



Lines of Communication

Conversations with the Council



BOLIVIA

March 23, 2026

Brunswick County Admin. Building

MOREHEAD CITY

March 24, 2026

NC DMF Central District Office

HATTERAS

March 25, 2026

Hatteras Village Civic Center

MANTEO

March 26, 2026

Virginia Tillett Community Center

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

4055 Faber Place Drive
Suite 201
North Charleston, SC 29405
843-571-4366

www.safmc.net

NORTH CAROLINA SUMMARY REPORT | MARCH 2026

Lines of Communication: Conversations with the Council, or simply “Lines,” is a Council initiative aimed toward building relationships with fisheries stakeholders by providing an opportunity for mutual sharing of information. Unlike other outreach efforts and public comment opportunities, Lines allows attendees to actively discuss their perspectives with local Council members, Council staff, and other fishery participants. Lines meetings are held in-person throughout the South Atlantic, meeting fishermen in their communities.



Introduction

Stakeholder input has always been a fundamental component of the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act and council system. While Participatory Science, Citizen Science, and local ecological knowledge are used as ways of improving the resolution and timeliness of the decision-making information available to the Council, stakeholders must be willing to get involved for these techniques to succeed. In 2024 the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (South Atlantic Council) began developing Lines of Communication: Conversations with the Council (Lines) as a new way of interacting with stakeholders

The traditional public comment format does not always allow for two-way discourse between South Atlantic Council members and fisheries stakeholders. Alternatively, Lines meetings are designed to provide an opportunity for South Atlantic Council members to have productive dialogues with fisheries participants. By engaging stakeholders in this more informal setting, South Atlantic Council members hope to be able to build or improve relationships and increase engagement in the management process. Lines meetings are held in-person, meeting fishermen in their communities.

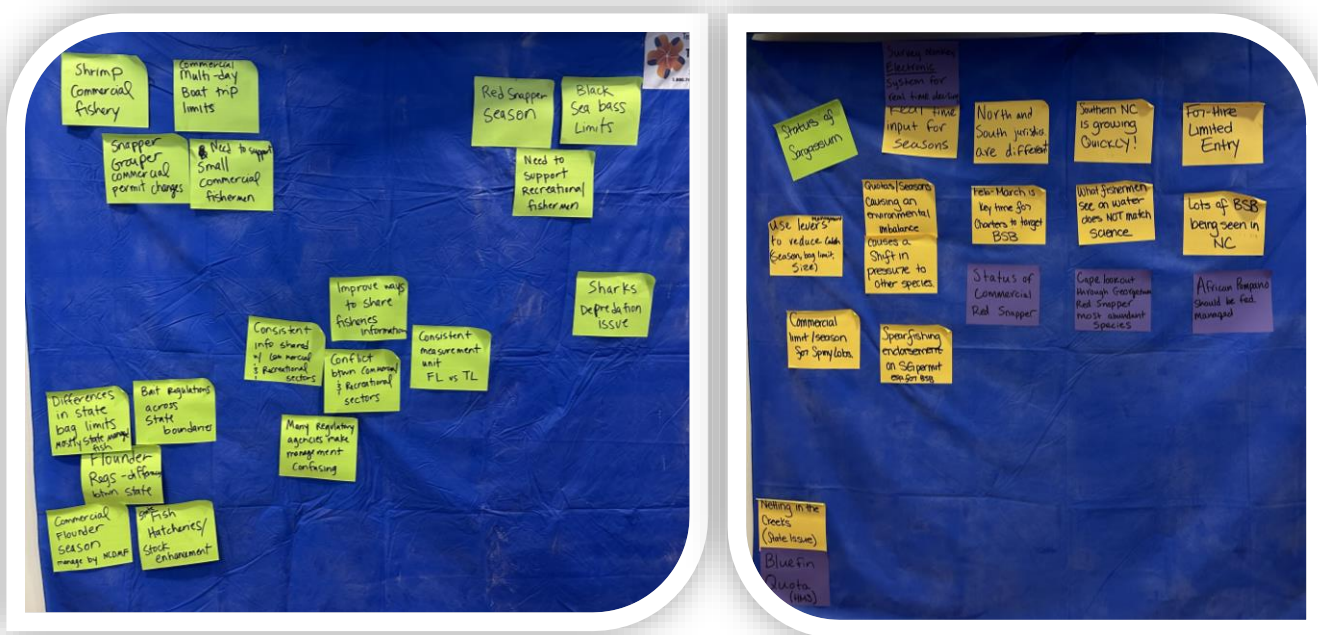
In March 2026, Lines meetings were held in Bolivia, Morehead City, Hatteras, and Manteo, North Carolina. The notes below represent a summary of information gathered throughout the meetings.

