



THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

South Atlantic Stakeholder Engagement Meetings

Council Discussion Document

December 2024



Background

Stakeholder input has always been a fundamental component of the Magnuson Act and council system. However, fisheries stakeholders increasingly express declining confidence in management institutions and often state that they feel their concerns are not heard or addressed. This is occurring against a backdrop of increasing demands on everyone’s time and an upheaval in traditional ways of interacting with the public. Moreover, climate change imposes challenges to ecosystems, stocks, and fisheries on scales of both time and space that may be incompatible with established fishery information systems. 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. New ways of interacting with stakeholders are needed to address declining confidence and improve the ability of the Council to address developing challenges.

To that end, Council staff has begun work to develop a plan for holding stakeholder engagement meetings (SEM) along the South Atlantic coast, meeting fishermen in their communities. The traditional public comment format does not always allow for two-way discourse between Council members and fisheries stakeholders. These stakeholder engagement meetings will provide an opportunity for Council members to have productive dialogues with fisheries participants. By engaging stakeholders in this more informal setting, Council members will be able to build or improve relationships and increase engagement in the management process. Building and maintaining relationships and momentum for participation in the management

process require consistent interaction with stakeholders over time, so staff intend for these types of meetings to become a regular part of the Council’s engagement efforts.

Goals and Objectives for Stakeholder Engagement Meetings

Overall Goal: Build relationships with fishery stakeholders by engaging them in an informal setting that allows for two-way conversations.

- **Objective One:** Provide an opportunity for an **open dialogue** and **mutual learning** between Council members and stakeholders.
 - Building trust, improving communication, and fostering mutual respect.
- **Objective Two: Increase knowledge** of the fisheries management process to encourage stakeholder engagement in Council initiatives.
 - Provide stakeholders with tools to help them confidently participate in the management process.
 - Increase involvement in public comment, advisory panels, the Citizen Science Program, and other Council initiatives.
- **Objective Three:** Provide a mechanism for stakeholders to **bring their concerns and observations forward**, directly to Council members.
 - Gather input to potentially inform proactive management action.
 - Provide Council members with information helpful for setting their workload priorities.
- **Objective Four:** Provide an opportunity for Council members to **share information** on salient management issues with stakeholders.
 - Allow Council members to discuss challenging management topics with stakeholders.

Objectives for this Council Meeting

- Review comments and recommendations from the Outreach and Communication Advisory Panel, the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel.
- Review the updated stakeholder engagement meeting structure.
- Review proposed topics for the structured and unstructured breakout sessions.
- Discuss planned outreach and ways to incentivize attendance.
- Determine when to hold stakeholder engagement meetings given other Council activities.

What is the Council going to do with information gathered from these meetings?

Stakeholder engagement meetings are different from traditional opportunities for public input because they are not tied to a specific management action. These meetings are intended to be proactive and forward looking. As such, the Council intends to use this information in the following ways:

- to identify topics that need to be addressed by the Council but haven’t been on their radar,
- to set their overall workload priorities, and

- to guide them on active management actions (what they should be considering and asking when discussing a given topic), as appropriate.

The Council will need to communicate to stakeholders how the input gathered will be used, the benefits of attending these meetings, and the opportunities they provide that traditional meeting processes may not provide. Council members should voice this during the meeting without sugar coating the possibilities as being direct may help change stakeholder perceptions of the Council.

Comments from the Outreach and Communication Advisory Panel (OCAP):

- The OCAP noted that the Council should market these meetings as an opportunity for extended discussion with Council members. Even going so far as acknowledging that the Council has received feedback from fishermen who feel like their voices are not being heard and this is an opportunity the Council created to try and better communicate with stakeholders.
- It will be important to show the value of fishermen input in the management process by providing specific examples of where their input has directly influenced a management decision.
- It would be beneficial to communicate the value of similar efforts, such as Snapper Grouper Visioning, Mackerel Port Meetings, and the Best Fishing Practices Master Volunteer Program.
- This effort should be called something other than a “meeting” to help it stand out from other Council public input opportunities.

