



Major Michael Paul  
Thomas, SCDNR

LE AP Chair

# Law Enforcement Advisory Panel Meeting Summary Report

March 2026





# Overview

The LE AP met in Charleston, SC, on January 20-21, 2026.

A detailed summary report is included in the Council's briefing book.

AP comments and recommendations in this presentation are in the order they appear on the agenda for this meeting:

- SG Am 60 (commercial permits and trip efficiency) and commercial trip limit sale issue
- Spawning Special Management Zones
- Headboat Vessel Limits
- SG Amendment 61 (revision of species in the management unit)
- Other topics and updates



# SG Amendment 60

## Action 1 – Removal of the 2 for 1 provision for unlimited permits

- The LE AP did not raise any issues with the proposed action.
- One-to-one transfers would be quicker and more straightforward.
- Issues that have come up (e.g., duplicate permits) are of an administrative nature and not related to enforcement.



# SG Amendment 60

## Action 2 – Trip limit efficiency

- Ensure there is enough time between when a trip limit change is announced and the effective date of the change for public and LE officers' awareness.
- Consider that enforceability during the “lag time” could be diminished.
- Market stability should be considered with trip limit changes.
- Consider that some areas in the South Atlantic are being affected by weather more than others and trip limit changes may disproportionately affect those areas.
- Suggest adding a column to the SERO ACL monitoring page that displays the trip limit that is in effect.

# SG Amendment 60

## Action 3 – Gear stowage

- Concern over potential for “ghost gear”.
- Consider whether added trip efficiency would outweigh the risk of potentially reduced enforcement of bad actors.
- Concern over potential for highly efficient gear being used illegally and decimating local populations. To avoid this, a VMS requirement could be considered for vessels with multiple types of fishing gear on board.
- A stowage requirement would have to be enforced “on the scene”. The further from shore the fishery operates, the less on-site enforcement.
- A mandatory observer requirement could be considered to allow switching gear during a trip. Alternatively, tamper resistant video cameras could assist with enforcement.



# Commercial trip limit sale

The Council requested that the AP discuss the issue and suggest acceptable forms of evidence to denote that an attempt to sell occurred and where there could be potential gaps in the system.

LE AP members offered the following:

- The best evidence that a trip limit was landed would be a trip ticket. It has to be filed whether the fish were sold or not.
- It may be better to approach this issue directly with individual dealers where this problem is occurring instead of changing regulations as it doesn't appear to be a widespread issue.
- LE AP members felt they did not have enough info to make any recommendations agreed the issue is not a prevalent one.

# Enforcement and compliance in Spawning SMZs

The LE AP was asked to complete a survey to help evaluate enforcement and compliance with SSMZ regulations.

## Survey results:

- Planning/objectives generally rated positive by several respondents but with some disagreement on sufficiency of evidence.
- Roles, responsibilities and coordination rated weaker in multiple responses.
- Enforcement resources and monitoring were frequently rated insufficient; compliance and stakeholder support mixed/uncertain.
- Most respondents identified enforcement, compliance, and outreach/communication as top needs for improvement.



# Enforcement and compliance in Spawning SMZs

## LE AP comments:

- Challenges: SSMZs are often far offshore (difficulty of patrols and frequency), limited LE resources (few vessels/personnel), need for coordination (NOAA, USCG, state LE, CBP Air & Marine), and challenges with VMS-only enforcement (VMS shows presence but not activity). Visual confirmation (flights) combined with VMS can build cases.
- Buoys: LE views buoy installation as unnecessary for establishing enforceability —buoys are vulnerable and can introduce other hazards (shipping, entanglement risk for whales).



# Enforcement and compliance in Spawning SMZs

LE AP comments (cont'd):

- Compliance: Outreach/education and community buy-in are critical.
  - Add the locations to electronic reporting maps
  - Verify FishRules has locations (Note: there is not a bounding box, but the rec app does indicate if you are in a closed area).
- Technology & monitoring: Use aircraft overflights (USCG, partner flights) to gather intelligence and shape patrol plans; VMS could be beneficial for vessels that already carry it but would not cover all user groups. Radar improvements increase detection range but not necessarily prosecution without corroborating evidence.
- Research gaps: strong desire for concrete evidence of biological benefit, which can be expensive, and benefits may take many years to materialize.



# Vessel Limits for Headboats

The Council requested the LE AP's feedback on enforceability of the potential changes and any other enforcement issues that could arise.

The LE AP offered the following:

- Enforceability depends on clear, simple rules and ability to verify passenger counts and fish onboard. Counting passengers (headcount or captain's manifest) and checking fish hold/ice chests are core enforcement actions.
- Avoid percentage-based limits. Use simple multiples (per 6 passengers) or clear vessel-cap based limits.
- Require headboats to maintain passenger manifests/records that can be reviewed at boarding — facilitates quick verification of allowable catch.



# Vessel Limits for Headboats

LE AP comments (cont'd):

- Multiple vessel sizes and capacities complicate management; any vessel-specific entitlement (based on COI or permit) would require accessible information for LE (permit/COI listing) to be effective.
- Consider that vessel-based limits could effectively increase total catch for some species. Consider conservation impacts and potential reallocation across user groups.



# SG Amendment 61

The Council requested the LE AP's feedback on enforcement concerns or benefits from potentially removing 17 species from federal conservation and management.

The LE AP offered the following:

- Clarity of regulations and outreach/education to reduce stakeholder confusion are critical. For some states, federal management helps with consistency in regulations between state and federal waters. Try to avoid a mis-match in regulations between state and federal waters. Education will be key.
- Maintaining species in the federal FMP keeps the species within the focus of federal law enforcement officers. If state managed-only, may not be an enforcement priority for federal officers.



# SG Amendment 61

LE AP comments (cont'd):

- Preference is for consistent state-to-state regulations to reduce angler confusion. However:
  - Not all states can extend state regulations into federal waters when species are unmanaged federally.
  - In Florida, removal from federal management could incentivize targeting of these species as “pathway species” used to qualify for a restricted species endorsement on the state saltwater products license (SPL) resulting in increased commercial pressure.
  - In North Carolina, concern with different procedural processes and potential for quick proclamations with little public notice; also insufficient enforcement presence beyond state waters.
- Removal from federal management could be viewed as a “free for all” among recreational anglers.
- Consider whether changes to reporting requirements would be necessary: for-hire requirements exists but none for private recreational.



# Additional Topics and Updates

## South Atlantic States' EFP applications

- Suggest additional clarity on how violations and penalties will be handled during the EFP period.
- Enforcement capacity is a concern, especially in North Carolina, which does not have a Joint Enforcement Agreement and limited offshore enforcement resources.



# Additional Topics and Updates

## Joint Enforcement Agreements and descending device compliance

- Representatives provided updates on activity under each JEA (SC, GA and FL) – refer to Summary Report for details
- Descending device compliance is improving with continued education efforts. Compliance estimated at 60 to 70% in GA and FL.

## Other Business

Concern over king mackerel tournament sale exemption: participating recreational anglers donate catch to tournaments which then sell the catch to dealers (proceeds go to charity). This allows fish to enter the commercial market without commercial permits, commercial reporting, or required commercial vessel safety equipment.

Panel members noted this is a management/regulatory policy issue as tournament sale exemptions are defined under federal regulations with state-level oversight. Changing this would require regulatory action.

Questions?