Discussion Summary

Boliva, North Carolina | March 23, 2026

Sticky Wall Exercise: what did attendees come to the meetings to discuss with their Council members and what are Council members hoping to learn more about from attendees?

- The number of entities involved in fisheries management (state, federal, Council, etc.) is confusing and it makes the process challenging to follow.
 - This can also result in discrepancy in bag and trip limits between state and federal waters.
 - Discrepancies were noted for both federally managed and state managed species (flounder and striped bass).
 - There needs to be a way to communicate accurate information to all stakeholders to prevent misinformation and conflict between sectors.
 - Bait regulations across state boundaries.
- It was unclear how fishing seasons for various Council managed species were set and frustration that current seasons do not align well with when fish are available in different areas and when the weather is favorable for heading offshore.
 - It was suggested that the Council look into a way to communicate and modify season timing based on more real-time data.
 - The longest season possible is important for fishermen and should be a priority.
- Attendees felt a single management approach throughout the entire South Atlantic region was problematic due to the drastic in seasonality, key species, weather conditions, etc. throughout the area.
 - For example, during the red snapper season in 2025 the weather was favorable in Florida but was not fishable in North Carolina.
- Fishing seasons and quotas are resulting in an imbalance of species within the environment.
 - For example, black sea bass are dominating fishing grounds that were previously dominated by various grouper species.



- Red snapper is an important species in North Carolina, especially from Cape Lookout to the NC/SC border. There were a lot of questions about the Exempted Fishing Permit submitted by North Carolina for the 2026 recreational red snapper season.
 - For charters, many of which book trips specifically for red snapper.
 - It was noted that commercial red snapper regulations would not be changing via the EFP, but commercial attendees supported what was originally proposed in the Secretarial amendment related to red snapper (150-pound trip limit).
- Black sea bass are an important species in North Carolina with catch trending upward over the last few years.
 - The months of February and March are a critical time for charter fishermen to be targeting black sea bass.
 - Fishermen are consistently catching the trip limit and are only keeping black sea bass that are 16-inches fork length of larger.
 - The science coming out of the most recent black sea bass stock assessment does not appear to match what fishermen are seeing on the water.
- The South Atlantic region is one of the fastest growing areas in the United States, with areas like Wilmington, North Carolina and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina growing especially quickly.
- The number of recreational fishermen participating in spearfishing is increasing.
 - There was a recommendation to put a spearfishing endorsement on commercial permits and to federally manage African pompano, a regular target of recreational spearfishermen.
- The commercial industry is struggling, and the Council needs to do more to support small commercial fishing businesses.
- Commercial vessels on multi-day trips should be able to retain multiple trip limits.
- It is confusing to have some fish measured using fork length and others measured via total length. The Council should create consistency in how size limits are measured to avoid confusion.
- There was concern expressed about the amendment addressing limited entry for the for-hire sector being removed from the Council's workplan priorities.
- Attendees expressed interest in understanding more about the changes to the snapper grouper unlimited permit the Council is considering in Snapper Grouper Amendment 60 (commercial efficiency).

