



Lines of Communication

Conversations with the Council



BRUNSWICK

November 4, 2025

Georgia Sea Grant Mar/Ex

DARIEN

November 5, 2025

Darien Lions Club

SAVANNAH

November 6, 2025

Richmond Hill City Center

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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GEORGIA SUMMARY REPORT | NOVEMBER 2025

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

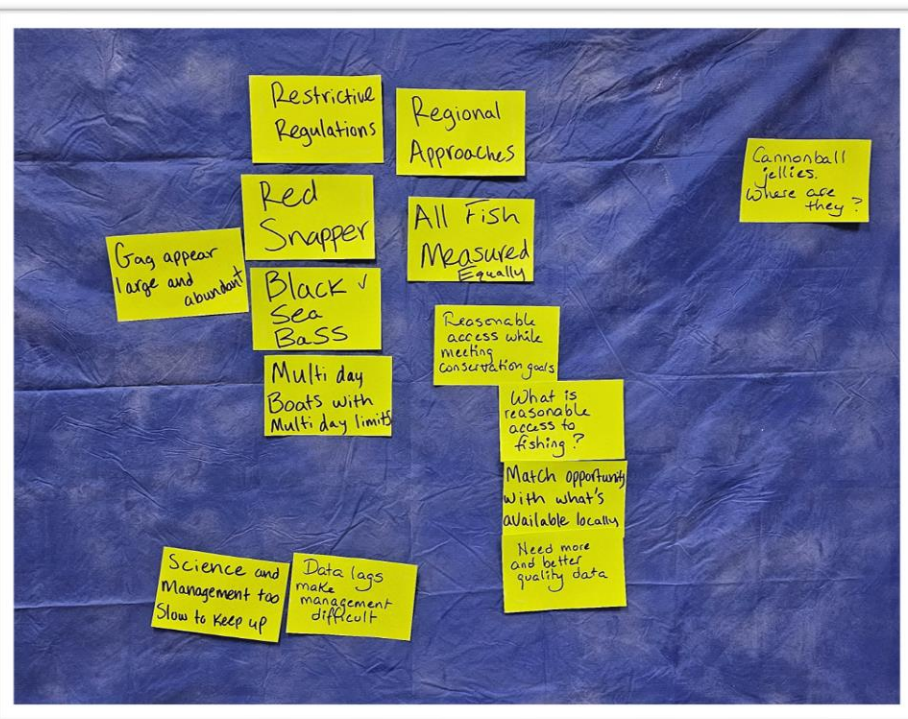
Stakeholder input has always been a fundamental component of the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act and council system. While Participatory Science, Citizen Science, and local ecological knowledge are used as ways of improving the resolution and timeliness of the decision-making information available to the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council), stakeholders must be willing to get involved for these techniques to succeed. In 2024 the 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 Council members and fisheries stakeholders. Alternatively, Lines meetings are designed to provide an opportunity for Council members to have productive dialogues with fisheries participants. By engaging stakeholders in this more informal setting, 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 November 2025, Lines meetings were held in Brunswick (five attendees), Darien (one attendee), and Richmond Hill (no attendees), Georgia. The notes below represent a summary of information gathered throughout the meetings.

Discussion Summary

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?



Interested in understanding what is currently happening with black sea bass and red snapper science and management.

- For-hire captains often hear from individuals that are frustrated that they have to release fish (especially red snapper) and there is a perception that in the Gulf fishermen are able to keep everything they catch.
- It would help the for-hire sector, especially larger offshore diesel vessels, to be able to consistently harvest red snapper.
- Upcoming cuts to the black sea bass annual catch target could have a significant negative effect on for-hire businesses.

Note: facilitated exercises (sticky wall and fishing satisfaction round table) only occurred in Brunswick, informal discussions were held in Brunswick and Darien).

Regulations for Council-managed species are often complex. Simplification of regulations could help with compliance and law enforcement efforts.

- Consistency in how fish are measured (total length vs. fork length) would make it easier for fishermen to abide by size regulations and for law enforcement to enforce those regulations. Preference would be for fork length to be the standard.

Efficiency for the commercial snapper grouper fishery.

- Multi-day trip limits for vessels that go on multi-day fishing trips.
 - Discussion on whether multi-day trip limits would result in the annual catch limits being met earlier in the season.
 - Consider different standards for larger boats that have more safety requirements.
 - Vessels that are spearfishing often have observers and have zero discards.
- Challenges with single-species management (ex. the gag grouper fishery is important to spearfishermen, but when it closed effort gets pushed onto other species even as gag recovers).
 - There is often a time delay between what is being seen on the water and regulations. Regulations need to be more responsive to what's happening on the water and change in a more timely manner.

Discussing the challenge of providing access to fishing while managing for conservation. How can managers work towards stability in fisheries to create predictability?

- There is a dichotomy between the commercial and recreational sectors, which often have different goals and definitions of accessibility.
 - Can seasons be modified to increase stability for both sectors?
 - There is a need for year-round access, but the species available can change through the year.
- Stability would be helpful for the for-hire sector. There are not a lot of offshore for-hire vessels anymore and loss of working waterfronts is creating additional challenges.
- How can innovative management help improve fisheries management (ex. aggregate bag limits, mandatory stops)?

