refinement of analyses.
- Provide any necessary direction for further document development.
- Consider approval of the draft amendment for public hearings.

# Actions and Alternatives

For more comprehensive analyses associated with each action, please refer to the draft amendment. The draft amendment is still undergoing review and editing at the time of the initial September Briefing Book posting, but will be online ahead of the meeting, by September 10.

## Action 1. Establish annual catch targets and revise the accountability measures for South Atlantic black sea bass

### Sub-Action 1a. Establish annual catch targets for black sea bass

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** No annual catch targets are currently in place for South Atlantic black sea bass.

**Alternative 2.** Establish a commercial annual catch target of 48,557 pounds whole weight and a recreational annual catch target of 63,143 pounds whole weight for South Atlantic black sea bass. The annual catch limits for each sector would remain unchanged.

### Discussion

- Current annual catch limits (ACL) were based on SEDAR 56 (2018).
- Although ACLs have not been exceeded since SEDAR 56, the Southeast Reef Fish Chevron Trap Survey index (Finch et al. 2025) has continued to trend down.
- The current ACLs (commercial: 276,490 lbs ww; recreational: 366,510 lbs ww) would remain in effect. **Sub-Actions 1b and 1c** address revisions to accountability measures (AMs) to connect them to the ACTs.
  - Current recreational ACL is based on the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS).
  - Sub-Action 1a - **Alternative 2** would continue monitoring of recreational landings using CHTS-based estimates.
- **Sub-Action 1a - Alternative 2** would establish annual catch targets (ACT) for each sector at 50% of the average annual landings for the 5 most recent years of catch information available at the time of amendment development (Table 1). This alternative was developed by the Council in June 2025.
- **Alternative 2** would establish a commercial ACT of 48,557 lbs ww and a recreational ACT of 63,143 lbs ww.

**Table 1.** Annual landings of black sea bass from the NOAA Annual Catch Limit monitoring website. Annual catch targets (ACT) were calculated as 50% of the average landings for each sector.

| Commercial Fishing Year | Commercial Landings (lbs ww) | Recreational Fishing Year | Recreational landings (lbs ww) |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 2019                    | 199,058                      | 2019-2020                 | 170,190                        |
| 2020                    | 80,690                       | 2020-2021                 | 104,202                        |
| 2021                    | 57,250                       | 2021-2022                 | 117,789                        |

|                           |        |                           |         |
|---------------------------|--------|---------------------------|---------|
| 2022                      | 78,566 | 2022-2023                 | 110,660 |
| 2023                      | 70,005 | 2023-2024                 | 128,587 |
| <b>Average</b>            | 97,114 | <b>Average</b>            | 126,285 |
| <b>ACT=50% of Average</b> | 48,557 | <b>ACT=50% of Average</b> | 63,143  |

### Sub-Action 1b. Revise the in-season accountability measure for the commercial sector

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** If the National Marine Fisheries Service estimates that commercial landings of South Atlantic black sea bass will reach or are projected to reach the commercial quota, currently set at the commercial annual catch limit, the National Marine Fisheries Service will close the commercial harvest of black sea bass for the remainder of the fishing year.

**Alternative 2.** If the National Marine Fisheries Service estimates that commercial landings of South Atlantic black sea bass will reach or are projected to reach the commercial quota, set at the annual catch target in Sub-Action 1a, Alternative 2, the National Marine Fisheries Service will close the commercial harvest of black sea bass for the remainder of the fishing year.

#### Discussion

- **Sub-Action 1b – Alternative 2** would close the commercial season if landings reach or are projected to reach the lower commercial ACT from Sub-Action 1a. This would reduce commercial landings relative to recent levels.
- The commercial sector also has a post-season AM that states: if commercial landings exceed the quota, currently set at the ACL, then the ACL in the following fishing year will be reduced by the amount of the overage in the prior fishing year, unless NOAA Fisheries determines that no reduction is necessary based on the best scientific information available. *This post-season AM is not being considered for revision, and will continue to be based on the commercial ACL (currently, 276,490 lbs ww).*

### Sub-Action 1c. Revise accountability measure for the recreational sector

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The National Marine Fisheries Service will project the length of the South Atlantic black sea bass recreational fishing season based on when the recreational annual catch limit is projected to be met and announce the recreational fishing season end date in the Federal Register prior to the start of the recreational fishing year on April 1.

**Alternative 2.** The National Marine Fisheries Service will project the length of the South Atlantic black sea bass recreational fishing season based on when the recreational annual catch target is projected to be met and announce the recreational fishing season end date in the Federal Register prior to the start of the recreational fishing year on April 1.

## **Discussion**

- **Sub-Action 1c – Alternative 2** would maintain the process of NMFS announcing the season end date, but the season projection would be based on the lower recreational ACT from Action 1a, rather than the recreational ACL.
- On and after the effective date of the recreational closure notification, the bag and possession limit for black sea bass in or from the South Atlantic exclusive economic zone (EEZ) for all recreational components would be zero.
  - This bag and possession limit would also apply in the South Atlantic on board a vessel for which a valid Federal charter vessel/headboat permit for South Atlantic snapper grouper has been issued, without regard to where such species were harvested, *i.e.* in state or Federal waters.
  - State water regulations are incompatible with federal regulations; therefore, a federal bag limit of zero during a closure would not apply to private recreational vessels or charter vessels/headboats that do not hold a federal snapper grouper permit and do not enter the South Atlantic EEZ.