- Commercial fishermen in North Carolina would like a commercial trip limit (greater than two lobsters per trip) and season for spiny lobster. It was noted that many spiny lobsters in North Carolina die because they cannot molt out of their shells once they are larger than eight pounds.
- Shark depredation continues to be a challenge for fishermen, and it appears that sharks are learning to be attracted to fishing vessels for an easy meal.

Fishing Satisfaction Round Table: what is necessary for a fishing experience to be considered successful and what are the tradeoffs between those components?

- For many recreational and commercial fishermen, fishing is in their blood. It is both for sport (recreational) and the challenge, you have to have the knowledge and the skills necessary to catch fish.
- Current regulations do not appear to be helping the population of many snapper grouper species.
- Good weather and fair seas are what make a good commercial trip, being able to keep as many marketable fish as possible makes a successful trip.
 - For the commercial sector season length is not as important as having regulations that allow for profitable trips (high enough trip limit and being able to target when the fish are available).
 - Commercial fishermen want to be able to head out, catch their limit and bring fish to market. Marketability of Council-managed species is not an issue and often high and low quality species are mixed together to increase sales and price.
 - Gag grouper, snowy grouper, and golden tilefish are a great species for the idealized commercial fishing trip because they are fun to hunt, can usually be targeted without a lot of other vessels around (snowy and golden), and are easy to market/profitable.
- Recreational fishermen want to keep enough fish to eat, but do not necessarily need to pack a cooler. It would be great if fishing seasons could be open year-round and some would prefer a lower bag limit and/or a larger minimum size limit if the season were to be open longer.
 - Seasonal regulations are one of the biggest drivers of whether or not to fish and what you are going to target. Fishermen are not going to go offshore if they can't bring at least something home.
 - Fishing clubs are a great way to introduce anglers, both adults and kids, to offshore fishing and get them engaged in the sport.
- For-hire customers have different motivations, some just want to catch fish, some want to target specific species, and some want to keep fish at a lower cost than buying at market (though this is becoming less feasible). Customers who want to catch specific species will book trips based on when those species are open and available.
 - For-hire customers find seasonal closures just as frustrating as they find low trip limits, both of which can negatively affect the ability to sell trips, especially for dolphin and snapper grouper species. Business sense needs to be incorporated into management decisions.
 - Abundance of target species is important for for-hire trips and critical to consistently providing satisfying trips. For-hire captains often have to manage client expectations.
 - Cobia, dolphin, Atlantic bonito, jacks, and false albacore are important to the for-hire industry because clients love them, they are easy to access, delicious, and fun to catch.
- Fishing support industries (like tackle shops) just want fishermen to be able to target fish.

Morehead City, North Carolina | March 24, 2026

Sticky Wall Exercise: what did attendees come to the meetings to discuss with their Council members and what are Council members hoping to learn more about from attendees?

- Attendees understood the need for fisheries management and regulations, but felt that fishermen around the country need more support in the form of more marketing, maintenance and preservation of working waterfronts, youth development programs, etc.
 - Fisheries management can be overreaching and cause problems for fishermen and fishing communities.

- Sustainable fisheries should include sustaining fishermen and fishing communities.
 - Poor data and bad science hurt all of these goals.
 - Imported seafood has become a huge component of seafood consumption in the United States, negatively effecting domestic seafood producers.
- Poor data and bad science are resulting in inappropriate fishing regulations. Stock assessments, observer processes, and survey methods all need to be improved.
 - There were suggestions to utilize more camera surveys, select survey sites where fish are able to be caught, and utilize gear and fishing methods that are appropriate for the type of fish being surveyed.
 - It was noted that there may be some change of fishing behavior when observers are on board a vessel, slightly skewing data.
 - Stock assessments need to be transparent so that stakeholders can see how they incorporate environmental data, population dynamics, and changes in the fishery and in effort over time.
- There needs to be a description for general understanding of North Carolina's Exempted Fishing Permit for the 2026 recreational red snapper season.
- Regional differences throughout the South Atlantic can make management incredibly difficult.
 - There needs to be continued efforts to figure out how to manage black sea bass in North Carolina differently from the southern portion of the stock.
 - Having access to black sea bass in the winter (February and March) is important for fishermen in North Carolina.
 - The red grouper stock in North Carolina is low, but they are being caught in other areas in the South Atlantic.
- Headboats are a specific component of the for-hire sector, and it is critical that the Council ensures vessel limits are appropriate for that type of fishery.



