Public Reporting

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

Public Comment Form

Meeting

March 26 Council Meeting

The March Council Meeting will be held from March 2-6, 2026 at the Villas by the Sea Resort in Jekyll Island, GA. Meeting agendas, webinar registration, and briefing materials are available here: https://safmc.net/events/march-2026-council-meeting/.

Submit Date	Submitted By	Location	Affiliation	Comment
2/23/2026	First Name: Chris Last Name: Mccaffity Email: freefish7@hotmail.com	City: Morehead City State: North Carolina	Commercial	Please split the Total Allowable Catch between sectors before recreational dead discard assumptions are deducted. Please manage Red Snapper responsibly by reallocating half the 5 million pounds of Red Snapper quota annually allocated to assumed dead discards over to harvestable quota that is managed with appropriate possession limits to keep recreational and commercial seasons open during most of the 8-month shallow-water grouper season. Please abolish the mandatory observer scam that discriminates against commercial fishermen and collects useless data as each observer observes things differently. Thank you!
2/27/2026	First Name: Catherine Last Name: Bruger Email: cbruger@oceanconservancy.org	City: St. Petersburg State: Florida	Non-Govt Org (NGO)	Please see attached comment.
2/28/2026	First Name: Jason Last Name: Wetmore Email: bestbaitinc@gmail.com	City: Rockledge State: Florida	Commercial	I'd like to leave public comment for the upcoming March 2026 meeting, Regarding Amendment 60 Action 2. Revise commercial trip limits for snapper grouper species I strongly support revising commercial trip limits of Vermillion Snapper and other species when the ACL is not being landed to enable commercial fishermen to harvest an optimum yield of snapper grouper species. Action 2 Alternative 2. I strongly support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermilion snapper during Season 1 to: Sub-Alternative 2c. 2,000 lbs gw, or Sub-Alternative 2d. 3,000 lbs gw Action 2 Alternative 3. I strongly support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermilion snapper during Season 2 to: Sub-Alternative 3d. 3,000 lbs gw, or Sub-Alternative 3e. 4,000 lbs gw. I also support Action 3 Establish temporary trip limit increases for snapper grouper species (step-ups), although I understand there may be some administrative burdens that make these more challenging. Increasing the trip limit of Vermillion Snapper will allow our fisherman to have a better opportunity to harvest additional fish per trip and approach the sustainable ACL of this species. Fisherman on larger slow vessels deal with many obstacles to actually put fish in the boat. The current 1000lb trip limit that unnecessarily terminates fishing is an additional burden that does not benefit the fishery in any way. Fisherman already have to deal with challenging weather, water conditions like thermoclines and current, fish that have tails and move around, or fish that simply aren't in the mood to bite a hook that day. In the rare event that all the other factors align and the fish are biting, we currently have to cease fishing operations when the 1000lb trip limit is approached. With significant penalties for going even slightly over, we often stop short. We then waste fuel and ice and precious time and head back in to shore, unload and head back out hoping the fish are still there, the weather and conditions are still fishable to attempt to continue fishing. Sometimes when you return to the same area where the fish were biting when you were forced to head in due to an unnecessary trip limit, they are no longer cooperating when you return. Every additional 1000lbs of Vermillion Snapper a vessel is allowed to keep, has the possibility to add up to $5000 in revenue to a trip that has already covered all expenses. This will reduce unnecessary fuel usage and other expenses and greatly increase the percentage of the total income per trip that is going to the Captain and Crew. Thank you, Jason Wetmore

3/3/2026	First Name: Michaekl Last Name: Cowdrey Email: michaeldcowdrey@gmail.com	City: Sneads ferry State: North Carolina	Commercial	Dear South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council, My name is Michael “Chops” Cowdrey. I am a life long commercial fisherman born and raised on a boat. In 1984 at 4 years old, my father graduated from a 30 ft boat to a 40 ft boat which allowed us to start working in the ocean. The black sea bass pot fishery was a major staple of our income. After spending my entire childhood as a deck hand, in 1997 at 17 years old, I became Captain of our family's boat, the Lady Kay. I am 45 years old now and have witnessed many fishing seasons. I have made tens of thousands of deployments of black sea bass pots, have worked vigorously