Comments from the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (SGAP):

- The SGAP felt that the Council would need to consider the timing of input (something happening in the fishery right now) and management (a long-term process), but overall, the meetings should be focused on allowing the Council to be proactive.
- It takes a significant amount of time and effort to understand and get involved in the fisheries management process, which is the largest obstacle to stakeholder participation. These meetings should focus on helping stakeholders understand the management process because it will improve both the quantity and the quality of input received by the Council.
- Trust in the Council is at an all-time low. So, it will be important that fishermen feel like they are being heard and their input is being actively considered. It will also be important for the Council to ensure transparency on the major issues (red snapper, sharks) and provide information to fishermen on what is needed to reach their goals.
- The Council should consider what amount of attendance would be considered a success.

Comments from the Council Planning Team:

- In response to the OCAP suggestion to provide specific examples of where stakeholder input has directly influenced a management decision, the planning team noted the following management efforts:
 - Black sea bass size limit versus trip limit discussion.
 - Commercial split seasons used to extend the commercial season and market
 - Increased the ease of use of ropeless gear in the black sea bass fishery.
 - Removal of operator card requirements in the dolphin wahoo fishery.

- Lowering of greater amberjack size limits.
- When providing examples of where public input has directly influenced decision making it will be important to include both commercial and recreational examples as well as examples when a stock was in good condition and when a stock was overfished or undergoing overfishing.
- It will be important to educate attendees on the limitations of the Council, especially regarding more controversial topics such as red snapper, sharks, whales, etc. Additionally, it would be helpful to explain why the Council process can be so time-consuming (good decisions take time and public input).
 - It would be helpful for staff to provide Council members with an FAQ sheet for controversial topics.
 - Council members can outline the landscape of making decisions and ask attendees how they would advise the Council on controversial issues.
 - Handouts could be prepared that discuss these issues or looping video presentations (ex. presentation on red snapper).
- The goal is not to have a minimum number of attendees, but rather to see increased engagement with these meetings and the Council process over time.
- It may be helpful to gather information on whether attendees are planning to communicate after the meeting about what they experienced or the Council process.

COUNCIL ACTION

NONE

Stakeholder Engagement Meeting Structure

Pre-Meeting Logistics:

- Council staff in attendance: 5
- Council members in attendance: 3
- Pre-meeting training session will be conducted with all staff and Council members attending to ensure that everyone understands what their role is during the meeting.
 - Facilitation best practices for Council members.
 - One-pagers on the main topics to be discussed, including prompting questions to encourage conversation.
 - FAQ sheet with information on important or controversial issues.

Prologue (30 minutes):

- As attendees arrive for the evening, they will be greeted by Council members and asked to sign in. Staff will walk around the room and record why attendees decided to come to the stakeholder meeting and what they hope to get out of the night's discussions.

Introduction (10 minutes):

- A very brief presentation will be given by a Council member to welcome attendees, explain the Council's goals and objectives for stakeholder engagement meetings and how

the night will operate. Council members should note some of the information gathered by staff on attendee motivations for attending.

Sticky Wall Session (25 minutes):

- Council members will explain to attendees that the first section of the evening is an opportunity to provide Council members with feedback on their priorities and identify areas where more communication is needed. There will be two sticky wall topics for input, as follows:
 - Questions for the Council
 - Ranking Council Priorities

After 10 minutes or so Council members and staff will note some of what was placed on the sticky walls and note where there might be opportunities to discuss more later in the evening.

Topical Discussion Session (25 minutes):

- Attendees will be separated into three different breakout groups, where each group will have a discussion on the same pre-selected topic. At each group a Council member will provide a brief synopsis of the topic and ask a series of pre-prepared questions to get conversation flowing. One staff member will be in each group to take notes on a flip chart and assist with discussion, as needed.

Intermission (10 minutes):

- A quick break for casual conversations and to allow staff to ensure the room is prepared for the next part of the evening.

Informal Information Session (40 minutes):

***Prior to the start of this session, Council members will note that should attendees want to stick around for more discussion after the meeting ends at 8p, staff and Council members will be happy to chat afterwards. ***

- Tables or stations on different topics will be set up around the room. A Council member and staff member will be at each station to chat with attendees and answer questions on specific topics. Attendees will be able to move about the room freely based on topics of interest to them.