Fishing Satisfaction Round Table: what is necessary for a fishing experience to be considered successful and what are the tradeoffs between those components?

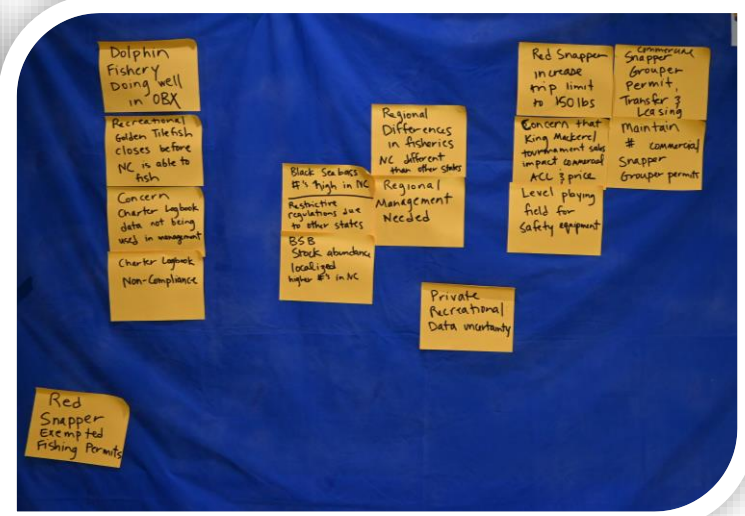
- For the for-hire industry, the key species to target can vary significantly based on individual clients. Some clients want to catch and release fish whereas others want to fill a cooler. As a result, access to species is critical to the success of for-hire businesses.
 - Regulations that turned harvest into catch and release destroyed the for-hire industry up north.
 - Red drum, gag grouper, black sea bass, red snapper, and silver snapper are all important species for the for-hire industry. Red drum are a catch and release fishery vs snapper grouper species which are targeted with the intent to harvest.
- Private recreational fishermen want fish to keep (catching their groceries and defending the money they spend on fishing). Releasing fish leads to wasting fish, which can ruin a fishing trip. If a fish is going to die regardless, fishermen should be able to harvest them.
- For commercial fishermen, the trip needs to be worth it in terms of the number of fish that can be harvested and at what market price (retaining enough fish to justify increasing expenses (ex. fuel) and still make a profit). Longer periods of fishing with larger limits are ideal.
 - The Council should try to increase trip limits wherever possible without shortening the window of opportunity to fish. Weekly trip limits might be a way to achieve this goal.

Hatteras, North Carolina | March 25, 2026

Sticky Wall Exercise: what did attendees come to the meetings to discuss with their Council members and what are Council members hoping to learn more about from attendees?

- The dolphin fishery was good last year, there were not big pushes in May and June, but the fishery was consistent the entire year.
- The two for one system for Snapper Grouper permits should be eliminated. There does not need to be any more net loss in commercial fishing permits and there is a need to eliminate the industry buying up permits.
 - Over fifty percent of the snapper grouper permits were lost in an effort to get rid of latent effort but there have not been any long-term gains for the fishery.
 - The Council needs to discuss what the *ideal* number of permits is for the snapper grouper fishery.
 - Some fishermen have purchased a snapper grouper permit, but don't want to buy an additional one while the Council is discussing permit changes.
 - The Council could consider a participation requirement to receive a permit.
- Red snapper continues to be a challenge and frustration for fishermen.
 - North Carolina's Exempted Fishing Permit for the 2026 recreational red snapper fishing season (as originally proposed) was not considered fair.
 - The EFP remains unfair to commercial fishermen because it allows the recreational sector to harvest more fish despite the stock being considered overfished.
 - The EFP needs to include better monitoring of catch and discards in North Carolina.
- Commercial sale of king mackerel caught during state-permitted fishing tournaments continues to be a problem. During fishing tournaments, the commercial market becomes flooded, significantly dropping the price.
 - The Council needs to ensure that tournament caught king mackerel are not taken off of the commercial annual catch limit even if they end up in the market.
 - Recreational vessels that are going to use this provision need to have the same safety equipment required of commercial vessels.
- The Spanish mackerel fishery needs more attention from the Council. There is frustration with the current management system and the lack of science needed to improve management measures.