from Cape Hatteras, NC to Little River, SC, and have witnessed first hand the management of the black sea bass fishery from beginning to end. From a time of no size limit, no trap limit, no catch limit, no mesh size limit, and no such thing as a permit of any kind to where we are now. In the beginning the state of NC would issue a sticker for $6 that allowed us to fish for anything, anywhere. The purpose of this letter is to hopefully educate and encourage you to open what has been deemed the “whale closure” in the South Atlantic Black Sea Bass pot fishery as it pertains to amendment 56. Using black sea bass pots as a method of harvest has been proven through scientific study as the most responsible, sustainable, and efficient way to catch the fish. Unfortunately, through regulation, the use of this type of gear has been prohibited across the board for all Snapper grouper fisherman with the exception of a handful of people like myself who had been deemed “worthy” of a pot endorsement back in 2010 or 2013, I can't even remember. Of the 540 south atlantic snapper grouper permits, only 32 qualified for the endorsement based on the landings requirement set by SAFMC. The pot endorsement, 35 pot limit, 1180 lb trip limit, a requirement to bring pots back to land each trip, and an increase in size limit were all measures put in place to “lengthen” the fishing season because the prior year we had caught the TAC in 6 weeks. Our six week season was a tragedy to the fishermen. The results of the first stock assessment on black sea bass turned out to be completely wrong and left us with very little quota during the largest migration of sea bass I have seen in my career. Prior to 2013, any hook and line fishermen in my area, when fishing for black sea bass, would use pots. If a boat was smaller it would use less pots resulting in less catch or a larger boat like mine using more pots resulting in more catch. Prior to losing their rights to use pots, I had never heard of a commercial fisherman targeting black sea bass with hook and line. The landings prior to the unjust stripping of fishermen's rights to use pots was 90% pots and 10% hook and line. Of the 10% landed by hook and line, I would argue that a decent portion was bycatch from snapper grouper fishing rather than targeted sea bass fishing. The difference in bycatch mortality and efficiency in hook and line versus the pot fishery is staggering. Also, prior to 2013, 85% of the sea bass caught in the South Atlantic were landed right here in my hometown of Sneads Ferry, NC. The second stock assessment on black sea bass was conducted during a few years of very strong migration that would be followed by several years of warm climate and weak migration. Once again causing the stock assessment to be completely wrong. We were given a larger quota during a time of scarcity of fish. None of the regulations put in place to “lengthen the season” were removed. As a matter of fact, after 10 or more years of not even reaching 50% of our TAC, not one single regulation was lifted. How does that happen? How is it legal to put regulations on a fishery specifically to slow fishermen down from catching the TAC too fast and continue with those regulations for an entire decade while the fishermen aren't able to reach even half the quota? We have not been ALLOWED to reach our quota one single time since the second stock assessment. The first year of an increased quota we were required to stop fishing at 44% November 1st - May 1st. We realized for the first time that we were closed 6 months of the year for whale migration. This closure had been slid in during the reform of our fishery unknowingly to most fishermen like myself. We didn't realise the first couple of years that we even had a whale closure because we had been reaching our TAC before November 1st. The closure itself seemed corrupt. We were the smallest pot fishery in the Atlantic Ocean with the fewest number of pots per boat and the fewest number of boats participating with the least amount of soak time on our gear. There had never been a single documented entanglement or injury of a whale due to Black Sea Bass pots. The presence of whales in our area was less than any other area on the entire east coast other than South Florida. Protected Resources chose the South Atlantic Black Sea Bass Pot Fishery to make an example of. I still cannot for the life of me understand why our particular fishery was closed other than we may have been low-hanging fruit because in general, we are financially poor and few in numbers and could not fight against it. I'm pretty sure the closure itself began in 2010, the 2013 date that has been referred to as our closure was actually an opening. Boundary lines were drawn outside of where black sea bass thrive in our area and we were giving that as an opening. Between 