Conclusion (10 minutes):

- A very brief presentation will be given by a Council member to thank attendees, recap the Council's goals and objectives, and note where the information goes next. As attendees are leaving, they will be asked to rank (using a flip chart) whether the meeting met their expectations.

Post-Meeting Logistics:

- Thank you email to all attendees from Council members that includes a bullet point list of some things learned, and information on upcoming Council meetings and opportunities for participation.

- Debrief with Council members that attended the meeting to discuss what went well, what didn't go well, and what was learned.
- Prepare a summary report for the meeting and make it available on a dedicated webpage (see Outreach Effort section)
- Post photos of the evening on social media.

Subsequent Council Meeting Logistics:

- At the start of the Council meeting following a round of stakeholder meetings, Council members that were present will each take a moment to note their biggest takeaways or things learned from the most recent round of SEMs.
- Detailed information from SEMs would be presented before each relevant Committee or topic.
- Presentation slides and/or summary report provided in the briefing book.

Comments from the Outreach and Communication Advisory Panel:

- A pre-meeting survey could be administered to better understand what fishermen want to get out of the meeting, but also as an icebreaker to help attendees feel more comfortable providing input later in the meeting.
 - Could ask if they have ever attended a Council meeting or public comment opportunity prior to tonight.
- Consider stepping away from the more structured breakout groups and prioritizing the unstructured sections, holding the unstructured session first, or doing two unstructured sessions. The goal should be to use unstructured sessions to help attendees become comfortable in the meeting environment.
- The debrief between Council members and Council staff should occur right after the meeting to ensure that everything is fresh in Council members and staff's minds.
- Look into adding attendees to a WhatsApp group that would allow staff to send them text notifications on events, public input opportunities, etc.

Comments from the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel:

- The SG AP was concerned that stakeholders would not be willing to attend and participate in these meetings. Instead, they recommended an online forum where fishermen can pose questions anonymously and have them answered by staff. This is easier than showing up at a meeting.
- The younger generation prefers to receive information in smaller snippets and the meeting is too structured to be effective. All materials provided should be short, summarizing the information necessary to improve understanding.
- There was concern that fishermen might not feel comfortable speaking up during a breakout group and noted it would be important for Council members to be prepared to encourage discussion.
- During the meeting, Council members should not sugar-coat what is going to happen in the future. They should be prepared to provide information on current issues and future plans with blunt honesty.
- The Council should hold virtual (webinar) opportunity to provide input for fishermen that were unable to participate in the meetings and/or to capture input from states that are not being visited in a given year.

Comments for the Council Planning Team:

- Facilitation planning will be important, especially planning for different levels of attendance.
 - The number of breakout groups for the topical discussion should be based on attendance. Smaller breakout groups are better.
- Need to consider how an unstructured question and answer session could be used at the beginning of the meeting when people might be primed to express their frustrations.
 - Consider framing the question-and-answer session around a specific topic, utilizing flip charts or a sticky wall to facilitate discussion, or asking a few collective questions of attendees that are easy to answer.
- It would be helpful for all Council members to be together for the first session to help set the tone and allow Council members to become comfortable in the meeting environment.
- No need to hold a separate webinar for those that are unable to attend or for states in their off year as a webinar would not meet the goals and objectives of this effort. However, could consider holding “fireside chats” at Council meetings again.

COUNCIL ACTION

REVIEW MEETING STRUCTURE AND PROVIDE INPUT, AS NEEDED.

Timing for the 2025 Meetings in North Carolina and Georgia

Option 1: Hold meetings in both North Carolina and Georgia prior to the March 2025 Council meeting, as originally planned.

- Positives: Meetings will occur at a time when fishing activity is generally lower and would provide the Council with stakeholder input to start the year.
- Negatives: The first round of meetings will require more time to plan than subsequent rounds and the turnaround to hold the meetings after the holidays is anticipated to be incredibly challenging. Additionally, the January and February calendar is already filling up with other Council priorities (*See Full Council 2: Attachment 3 and Attachment 4 for details on currently planned winter meetings*).
- Other Considerations: Information gathered during these meetings is not time sensitive. It is unknown when public hearings for the Secretarial Amendment to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan will occur, but they could overlap with this effort.

Option 2: Hold meetings in North Carolina and Georgia after the March 2025 Council meeting but prior to the June 2025 Council meeting.

