

Limiting Entry to the Dolphin Wahoo For-Hire Fishery in the Atlantic

Discussion Document
April 2025

Background

In 2016, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) established a control date of June 15, 2016, with the intent to consider limiting entry into the for-hire component of the Snapper Grouper, Dolphin Wahoo, and Coastal Migratory Pelagics fisheries. A control date is used to establish eligibility criteria for determining future access to fisheries or sectors of fisheries. What eventually became Snapper Grouper Amendment 47 was initiated and developed through the public scoping stage. This amendment initially included the Snapper Grouper, Dolphin Wahoo, and Coastal Migratory Pelagics fishery management plans, but the scope of the amendment was narrowed down to focus solely on the Snapper Grouper fishery. Following [scoping hearings](#) held in August 2018 and most [comments](#) being in opposition to a moratorium, the Council decided to discontinue work on Amendment 47 indefinitely.

At their Fall 2023 meetings, the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) and the Mackerel Cobia AP provided recommendations to the Council to consider limiting entry into their respective for-hire fisheries. The APs stated the following as justification:

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel feedback (Fall 2023):

- Most of the AP expressed support for re-consideration of limiting entry for the recreational for-hire component of the snapper grouper fishery.
- Representatives from the Florida Keys and South Carolina noted large population growth in recent years and increases in the number of recreational for-hire participants.
- The AP discussed whether headboats and “6-pack” charters should both be included in limited entry considerations.
 - Headboats should have some separation from other for-hire businesses.
 - 6-pack charters can fish for a wider variety of species using a wider variety of methods. Headboats have more limited methods and target species.
 - Headboats have a higher regulatory requirement to operate than charters.
 - Private boats can be insured to do similar things as charter, easing entry into this component of the fishery.

- The June 15, 2016, control date should be revisited. It was set during a previous amendment process and many changes have happened since then.
- Consider setting the control date to align with the beginning of electronic for-hire reporting.
- “Illegal charters” (charged trips by boat owners that do not have a for-hire license) are becoming more of a problem through social media advertising.
- In considering how entry would be limited and who would be allowed entry, the Council should consider regional variations in fishing effort, as well as differences between part-time and full-time participants. Possibly consider more clearly defining “professional” charter captains.
- Captain and mate are being limited from inclusion in the bag limit for some species.
- Many Snapper Grouper management unit species are becoming a very limited resource.
- Limited entry could be considered for South Atlantic fisheries outside Snapper Grouper, as well.
- Look at Gulf for-hire management & process for limited entry.
 - In the Gulf, there are different permits based on how many passengers can be carried.

Mackerel Cobia Advisory Panel feedback (Fall 2023):

- Limited entry would control the expansion of recreational harvest and professionalize the for-hire fleet.
- The AP would be interested in discussing new and unique structures for a limited entry program (ex. limited leasing, a greenhorn pool, etc.).
- Recommendation to form a workgroup to discuss limited-entry for for-hire fleets. The workgroup should include fishermen who are for and against limited entry, staff with permit experience, and fishermen with experience operating under a for-hire limited entry system (ex. Gulf CMP for-hire fishermen). The Council should not set or change the control date until this group has produced a report for review by the Council.

At their December 2023 meeting, the Council discussed the APs’ recommendations and received an update on the SEFHIER program. Overall, there has been poor compliance with the for-hire reporting requirements in the South Atlantic and the agency is unable to determine the accuracy of submitted data. The open access nature of for-hire permits in the South Atlantic was cited as a potential reason for poor compliance with reporting requirements. As such, **the Council initiated development of an amendment to consider limited entry for the finfish fisheries under its jurisdiction which include the Snapper Grouper, Coastal Migratory Pelagics, and Dolphin Wahoo fisheries.** Additionally, the Council passed the following motion to revise the control date of the for-hire permits:

Motion: To prevent speculative entry, establish an additional control date of December 8, 2023, that the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) may use if it decides to create restrictions limiting participation in the exclusive economic zone for the federal charter vessel/headboat (for-hire) component of the recreational sectors of the coastal migratory pelagics fishery in the Atlantic, dolphin and wahoo fishery in the Atlantic, and snapper-grouper fishery in the South Atlantic. Anyone obtaining a federal for-hire permit for these recreational sectors after the control date will not be assured of future access should a management regime that limits participation in the sector be prepared and implemented.

Additionally, federal permit holders that have not reported snapper-grouper, coastal migratory pelagic, and/or dolphin and wahoo catch from the South Atlantic to the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting program on or prior to December 5, 2023, will not be assured of future access should a management regime that limits participation in the sector be prepared and implemented.

Over two meetings, the Council discussed initial ideas for potentially limiting access to for-hire permits that included a moratorium on the issuance of new permits. Additionally, the Council discussed developing a limited entry system that would specify transferability of for-hire permits and ways to allow new entrants into the fishery. The Council last discussed for-hire limited entry at their June 2024 meeting. At this meeting, the Council provided guidance to pause development of this amendment to gather additional information from APs and updated permit information. Detailed full-year data on for-hire permits after 2020 is currently unavailable due to issues and ongoing updates with the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office's (SERO) permits system.