2010 and 2013 we were not allowed to fish with black sea bass pots at all anywhere during the winter months. Eight years ago, I received a phone call from a college student named Kim Sawicki asking if I would participate in a study of fishing ropeless gear. Over 8 years time, Kim and I worked and developed ropeless fishing into an on-demand gear that seems to work flawlessly outside of human error " if you don't do it right it doesn't work right”. During the eight years that we have worked on this ropeless gear project, there have been other fisheries across the country that are beginning to experience closure. Dungeness crab fishermen in California were able to use our work, our study and our training, and within 3 years, the state of California has reopened the fishery. This is a large fishery with a lot of pots and 50,000 gray whales. In comparison to that, we sit here in the South Atlantic after 15 years of closure and are faced with an opportunity to put our small American Fishing families back to work. From the first meeting in Townsend, Georgia a couple of summers ago to where we are now, I will list off some of the things I have heard as opposition to reopening the whale closure to sea bass pots: Allowing black sea bass pot fishing will make it harder for charter captains to catch their limit for their customers. Closing charter fishing for black sea bass would reduce the recreational by catch mortality dramatically which would impact the stock assessment greatly and in hand make it easier for me to make a living as a commercial fisherman. One sounds as ridiculous as the other. 2. We would have to relook at the stock assessment because we have been using the closure as a benefit to the fish when assessing the stock. Stock assessment began before closures were ever in place. The TAC is what is decided to protect the fish. I have not heard of any scientific study yet that reveals whether catching the fish in the summer or the winter will impact the stock. I have heard of studies though that might compare to by catch mortality of pot fishing to hook and line. 3. What about the historical commercial hook and line black sea bass fishery? There has been no historical hook and line black sea bass fishery since the 1950s when commercial fishermen first brought crab pots into the ocean. The fishery has been nearly exclusively a pot fishery. Hook and line landings over the last 10 or 15 years were exclusively manipulated by laws and did not exist prior. All Snapper grouper unlimited permit holders should be allowed to have access to pots for the harvest of black sea bass 4. Leaving the whale migration closed for ropeless gear could be used as a supposed spawning closure. I do not believe a supposed anything should be suggested in order to keep us closed. An actual true scientific biological spawning closure set for a specific time that actually helps the biology of the fish not only would be much shorter than 6 months, but also may help offset the supposed benefits that are being put towards the stock assessment for the fish being harvested by hook and line, and not pots. 5. We need to leave it closed to pot fishing because the latest stock assessment looks very bleak. The stock assessment and the TAC have nothing to do whatsoever with the method of harvesting the fish. This is not a good reason to allow the fish to be caught with hook and line but not pots. The stock assessment is very flawed. The next stock assessment may very well show an abundance of fish and when it does we need to be ready to harvest. We do not need to be here 3 or 5 years down the road with an extra quota and still sitting on our thumb not allowed to fish. To summarize this letter, us commercial black sea bass pot fishermen desperately need this area opened. The wintertime nature of our fishery, the historical presence of

3/3/2026	First Name: Kathy Last Name: Krell Email: kathykrell11@gmail.com	City: Cocoa State: Florida	Private Recreational, Commercial	My family has been commercial fishing for over 50 years and we support increasing commercial trip limits of Vermillion Snapper when the ACL is not being caught to allow commercial fishermen to harvest an optimum yield of snapper grouper species. Alternative 2. We support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermilion snapper during Season 1 to: Sub-Alternative 2c. 2,000 lbs gw, or Sub-Alternative 2d. 3,000 lbs gw Alternative 3. . We support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermilion snapper during Season 2 to: Sub-Alternative 3d. 3,000 lbs gw, or Sub-Alternative 3e. 4,000 lbs gw. The proposed Increases in the trip limit of Vermillion Snapper will allow our boat to have the best opportunity when the fishing is good to catch additional fish per trip and reduce expenses while increasing profits and crew pay.