- Positives: Would provide staff with more time to plan the meetings and would allow the focus to be on other priorities prior to March 2025.
- Negatives: Fishing activity for some fisheries may be increasing at this time. The spring quarter is also typically a busy time with a variety of advisory panels scheduled to meet as well as the Social and Economic Panel and Scientific and Statistical Committee.

Option 3: Hold meetings in North Carolina and Georgia in November, prior to the December 2025 Council Meeting.

- Positives: Meetings would occur at a time of year when fishing is generally slowing down. It would provide staff with more time to plan the meetings.
- Negatives: Delays implementation of this effort until the fall quarter.
- Other Considerations: Consistency in when these meetings are held is important. Would we want South Carolina and Florida to be held in Winter 2026 (back-to-back with these) or Fall 2026?

COUNCIL ACTION

DETERMINE WHEN TO CONDUCT THE FIRST ROUND OF MEETINGS

Proposed Discussion Topics for the 2025 Meetings

Fishing Trip Satisfaction (Topical Discussion): While typically thought of in a recreational context, understanding satisfaction can provide information that is useful in the management of both commercial and recreational fisheries. Fishing trip satisfaction can be driven by a number of variables such as sense of excitement, catch rates, size of fish, diversity of catch, number of regulatory discards, relaxation level, etc. The relative importance of each variable can also change with context such as the trip motivation, time of year, desired species, angler experience etc. Meeting attendees could be asked to discuss what makes a successful fishing trip as well as the tradeoffs between different variables. Discussion questions could be structured in a way that would provide helpful information for the next steps in the Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation.

- Directly addresses Objective 1: *Provide an opportunity for an open dialogue and mutual learning between Council members and stakeholders.*

Fisheries Management 101 (Informal Session): The fisheries management process is complex and time consuming to understand. Input from multiple advisory panels indicates that this is one of the barriers to stakeholder participation in management. The Fisheries Management 101 table could cover general information on the Council in the form of a looping slideshow, ways to get involved in the process (public comment, advisory panels, etc.), as well as information on programs like MREP.

- Directly addresses Objective 2: *Increase knowledge of the fisheries management process to encourage stakeholder engagement in Council initiatives.*

Citizen Science Program (Informal Session): The Council's Citizen Science Program was developed because fishermen in the South Atlantic region consistently expressed a desire to become more involved in collecting data used to manage their fisheries. The success of projects developed under the Citizen Science Program relies on those fishermen participating in the program. This table could provide information on current citizen science projects and ways for attendees to get involved.

- Directly addresses Objective 2: *Increase knowledge of the fisheries management process to encourage stakeholder engagement in Council initiatives.*

Releases (Informal Session): Regulatory measures combined with growing fishing effort in the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery, particularly from the recreational sector, have led to a drastic increase in the number of non-target snapper and grouper that must be released. Large numbers of released fish limit the Council’s ability to prevent overfishing and reduce the number of fish that can be sustainably landed by the fishery. This table could provide information on best fishing practices, how releases are estimated in layman’s terms and how it affects catch levels. Attendees could be asked to provide information on what they are releasing, what the goal fish are for the given trip, and how they feel the Council should address releases.

- Directly addresses Objective 4: *Provide an opportunity for Council members to share information on salient management issues with stakeholders.*

Miscellaneous (Informal Session): An opportunity for attendees to bring up and discuss issues that were not explicitly addressed during the rest of the stakeholder engagement meeting.

- Directly addresses Objective 3: *Provide a mechanism for stakeholders to bring their concerns and observations forward, directly to Council members.*

Comments for the Council Planning Team

- There needs to be a miscellaneous or catch-all topic for the informal session so that there is an opportunity for attendees to bring up their specific interests or concerns.
- Use the trip satisfaction discussion topic to gather information that could be helpful as the Council moves forward with the results from the Snapper Grouper MSE.
- The releases informal topic could be used to help understand fishing effort by area, how fishermen are using best fishing practices, and best fishing practices for other fisheries.

COUNCIL ACTION

REVIEW AND APPROVE TOPICS FOR THE 2025 MEETING SERIES

Outreach Efforts Planned

To boost attendance at these meetings, staff intend to spread the word not only through the traditional Council channels as well as partnering with trusted members of the fishing community.