Summary of Available Data on For-Hire Permits in the Dolphin Wahoo Fishery

The following permit information was provided by the SERO Limited Access Privilege Programs and Data Management Branch in January 2024. The number of federal for-hire (charter/headboat) permitted vessels for the three finfish fisheries that the Council manages was examined from 2008 through 2020. Full-year data after 2020 are currently unavailable due to issues and ongoing updates with the SERO permits system. It is expected that information from 2020 onwards will be available later in 2024. **It should be noted that COVID-19 and the comprehensive for-hire logbook reporting amendment (effective January 4, 2021) likely affected the number of federally permitted for-hire vessels in recent years and these trends are not fully shown in the following figures and tables.**

Federal Atlantic Charter/Headboat permits for Dolphin Wahoo are open access. From 2008 through 2020, most of the federal for-hire dolphin wahoo permitted vessels had a homeport in the South Atlantic region. A similar increase in the number of permits also seen in the snapper grouper and coastal migratory pelagic fishery is evident in the for-hire component of the dolphin wahoo fishery after 2015 (**Table 1, Figure 1**) with most permitted vessels homeported in Florida. The number of permits peaked in 2019 at 2,360 permitted vessels (**Table 1**). Compared to snapper grouper for-hire permits, there are notably more dolphin wahoo permits for vessels in the Mid-Atlantic and New England regions since the permit is required to fish for the two species in those regions.

Table 1. Number of vessels with federal charter/headboat dolphin wahoo permits by homeport state or region from 2008 through 2020.

Year	FL (East, Keys, Interior)	GA	SC	NC	Gulf	Mid-Atlantic	New England	OOR	Carib	Total
2008	757	24	137	401	320	304	14	7	1	1,965
2009	774	28	148	412	320	312	19	6	2	2,021
2010	764	24	147	394	329	320	21	4	3	2,006
2011	785	23	140	394	331	312	21	4	4	2,014
2012	803	25	141	369	339	312	22	5	3	2,019
2013	802	27	141	348	340	278	21	5	1	1,963
2014	763	30	143	337	326	271	20	5	1	1,896
2015	774	34	170	352	321	264	21	4	3	1,943
2016	818	39	192	363	313	269	28	5	2	2,029
2017	890	49	197	388	322	264	36	3	1	2,150
2018	1,014	53	201	391	332	268	36	4	1	2,300
2019	1,073	48	200	404	325	272	34	3	1	2,360
2020	1,095	45	177	392	308	260	33	2	2	2,314

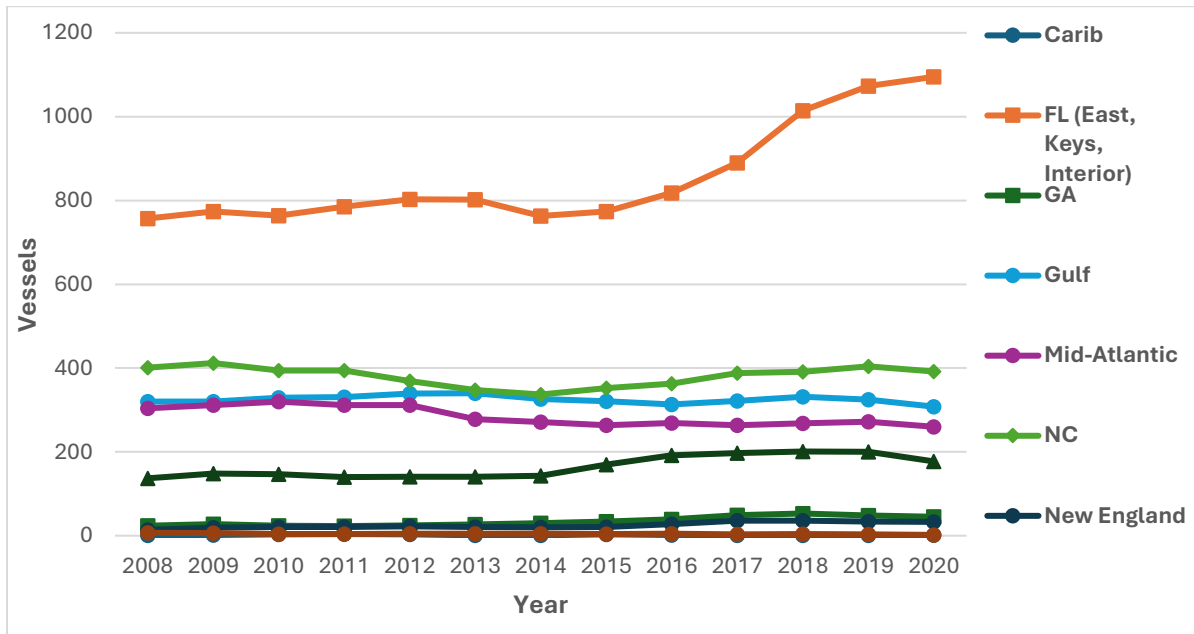


Figure 1. Number of vessels with federal charter/headboat dolphin wahoo permits by homeport state or region from 2008 through 2020.

AP Discussion:

- Does the AP feel that there has been a notable change in the number of for-hire vessels participating in the Dolphin Wahoo fishery since 2020? Please explain.
 - Is there a state or regional aspect to this observation?

- Does the AP feel that there is a need to consider limiting the number of for-hire Dolphin Wahoo permits available?
 - If not, why?
 - If so, why? Also, is this a coast-wide need or is it region-specific?