3/3/2026	First Name: CJ Last Name: Altieri Email: fishergirl1333@gmail.com	City: Jacksonville State: Florida	Commercial	This comment is for the March 26 meeting regarding Amendment 60, action 2. Revise commercial limits for snapper/grouper. I very strongly support revising commercial trip limits of Vermillion snapper as well as other species when the ACL is not being landed to enable commercial fishermen to harvest an optimum catch of snapper/grouper species. Action 2, Alternative 2 - I strongly support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermillion snapper. Action 2, Alternative 3 - I strongly support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermillion snapper. I also support that Action 3 establish temporary trip limit increases for snapper grouper species. Increasing the trip limit of vermillion snapper will allow our commercial fishermen to have a better chance to harvest additional fish per trip to reach the sustainable ACL of this species. Commercial fishermen on larger slow vessels encounter many obstacles to land these fish. The current 1,000 lb limit is an additional burden that does not benefit the fishery in any way. Commercial fishermen already have the challenge of weather, water conditions and current. Every additional 1,000 lbs of vermillion snapper that fishermen are allowed to keep adds revenue and reduces unnecessary fuel usage as well as other expenses and will increase income per trip for the captain and his crew. Thank you, CJ Altieri
3/3/2026	First Name: Toney Last Name: Altieri Email: huntergrace333@outlook.com	City: Jacksonville State: Florida	Commercial	This comment is for the March 26 meeting regarding Amendment 60, action 2. Revise commercial limits for snapper/grouper. I very strongly support revising commercial trip limits of Vermillion snapper as well as other species when the ACL is not being landed to enable commercial fishermen to harvest an optimum catch of snapper/grouper species. Action 2, Alternative 2 - I strongly support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermillion snapper. Action 2, Alternative 3 - I strongly support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermillion snapper. I also support that Action 3 establish temporary trip limit increases for snapper grouper species. Increasing the trip limit of vermillion snapper will allow our commercial fishermen to have a better chance to harvest additional fish per trip to reach the sustainable ACL of this species. Commercial fishermen on larger slow vessels encounter many obstacles to land these fish. The current 1,000 lb limit is an additional burden that does not benefit the fishery in any way. Commercial fishermen already have the challenge of weather, water conditions and current. Every additional 1,000 lbs of vermillion snapper that fishermen are allowed to keep adds revenue and reduces unnecessary fuel usage as well as other expenses and will increase income per trip for the captain and his crew. Thank you, Toney Altieri

3/3/2026	First Name: Greg Last Name: Altieri Email: fisherman1333@gmail.com	City: Jacksonville State: Florida	Commercial	For the March 26 meeting - I strongly support Amendment 60, Action 2 - Revise commercial limits for snapper/grouper. I very strongly support revising commercial trip limits of Vermillion snapper as well as other species when the ACL is not being landed to enable commercial fishermen to harvest an optimum catch of snapper/grouper species. Action 2, Alternative 2 - I strongly support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermillion snapper. / Action 2, Alternative 3 - I strongly support increasing the commercial trip limit for vermillion snapper. / I also support that Action 3 establish temporary trip limit increases for snapper grouper species. Increasing the trip limit of vermillion snapper will allow our commercial fishermen to have a better chance to harvest additional fish per trip to reach the sustainable ACL of this species. Commercial fishermen on larger slow vessels encounter many obstacles to land these fish. The current 1,000 lb limit is an additional burden that does not benefit the fishery in any way. Commercial fishermen already have the challenge of weather, water conditions and current. Every additional 1,000 lbs of vermillion snapper that fishermen are allowed to keep adds revenue and reduces unnecessary fuel usage as well as other expenses and will increase income per trip for the captain and his crew. Thank you, Greg Altieri