Creation of a Council Webpage

- Background on why the Council is conducting these meetings and how they are different from traditional public comment opportunities.
- The Council’s goals and objectives for these meetings.
- Upcoming meeting dates and locations.
- Summaries from past stakeholder engagement meetings.

Council Released Materials

- **Flyers** for each set of meetings.
- **News Releases** from the Council and shared with other relevant groups/agencies.
- **Featured article** in the South Atlantic Bite.
- **Social media** posts and stories.

Community Outreach

- Working with Council advisory panel members, Best Fishing Practices Master Volunteers, and SAFMC Release participants.
- Industry groups (ex. CCA, NCFA, ASGA, NCWU, etc.)
- Saving Seafood mailing list and other media outlets.
- Outlets that have published information on the Council in the past, including on the Citizen Science Program or best fishing practices.

Comments from the Outreach and Communication Advisory Panel:

- The OC AP believed that Council members should be the ones responsible for pushing out information on these meetings. Consider **who** you really want to attend these meetings and then have Council members personally reach out.
- Utilizing social media will be important, including collaboration with influencers on social media or even having Council members put together a scissor reel telling viewers what the meetings will be about and encouraging them to attend.
- Emphasize the fact that Council members will be in attendance and participating in running the meeting as opposed to just staff.
- Post stories on social media in real time and include links with information on the topics being discussed during the meeting.

Comments from the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

- Generally, it is felt that communication from the Council is lacking.
- The Council should work with tackle shop manufacturers to help get this information out to the stakeholders. Letting fishing influencers be the voice encouraging participation should help increase attendance. However, keep in mind that the groups have a lot to advocate for and limited time and budget.
- Consider combining these meetings with other fishing-focused events such as seminars.
- A social media campaign should be used to increase participation in these meetings but also generally to provide information on fisheries management to stakeholders. This is a more up-to-date way to share information and will help get a younger audience involved. Social media is lower cost and trackable to see how engagement has changed over time.
- Consider consulting with a public relations professional because this project is going to need a substantial communications plan.
- For Mackerel Port Meetings fishermen showed up because they saw the social media posts, postcards, and word of mouth, but mostly it was because they thought more regulations were coming.
- The venue is going to be extremely important, the more informal the better (ex. tackle shops are better than community centers).
- Consider partnering with organizations that might be able to provide something to raffle off during the meeting to increase attendance.

Comments from the Council Planning Team

- Council Planning Team members were comfortable personally reaching out to constituents and encouraging their attendance at these meetings as well as being social media promoting these events.

- Lean on fishing organizations posts on social media promoting the meetings.

COUNCIL ACTION NEEDED

REVIEW OUTREACH PLAN AND PROVIDE INPUT, AS NEEDED.

Evaluation of Stakeholder Engagement Meetings

Building and maintaining relationships and momentum for participation in the management process is a long-term goal. As stakeholder engagement meetings become a regular part of the Council’s engagement efforts, it will be important to evaluate success and adjust as needed to ensure progress is made toward the stated goals and objectives. To evaluate the success of each round of meetings, staff intend to do the following:

- Prepare an **internal survey** that would be completed after each series of meetings to quantify staff and Council member perception of different performance metrics that are directly tied to the goals and objectives.
- Ask attendees at the end of each meeting if their expectations were met to understand attendee perceptions meeting success.
- Note the key issues that were identified at each meeting and track their progress (i.e. added to workplan, amendment initiated, amendment completed, etc.)
- Compile general metrics such as overall attendance over time, returning attendees, number of individuals asking for more information or applying to advisory panels, mentions during public comment, before and after signups for Council new releases, website hits etc.

COUNCIL ACTION

REVIEW EVALUATION PLAN AND PROVIDE INPUT, AS NEEDED.

Stakeholder Engagement Meetings Renaming

The OCAP, SGAP, and Council staff all agree that calling this outreach effort “Stakeholder Engagement Meetings” is not compelling enough to encourage attendance nor does it sufficiently reflect the purpose of the meeting. The following two names are suggested alternatives:

- Conversations with the Council
- Fishermen Roundtables

COUNCIL ACTION

SELECT A NAME FOR THIS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT EFFORT