



# South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

## News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
March 11, 2024

CONTACT: Kim Iverson  
Public Information Officer  
Toll Free: 866/SAFMC-10 or 843/571-4366  
kim.iverson@safmc.net

### **Federal Fishery Managers Review Assessment for Black Sea Bass, Red Snapper Projects, and Address Other Issues During March Meeting**

Black Sea Bass are managed along the Atlantic coast in federal waters from Cape Hatteras, NC southward along the east coast of Florida by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. Based on the recent stock assessment conducted through SEDAR 76, the stock is overfished and declining in abundance. With a current recreational bag limit of 7 fish per person and a 13-inch minimum size limit, the number of undersized fish released by the recreational fishery has increased in recent years while total landings have declined. Black Sea Bass inhabit offshore reef areas as well as nearshore structure and around half of the estimated regulatory discards occur in state waters. The overall discard mortality rate is approximately 14%. In addition, the stock assessment shows continued trends in low recruitment, or the number of new fish entering the population each year.

During its March meeting last week in Jekyll Island, Georgia, the Council reviewed stock projections for Black Sea Bass from NOAA Fisheries, considered recommendations from its Scientific and Statistical Committee, and a management response options presentation from Council staff addressing [Population Conditions and Management Challenges for Black Sea Bass](#). The presentation shows strong evidence the stock is in significant decline. Climate change may be contributing to low recruitment and loss of the stock at the southern end of its range, and there is an urgent need to reduce both discards and landings.

The Council will continue to discuss Black Sea Bass during its June 10-14, 2024 meeting, including options for management to take out to public scoping. Public scoping meetings for Snapper Grouper Amendment 56 addressing measures for Black Sea Bass are tentatively planned for this summer.

#### **Red Snapper Exempted Fishing Projects**

Council members received an overview of three projects proposed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation (FWC) that require Exempted Fishing Permits. The projects are expected to be funded by NOAA Fisheries to explore new and innovative approaches to better understand and reduce Red Snapper discards and increase fishing opportunities in the snapper grouper fishery. A [total of five projects](#) are recommended for funding.

The [three FWC proposals](#) involve the use of Exempted Fishing Permits to allow harvest of Red Snapper. The individual projects would collaborate with fishermen to obtain catch and discard data, test innovative strategies to reduce discards, and allow additional harvest opportunities. In addition, the projects include a reporting app, an education course, and an angler satisfaction evaluation.

The proposals include both private recreational anglers and for-hire vessels in northeast Florida and private recreational vessels in southeast Florida. Fishermen will be selected to participate and test aggregate bag limits of snapper grouper species, including retention of Red Snapper. The projects could potentially begin in July 2024 and continue for one year, with possible funding available for an additional year. The Council provided comments on the proposals. NOAA Fisheries will also solicit public comment on the Exempted Fishing Permits needed for the three project proposals.

*(Continued)*

## Red Snapper Management

During the meeting, the Council received a letter from NOAA Fisheries stating the agency is considering interim measures to reduce overfishing of Red Snapper during the 2024 fishing year. In the letter, Regional Administrator Andy Strelcheck noted the need to take “expeditious action to meet legal obligations, now and in the long term: including thorough consideration of the benefits and tradeoffs of different management opportunities to increase Red Snapper access, reduce discards, and rebuild other snapper grouper stocks.” The Council received notification on July 23, 2021 that the Red Snapper stock was experiencing overfishing, primarily due to release mortality in the recreational fishery.

The Council developed Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 35 to address overfishing for Red Snapper, reduce the number of fish caught and released, and reduce mortality of released fish. However, during its December 2023 meeting, the Council rescinded approval of the amendment, acknowledging that taking additional time to work on the regulatory amendment poses little risk as the Red Snapper stock is rebuilding faster than expected, exhibiting strong recruitment, increasing abundance, and expanding age structure.

The Council is addressing long-term management measures for Red Snapper and other snapper grouper species through development of a Management Strategy Evaluation for the Fishery. To help reduce release mortality, the Council has implemented requirements for descending devices to be onboard and readily available when fishing for snapper grouper species and hook specifications to help ensure released fish survive. The Council has also continued expansion of outreach efforts including the Council’s Best Fishing Practices and Citizen Science Programs.

When asked about the 2024 Red Snapper season, Regional Administrator Andy Strelcheck stated they have no season projections to date, and a final decision will be made later this spring. The length of any season is determined by NOAA Fisheries.

## For-Hire Reporting

The Council also continued discussing the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting Program and the need to improve compliance with reporting requirements. To begin identifying needed changes and get feedback from those who are required to report, the Council approved assembling an advisory panel whose charge would be to explore approaches to improve the existing program. The Council established the structure of this advisory body and will solicit applicants this spring with the intent of appointing members at their June 2024 meeting.

## Management of the Commercial Snapper Grouper Fishery

The Council continued discussion of the snapper grouper commercial fishery, including the current permit structure and trends in the fishery. The Council will take a focused look at both short-term and long-term changes needed for the fishery. Council members requested additional information on vessels active in the fishery, leasing of permitted vessels, trends in imports, and permit trends. The Council will continue to solicit input from its Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel, scheduled to meet March 26-28, 2024 in Charleston, SC.

## Additional Information

Additional information about the March 2024 Council meeting in Jekyll Island, Georgia, including meeting materials and committee reports, is available from the Council’s website at: <https://safmc.net/events/march-2024-council-meeting/>. The next meeting of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council will be held June 10-14, 2024 in Daytona Beach Shores, Florida.

**The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, one of eight regional councils, conserves and manages fish stocks from three to 200 miles offshore of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and east Florida.**