3/4/2026	First Name: Kim Last Name: Sawicki Email: admin@sustainableseastechnology.org	City: Ocala State: Florida	Non-Govt Org (NGO)	First, I would like to sincerely thank the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office (SERO) and their Protected Resources Division (PRD), NMFS, and the many fishermen who have worked alongside me for the past eight years. I would also like to specifically thank Nicholas Hopkins of the Southeast Fisheries Science Center Gear Research Group for his continued engagement with this project. The collaboration between agency staff, scientists, and fishermen has made meaningful progress possible and reflects the best of cooperative fisheries management. The commercial black sea bass pot fishery in the South Atlantic has a long documented history. Early descriptions of the fishery in the Carolinas show that wire traps were being used extensively by the mid-twentieth century (Sundstrom 1957; Rivers 1966; Frame and Pearce 1971). These early traps were typically cube-style wire traps roughly 24 × 24 × 24 inches and were hauled regularly from ports throughout the region including Sneads Ferry and Morehead City in North Carolina, Murrells Inlet, Georgetown, McClellanville, and Charleston in South Carolina, as well as Brunswick, Georgia and Fernandina Beach, Florida. Historical landing records from the 1960s show that the fishery supported substantial harvest while operating with relatively simple gear and small vessels. These early surveys describe a stable fishery prosecuted by small family vessels that relied on efficient trap gear to harvest sea bass with relatively low effort and high selectivity. Over time, the gear used in the fishery has become even more conservation oriented. Modern federal regulations require smaller traps of approximately 22 × 22 × 22 inches along with escape vents, degradable ghost panels, and other engineering measures designed to reduce unwanted mortality and prevent ghost fishing. These changes demonstrate that the pot fishery has continually evolved toward lower ecological impact while maintaining its core efficiency and selectivity. Recent work has taken this evolution further through the development and integration of on-demand trap systems. These systems eliminate the vertical buoy line and buoy in the water column and instead use acoustic release technology to recover the trap when the vessel returns to haul it. Removing the vertical line and buoy eliminates entanglement risk to whales and sea turtles while dramatically reducing the risk of gear loss. The traps used in the on-demand configuration for this fishery are intentionally weighted to approximately 34 to 37 pounds. This additional weight counteracts the buoyancy of the KD-40 floats (similar to those used in turtle exclusion devices) and stabilizes the gear on the seafloor. This design significantly reduces trap movement and the potential for lost gear. In contrast, lightly weighted traps that rely on surface buoys can weigh as little as 8 to 12 pounds and are more vulnerable to movement across the bottom during rough weather due to the kite effect created by buoy lines. Stabilized traps reduce gear loss and therefore reduce the possibility of ghost fishing. Available cooperative fishing trials have demonstrated extremely low rates of trap loss under these stabilized configurations. In over 2,500 trap hauls conducted during field testing from just one of our several vessels, only two traps were lost, representing an annual inventory loss of approximately 5.7 percent and an even smaller loss rate per haul (.008). These rates are comparable to or lower than gear loss estimates reported in well-studied trap fisheries such as the Chesapeake Bay blue crab fishery, where annual trap loss rates have been estimated between approximately 12 and 20 percent. Even where trap loss occurs, the ecological impact of on-demand trap systems is substantially lower because the gear does not include persistent vertical lines in the water column and therefore eliminates the risk of whale entanglement. From a conservation standpoint, on-demand trap gear likely represents the cleanest form of commercial harvest currently available for black sea bass on earth. A simple ecological ranking of harvest methods would place on-demand trap gear first due to the absence of vertical lines and extremely low gear loss. Traditional trap gear would follow due to its selectivity and relatively low discard mortality. Commercial hook and line gear would follow because it produces higher discard rates. Recreational hook and line fisheries generally produce the highest levels of dead discards due to release mortality and depth-related barotrauma. Trap gear is also one of the most efficient methods of harvesting black sea bass. A single trap can capture multiple fish passively while remaining stationary on structured habitat, allowing fishermen to harvest quota with significantly less fishing effort than hook and line methods. Hook and line fishing requires continuous active fishing time, repeated gear deployments, and repeated handling of fish. Trap fisheries have been engineered to reduce these impacts through escape vents, trap placement, and selective entrance designs that allow smaller fish to escape before the trap is hauled. Harvesting quota with fewer gear interactions, less vessel time, and reduced handling stress represents an important conservation benefit that should be considered in evaluating gear performance. It is also important to recognize that the true scale of discard mortality in reef fish fisheries remains one of the most uncertain components of current stock assessments. Studies examining release mortality in the South Atlantic snapper-grouper complex have shown that discard mortality can vary widely depending on gear type, depth, handling practices, and barotrauma (Rudershausen and Buckel 2007; Rudershausen et al. 2013). These studies demonstrate that hook and line fisheries can generate substantial levels of release