Regional management for South Atlantic fisheries in order to match fishing opportunities to what is available off the coast in a given state.

- One size fits all management is not working; regional management may be more effective.
- Information about regional abundance of important stocks would be needed to move forward with a more regional approach to management.

What are fishermen seeing in terms of fish stocks when they are on the water?

- Gag grouper are being seen in high numbers by spearfishermen (shallowest dives are around 150 feet). Most gag grouper are at or above the legal size limit, especially off the coast of Georgetown, SC. The gag grouper fishery in Florida is different, possible due to higher effort in Florida and northeast Florida being a hot spot for red snapper.
- Scamp is in notably worse condition than gag grouper and was declining prior to the assessment.
- Black sea bass in Florida have disappeared, whereas the lionfish and red snapper populations have exploded. Lionfish have been seen regurgitating juvenile black sea bass. Red snapper may also be eating juvenile black sea bass.
 - More diet studies need to be conducted in order to be comprehensive.

Items noted by attendees that were outside of the Council's purview:

- Concerning cannonball jellyfish fishery and why they are no longer being actively harvested.

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

Why do you enjoy fishing, generally, and what species do you enjoy fishing for the most?

- Fishing gets in your blood; there is nothing as enjoyable as being on the water. There is the challenge of catching a difficult fish (recreationally) and making money (commercial).
- Gag grouper are at the top of the pyramid for commercial spearfishermen, while greater amberjack are low on the pyramid. Gag grouper are very marketable and readily sold to any dealer.
- Dolphin and king mackerel are favorites of for-hire captains because they are fun to catch.
 - When trolling catch is typically lower, but the thrill is fun vs. dropping squid down to the bottom where catch is more reliable.
 - For-hire clients often want to fish for anything off the bottom, including species like amberjack because they offer a fight and are exciting to catch.
- There are private recreational fishermen that will spend a lot of money to have an exciting fishing experience.

Shark depredation is negatively affecting trip satisfaction for recreational, for-hire, and commercial fishermen.

- The number of shark encounters has increased significantly over the past few years. Shark behavior has also changed and sharks appear to be seeking out or following fishing vessels.
- The commercial market for sharks is not profitable for many potential participants, which is frustrating.



When given the option between a lower trip limit and a longer season and a higher trip limit with a shorter season, it was noted that the for-hire industry would prefer a longer season.

- It is important that something is open year-round, especially with weather affecting what kind of trip can be taken on a given day.
- Descending device requirements can affect the fishing experience.
 - For-hire clients find them cool to use the first time on a trip, but after a while their use starts to affect trip efficiency and satisfaction.
- Venting is more efficient, but customers don't also know what is going on and there isn't necessarily time to explain barotrauma to them if fish are biting.

Informal Discussions: how to get involved in the science and management process, citizen science projects, and how released fish influence science and management.

Fishermen have become frustrated and disillusioned with the science and management process, decreasing participation in Council outreach and engagement efforts.

- It is important that stakeholders stop seeing the Council as the enemy and understand that often everyone is working towards the same goal.

Council members need to better communicate their personal relationship with fishing and their goals for the management process. It is important to let stakeholders know that Council members take an oath and that they are separate from NOAA Fisheries. Additionally, it is important that stakeholders understand that the Council has discretion.

- The Council and NOAA Fisheries do their best to work together but there can occasionally be conflicts. Examples of this happening include the most recent Atlantic Spanish mackerel assessment, Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 35 (red snapper), and Snapper Grouper Amendment 59 (Secretarial Amendment for red snapper).
- NOAA Fisheries and the Southeast Fishery Science Center (SEFSC) are open to looking at additional data sources to inform assessments, especially now that funding has become tight. They are seeking more opportunities to collaborate with fishermen.

Understanding the science and management process can be challenging for stakeholders.

- There is significant frustration from stakeholders about the data being of poor quality or a lack of data inhibiting decision making.
 - In addition to better biological data, there needs to be more social and economic data collection (stakeholders are concerned about the negative economic effects of the short red snapper season). Council members and staff also need to better communicate how social and economic data are used to inform management decisions.
- The science process needs to be explained more concisely. It is hard for the public to understand how the stock assessment process results in a single number that dictates how much can be harvested and subsequent regulations.
 - It isn't clear to stakeholders that multiple data sources go into an assessment, not just landings information from MRIP.
- Each new assessment involves new uncertainties, and it can be challenging to tell if overfishing is really occurring or if there is an issue with the mathematical model (this has been a challenge and source of frustration for red snapper).
 - Recommendation to focus more on reported information from fishermen (ex. commercial logbooks).
 - It is unclear who holds the data that is being collected from fishermen (NOAA Fisheries) and it is important for stakeholders to understand that the Council does not collect data and it can be challenging to get access to the data used in assessments.
 - The Council's Citizen Science Program provides an avenue for fishermen to help fill stock assessment data gaps.
- Assessment terminal years can become dated quickly, especially with the long process associated with stock assessments.

The Council needs to better collaborate with industry groups (ex. Coastal Conservation Association, Center for Sportfishing Policy, American Sportfishing Association, etc.)

- These groups can help bring more stakeholders out to meetings like Lines and share information on the science and management process.
- Industry groups can advocate for more research and data collection, which can improve management.