## **Action 2. Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass is 7 fish per person per day.

**Alternative 2.** Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 1 fish per person per day.

**Alternative 3.** Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 2 fish per person per day.

**Alternative 4.** Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 3 fish per person per day.

**Alternative 5.** Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 4 fish per person per day.

### ***Discussion***

- State water bag limits for black sea bass:
  - NC: 15 fish /day
  - SC: 7 fish/day
  - GA: 15 fish/day
  - FL: 7 fish/day
- Differences between state and federal regulations can affect the efficiency of managing the South Atlantic black sea bass stock.

## Action 3. Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass is 13 inches total length.

**Alternative 2.** Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 12 inches total length.

**Alternative 3.** Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 11 inches total length.

### Discussion

- The intent is for this action, along with a reduction in the bag limit, is to contribute to reduced fishing mortality by reducing discards of black sea bass, which is the primary source of black sea bass removals in numbers of fish.
- With a lower bag limit (Action 2) and anglers being more likely to retain fish that are caught, it is more likely that they will hit their bag limit earlier in the trip, potentially motivating them to switch to a different fishing method (e.g., trolling) or move to a different area where they would be less likely to encounter black sea bass.
- **Alternative 3** would reduce regulatory differences between sectors without changing the commercial minimum size limit.
- The primary commercial gear, pots, has mesh and opening regulations based on a 10-inch minimum size limit. Amendment 18A (2011) increased the minimum size limit from 10 to 11 inches but did not change the gear requirements. Further deviation away from this level may result in additional commercial discards.

## Action 4. Establish a spawning season closure for South Atlantic black sea bass

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** There is no spawning seasonal closure for black sea bass in or from South Atlantic federal waters south of Cape Hatteras, NC.

**Alternative 2.** Establish a commercial seasonal closure in which commercial sale, purchase, harvest, or possession of black sea bass in or from South Atlantic federal waters south of Cape Hatteras, NC, is prohibited and the commercial trip limit is zero.

The commercial seasonal closure occurs from:

**Sub-Alternative 2a.** January 1 through January 31.

**Sub-Alternative 2b.** February 1 through the end of February.

**Sub-Alternative 2c.** March 1 through March 31.

**Sub-Alternative 2d.** April 1 through April 30.

**Alternative 3.** Establish a recreational seasonal closure in which recreational harvest or possession of black sea bass in or from South Atlantic federal waters south of Cape Hatteras, NC, is prohibited and the bag limit is zero.

The recreational seasonal closure occurs from:

**Sub-Alternative 3a.** January 1 through January 31.

**Sub-Alternative 3b.** February 1 through the end of February.

**Sub-Alternative 3c.** March 1 through March 31.

**Sub-Alternative 3d.** April 1 through April 30.

### Discussion

- Sub-alternatives under **Alternative 2** and **Alternative 3** consider closures in 1-month increments, from January through April.
  - **The Council may select multiple sub-alternatives as preferred to establish a closure that lasts for more than one month.**
- Spawning season closures are intended to protect and increase the stock biomass by allowing fish to spawn for some time in their spawning season without any fishing mortality from harvest (though there may still be some fishing mortality from fish that are caught and released).
- Peak spawning season for black sea bass: February – May (Farmer et al. 2017)
  - **IPT Question:** Given it is part of the peak spawning season, should May be considered in the Action 4 alternatives?



- Other species in the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery management unit that are closed to harvest from January through April include: black grouper, blueline tilefish (recreational only), gag, greater amberjack (closed only in April), East Florida/Florida Keys hogfish (recreational only), red grouper, red porgy (recreational only), scamp, snowy grouper (recreational only), wreckfish (recreational closed January-April; commercial closed January 15 - April 15), red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney.
- For all three species that have been assessed since 2010 and are included in the January-April shallow water grouper closure (gag, scamp, and red grouper), removals (landings plus dead discards in number of fish) declined significantly in 2010, the first year of the closure's implementation, and remained lower than typical levels observed prior to 2010 (SEDAR 71, SEDAR 68, SEDAR 53).
- Spawning closures considered in Action 4 do not change seasonal area closures for commercial fishing with black sea bass pots. *The seasonal area closures for black sea bass pots will remain in effect.*

## Council Action

Review draft actions and alternatives and modify as needed. Select initial preferred alternatives.

## Tentative Amendment Timing

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <b>June 2025</b>      | Amendment initiated  |
| <b>September 2025</b> | <b>Review the draft amendment, select preferred alternatives (as necessary), and approve for public hearings</b> |
| <b>Fall 2025</b>      | Conduct public hearings  |
| <b>December 2025</b>  | Review public comment, approve all actions, and approve for formal review  |
| <b>Mid-Late 2026</b>  | Regulations effective  |

## Council Action

Review timeline and revise as necessary. Consider approval of the amendment for public hearings.