- Spanish mackerel are moving northward and the regional allocations between the northern zone and the southern zone do not reflect how the fishery is currently operating. They must be revised.
- It is impossible to regulate all of the south Atlantic states together due to their significant regional differences, regional management is needed.
 - North Carolina has plenty of black sea bass, but Florida is seeing a decrease in population. The Mid-Atlantic region is seeing an increase in population. The Hatteras area may have a healthier black sea bass population than the rest of the South Atlantic region.
 - Golden tilefish (recreational harvest) is closing earlier. All of the landings are from Florida because there was no chance for North Carolina fishermen to catch them because the weather was poor early in the year. This system forces fishermen in North Carolina to fish in dangerous conditions.
 - A later opening for the recreational sector could be considered.
 - Dolphin is another candidate for regional management (north of the Bahamas vs. east of the Bahamas)
- What is the point of filling out logbook information if the data are not going to be utilized? Fishermen that are not in compliance with their Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Report (SEFHIER) logbooks should be unable to renew their for-hire permits.
- The Council needs to prioritize limited entry for the for-hire fishery and consider implementing a two for one program as well as the industry is over capacity.
- Regulations are skewed against commercial fishermen and there is no scientific reason for significant differences in data collection and accountability requirements between the commercial sector, and the private and for-hire components of the recreational sector.
- Data collection for fisheries needs to be significantly improved because right now bad data is being used to shut fisheries down and not open them back up to harvest or alternatively as a reason to not implement some forms of management.
 - Regulations need to be put into place that would require regular evaluation of all data collection methods to determine how well they are performing.
 - The use of catch per unit effort in stock assessments needs to be prioritized and its role better communicated to fishery stakeholders.



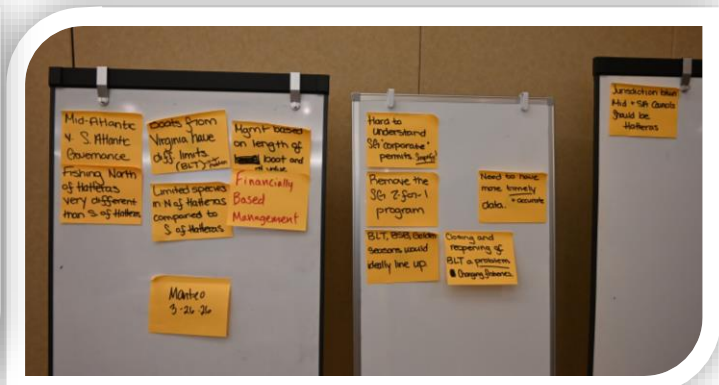
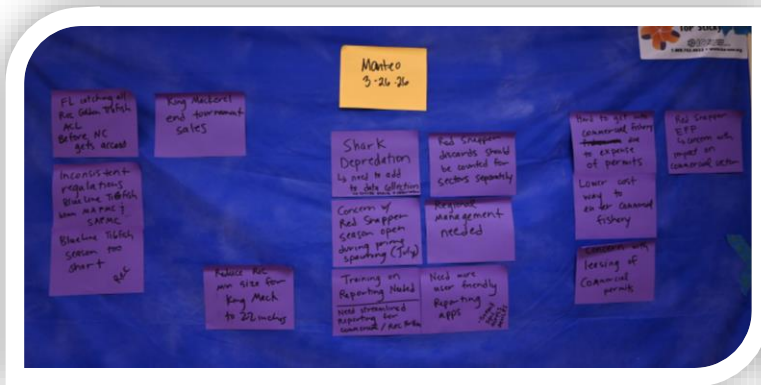
Fishing Satisfaction Round Table: what is necessary for a fishing experience to be considered successful and what are the tradeoffs between those components?