mortality, particularly when fishing occurs in deeper offshore waters where barotrauma is more severe. In contrast, trap fisheries capture fish alive in shallower waters, in enclosed gear, and allow undersized fish to be released with minimal handling stress. Because discard mortality estimates used in stock assessments often rely on generalized assumptions rather than continuous fishery-dependent observation, improving real-time monitoring of discards across gear types would likely provide a more accurate understanding of total fishing mortality. Integrating modern electronic monitoring tools and cooperative research programs with fishermen could significantly improve these estimates and lead to more precise management decisions. It is also important to recognize that the apparent shift toward hook and line landings in recent years does not reflect a natural preference among commercial fishermen. Since 2012, regulatory measures intended to reduce whale entanglement risk have closed 15,000 square nautical miles of the inshore fishing grounds from November through April when whales are present. These closures have effectively displaced the traditional pot fishery and pushed fishing effort offshore during the winter months or eliminated it altogether. As a result, many fishermen have relied more heavily on hook and line gear, which has shifted reported landings data toward that gear type. This regulatory displacement of effort should absolutely not be interpreted as evidence that pot fishing is declining or less important to the fishery. Pot gear remains one of the most efficient and selective methods available for harvesting black sea bass, allowing fishermen to maximize catch while minimizing effort and reducing the likelihood of dead discards. Efficiency and flexibility are of the utmost value to our portfolio fishers in the South Atlantic. The South Atlantic black sea bass pot fishery has historically been a small, family-owned fishery consisting largely of single endorsements held by individual fishermen and vessels. Maintaining this traditional structure is important for both cultural and economic reasons. The pot endorsement currently exists as an add-on to the broader snapper-grouper permit, and there is increasing consolidation occurring as some entities acquire multiple endorsements associated with those permits. When considering allocation and management frameworks, it may be appropriate to recognize the traditional nature of this fishery and prioritize active individual endorsement holders who are directly engaged in the fishery. For these reasons, the introduction of on-demand gear should not be treated as a risk to the stock. The available evidence suggests that it represents the next step in a long engineering progression toward safer and more selective fishing gear. Adding on-demand gear as an allowable gear type within or during the time area closure does not inherently increase fishing mortality. Instead, it reduces ecosystem risk while maintaining the same fundamental trap fishing method that has existed in the region for decades. Given these realities, I believe that it would be prudent to consider separating the on-demand gear authorization portion of Amendment 56 into a framework amendment or a separate action. Doing so would allow the Council to address gear innovation without delaying progress through unrelated allocation or management debates. Management decisions should also consider actual fishing effort rather than theoretical maximum participation. Not all permit holders actively fish their endorsements in any given year. Counting inactive permits when evaluating potential effort can artificially inflate perceived fishing pressure and lead to unnecessarily restrictive measures for fishermen who are actively participating in the fishery. Finally, the Council should continue exploring ways to incorporate timelier fishery-dependent data into the assessment process. Reef fish stock assessments currently rely heavily on retrospective modeling that can lag real fishery conditions by several years. More flexible management frameworks that incorporate near real-time data from electronic monitoring, logbooks, and cooperative research programs would allow managers to respond more quickly to changes in stock conditions and reduce the likelihood that fishermen are penalized long after a temporary decline has passed. The black sea bass fishery has demonstrated resilience in the past. Historical records show that the stock has experienced periods of decline followed by strong recovery under responsible management. Continued collaboration between fishermen, scientists, and managers will ensure that this fishery remains biologically sustainable while supporting the coastal communities and family-owned fishing businesses that have depended on it for generations. Thank you again to the Council, NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office staff, especially the Protected Resources Division, NMFS, Nicholas Hopkins and the Southeast Fisheries Science Center Gear Research Group, and all of the fishermen who have dedicated years of work to improving this fishery and developing innovative solutions that benefit both marine ecosystems and fishing communities.