## Appendix A. Summary of Regulations

| Species                                 | Black Sea Bass   |
|---|--|
| OFL                                     | 703,000 lbs ww (2021+)   |
| ABC                                     | 643,000 lbs ww (2021+)<br>(AF 2)   |
| Total ACL                               | 643,000 lbs ww (2021+)<br>(AF 2)   |
| Commercial ACL                          | 276,490 lbs ww (2021+) (AF 2)  |
| Recreational ACL                        | 366,510 lbs ww (2021-2022+) (AF 2)   |
| Commercial Allocation                   | 43.00%   |
| Recreational Allocation                 | 57.00%   |
| Commercial AM<br>(Amendment Language)   | If commercial landings, as estimated by the SRD, reach or are projected to reach the quota specified in §622.190(a)(5), the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to close the commercial sector for the remainder of the fishing year.  |
| Recreational AM<br>(Amendment Language) | NMFS will project the length of the recreational fishing season based on when NMFS projects the recreational ACL is expected to be met and announce the recreational fishing season end date in the Federal Register prior to the start of the recreational fishing year on April 1. On and after the effective date of the recreational closure notification, the bag and possession limit for black sea bass in or from the South Atlantic EEZ is zero. This bag and possession limit applies in the South Atlantic on board a vessel for which a valid Federal charter vessel/headboat permit for South Atlantic snapper-grouper has been issued, without regard to where such species were harvested, i.e. in state or Federal waters. |
| Commercial In-season Closure?           | Yes  |
| Commercial Payback?                     | Yes  |
| Rec In-season Closure?                  | No- NMFS will announce rec season each year (Reg 14). Rec season for 2024 is Apr 1- Mar 31 (all year)  |
| Rec Payback?                            | No (removed in Reg 14)   |
| Fishing year                            | Jan 1-Dec 31 comm    Apr 1- Mar 31 rec (Reg 14)  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Commercial Management Measures</b>   | <p>Trip limit 1,000 lbs gw (1,180 lbs ww);<br/> 11" TL. (Am18A)<br/> H&amp;L trip limit 300 lbs gw Jan -Apr (Reg 14 effective 12/8/14)<br/> Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)</p> <p>Commercial trip limit alternatives:<br/> Look at average trip harvest<br/> Come back at Full Council<br/> Different trip limits for different gears</p> |
| <b>Recreational Management Measures</b> | <p>13" TL (Am 18A);<br/> 7-fish bag limit (Reg Am 25)<br/> Sale of recreationally caught fish prohibited.</p>   |
| <b>Seasonal closures</b>                | Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)  |
| <b>Spawning season</b>                  | Peak spawning March-May offshore with minor spawning Sept-Nov   |
| <b>Size at first spawning</b>           | Black sea bass change sex from female to male. The minimum size of maturity for females 3.6 in SL. All females are mature by 7.1 in SL.   |

## Appendix B. State Regulations

Based on current information, the effects of changes to recreational management should all be considered with the expectation that state regulations (summarized below) remain unchanged. A large portion of the recreational catch occurs in state waters (Table 2).

**Federal:** 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

**North Carolina (S of Cape Hatteras):** 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

**South Carolina:** 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

**Georgia:** 15 fish per person per day bag limit; 12-inch minimum size limit

**Florida:** 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

**Table 2.** South Atlantic recreational catches (shore, charter, and private trips) of black sea bass from 2019-2023 for inland, state ocean ( $\leq 3$  miles), and federal ocean ( $> 3$  miles) waters.

| Year                     | Inland    | Ocean $\leq 3$ miles | Ocean $> 3$ miles |
|--------------------------|-----------|----------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Landings (number)</b> |           |                      |                   |
| 2019                     | 4,778     | 17,423               | 388,759           |
| 2020                     | 23,296    | 16,028               | 187,633           |
| 2021                     | 65,012    | 10,306               | 195,872           |
| 2022                     | 30,954    | 8,006                | 269,466           |
| 2023                     | 97,263    | 19,855               | 232,122           |
| <b>Releases (number)</b> |           |                      |                   |
| 2019                     | 2,361,811 | 1,167,075            | 4,208,745         |
| 2020                     | 2,343,704 | 811,823              | 2,818,590         |
| 2021                     | 2,205,874 | 1,110,027            | 2,238,182         |
| 2022                     | 3,713,356 | 1,503,126            | 3,329,941         |
| 2023                     | 3,563,520 | 1,035,373            | 1,522,056         |
| <b>Catch (number)</b>    |           |                      |                   |
| 2019                     | 2,366,589 | 1,184,498            | 4,597,504         |
| 2020                     | 2,367,000 | 827,851              | 3,006,223         |
| 2021                     | 2,270,886 | 1,120,333            | 2,434,054         |
| 2022                     | 3,744,310 | 1,511,132            | 3,599,407         |
| 2023                     | 3,660,783 | 1,055,228            | 1,754,178         |

Source: MRIP Public Data (Fishing Effort Survey-based estimates)