- For commercial fishermen, what makes a successful trip is driven by the need to make a living and harvest fish responsibly.
 - The price at the dock will determine which fishery to target and when because they need a return on their investment.
 - There is significant price volatility when fishing seasons are short (the market floods with fish and the price drops quickly).
 - Key species include king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, snowy grouper, and black sea bass.
 - King mackerel trolling is one of the biggest fisheries available in Hatteras. Spanish mackerel is marketable, but unavailable when fishing is good because federal waters have closed dropping the state waters trip limit to 500-pounds, which is not enough to justify a trip.
 - Snapper grouper species can be challenging because it is a multi-species fishery, but regulations result in concentrated pressure on specific species. The Council should consider looking at how aggregates are managed.
- For charter fishermen, what species to target is often driven by regulations.
 - Clients determine whether species are going to be kept (access to harvest is most important) or released (abundance to catch is most important).
 - Out of Hatteras, a lot of clients want to be able to keep fish, making access to harvest especially important.
 - Changes in season length and well as differences in regulations between federal and state waters can make trips challenging. It is hard to stay informed and plan when regulations are so inconsistent.
 - Key species include blackfin tuna, dolphin, and wahoo. Customers especially love dolphin because they are easy to catch, delicious, and can be harvested.
- Regional management would help level the playing field between states and would make commercial and for-hire fishing businesses more successful.
 - The Council needs to spend more time looking into how regional catch effect quotas. Fishing seasons often close before North Carolina fishermen have access.
 - Fishing years and seasons should follow the fish migrations.
- To make fishing trips more successful, the Council should look at efficient management and allowing fishermen to adapt in a timely manner, equal accountability from all sectors, and improving private recreational data collection.

Manteo, North Carolina | March 26, 2026

Sticky Wall Exercise: what did attendees come to the meetings to discuss with their Council members and what are Council members hoping to learn more about from attendees?

- Shark depredation in the area is only increasing, and fishermen are losing thousands of pounds of fish to sharks. There is no field in VESL to document when this occurs. It would be helpful to include a field to indicate shark depredation and the species of shark.
- Commercial fishermen are expected to report all their information via logbooks, but there is not training on how to accurately report and the currently system is not user friendly or streamlined.
 - The Council should provide classes or online videos on how to fill out paper logbooks and how to use electronic logbooks.
- There was frustration regarding North Carolina's Exempted Fishing Permit for the 2026 recreational red snapper season.
 - Why are the recreational fishermen receiving an increase in the number of fish they can harvest but the commercial sector is remaining status quo?
 - The recreational season should not occur in July when red snapper are spawning.



- Commercial permits (especially king mackerel and snapper grouper permits) have become too expensive and access is very limited. Leasing of these permits is increasing, creating concerns for those who would rather purchase a permit.
 - Corporate permit transfers need to be clarified and streamlined to ease the permitting process.
- The Council needs to prohibit the commercial sale of tournament caught king mackerel. These sales are damaging to the commercial sector and account for 10% of sales in North Carolina this past year.
- More research is needed into the dynamics of the dolphin fishery. Fishermen in Manteo are not seeing dolphin when fishing is good in Morehead City but do see dolphin when fishing has been good in the Bahamas.
 - The commercial HMS longline hook size requirements can make dolphin challenging to harvest them, not to mention the increase in shark depredation.
- Overlapping management in this area between the Mid-Atlantic Council and the South Atlantic Council creates several challenges for fishermen.
 - Fish in the Manteo area are more similar to the Mid-Atlantic (ex. tilefish) than to the South Atlantic. Hatteras represents the biological boundary for species.
 - Often fishermen in this area are fishing in the same waters as Mid-Atlantic boats, but with different regulations.
 - This is especially frustrating when more fish are able to be harvested with a Mid-Atlantic permit as opposed to a South Atlantic permit (common for bluefin and golden tilefish).
 - Black sea bass management also overlaps, but there are different seasons between Councils.
- The Council should consider how more regional management could benefit the state of North Carolina.
 - The recreational golden tilefish annual catch limit was met this year before North Carolina fishermen had the opportunity to fish.
 - Bluefin tilefish regulations are inconsistent and often the commercial season is too short in North Carolina (especially when compared to the season in the Mid-Atlantic).
- Accounting for discards needs to be done for individual sectors, not for the entire annual catch limit (i.e. commercial sector is responsible for their discards and the recreational sector is responsible for their discards).
- Catch tracking for the commercial and recreational sectors needs to be accurate and timelier. Fishermen will switch gears on their vessel based on what is available to target and when species are closed to harvest and reopened it can be challenging and inconvenient for fishermen to switch around gear on their vessel.
- The Council needs to consider permitting and reporting requirements for the private recreational sector. It is unreasonable to have differences in accountability between the commercial and the recreational sector.

- The Council could consider managing the commercial fishery based on a dollar value that would be established according to the size of the vessel (ex. \$10,000 per foot vessel). Once that dollar value has been reached, the vessel would have to stop fishing for the year.

Fishing Satisfaction Round Table: what is necessary for a fishing experience to be considered successful and what are the tradeoffs between those components?

- For for-hire businesses, being able to harvest fish is critical as majority of clients want to take fish home, but specifically what fish is targeted will depend on the clients and the season.
 - In the late spring, early summer (May/June) tuna fishing is the main focus of for-hire businesses. In the summer (July/August) clients are more focused on fun fishing and being able to harvest fish is somewhat less important. If clients do want to harvest fish, dolphin fishing is also strong during the summer. By September, tuna fishing has picked back up as well as marlin.
 - Tuna are a priority species, if they are available that is what for-hire vessels will target.
 - Offshore for-hire vessels spend most of their time trolling but will target tilefish on occasion.
 - Other for-hire vessels do run a lot of trips targeting snapper grouper species, especially blueline tilefish.
 - Headboats will only target blueline tilefish if the bag and vessel limits are high enough (three to four tilefish), otherwise it is not worth the cost.
 - The blueline tilefish fishery begins in July and it would be ideal if the season would link up with the start of the fishery.
 - Shark depredation, especially on tuna, has become a problem and it makes fishing trips significantly less satisfying.
 - The focus of a commercial trip very seasonal with fishermen switching gears throughout the year.
 - Snapper grouper species are targeted between June and August (including amberjack, tilefish, and black sea bass). In the spring and fall months, fishermen switch to gillnetting.
 - The success of the commercial longline fleet is driven by weather, with the weather being best between May and September.
 - The commercial longline industry needs a shark fishery because you can target them in worse weather. Sandbar sharks are needed to make a fishery viable, including the sale of both shark meat and fins.
 - Offshore fishing is dependent on good weather and fishing weather windows are not as common as they used to be, which is having a significant effect on all sectors. It is frustrating when a good weather window opens but there are only limited species that can be targeted and harvested.
 - Fishing accessibility in the Outer Banks is very different from the rest of the South Atlantic. The Council should consider split seasons as a way to help get even access across the South Atlantic states.
 - Collaboration between the Mid-Atlantic Council and the South Atlantic Council would create more consistency in regulations, which would make trips more successful. This is especially important for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish.
 - Virginia Beach fishermen will come to North Carolina to get their limit and then return to Virginia. For-hire clients don't typically notice because vessels are not fishing that close together, but captains do notice.
 - Consider lowering the size limit on king mackerel because of release mortality (fishermen do not want to waste catch).