

Innovative and Comprehensive Management Approaches for Snapper Grouper

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Goal: Adapt to changes in NMFS and maximize commercial and recreational goals through innovative and comprehensive management in the SG fishery

Our word for this next step is **Innovation**

WHY IS INNOVATION NEEDED

- Red Snapper
 - Red Snapper stock recovery should be a management success but Red Snapper management remains frustrating to constituents and the Council
- Managing a multi-species complex with single-species tools and actions is challenging
 - The Council recognized the need to address the ‘Snapper Grouper Fishery’, not just the Red Snapper Stock, several years ago
- SG Regulatory Amendment 35 and Secretarial Amendment
 - The Council decided against submitting Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 35 because the fishing level recommendations were considered overly precautionary and not representative of the current state of the Red Snapper stock
 - The Secretarial Amendment proposes an overfishing definition and an allowable harvest level that is more in line with common perceptions of the stock, but those actions were not available to the Council
- NMFS leadership messaging from the May 2025 CCC meeting on the future of science and analysis
 - NMFS indicated that the future science enterprise will be reduced from current levels
 - NMFS directed Councils to prepare to manage with higher risk levels and to consider reducing the overall management burden by revising management units
- Many unassessed and data limited stocks in the South Atlantic
 - Despite MSA goals and the science-based management intent of the SFA, significant information gaps persist for both South Atlantic fisheries and stocks
 - The SEDAR program cannot support additional assessments at this time and is struggling to maintain past productivity levels
 - Council is forced to make hard prioritization decisions on its assessment needs
- Council workload is often dominated by “must-do” single species stock responses, leaving little resources available for actions with broad impacts

- Current assessment and management approaches are complex and time consuming
 - Outcomes often lag behind real-time conditions and on-the-water observations, leading to increased controversy and resistance and decreased constituent confidence and trust
 - Council is forced to make tough decisions with inadequate information

Reset and New Direction Proposal

Several years ago when dealing with Red Snapper the Council recognized that the problem was not a single species problem, and could not be solved by single-species actions alone. A plan was proposed to address Red Snapper overfishing in the short term, support a multi-year MSE development project to provide a tool to improve multi-species analytical abilities, and ultimately consider broad changes to the overall Snapper Grouper fishery to ‘get out of the single species rut’. With the changes conveyed by NMFS leadership, we need to plot a new course for snapper grouper management that is less data intensive while also more efficient and dynamic.

We propose a framework to reset Snapper Grouper fishery discussion and begin progress toward innovative actions that improve the overall fishery. The framework is built around establishing what we are calling “goalposts” to describe overarching fishery objectives that will help guide individual decisions, agreeing to some basic principles and facts to avoid rehashing the same discussions over and over, and developing a series of short, medium, and long-term actions that are achievable given the science and regulatory challenges we face.

Innovation requires brainstorming and the first steps need to be judgement free brainstorming. We hope to set up a multi-step process that will allow the Council to:

- First, come up with ideas and innovative solutions that can be evaluated objectively and avoid wrapping ourselves around the axle with details and uncertainties that may or may not prove relevant or even answerable.
- Second, apply some structure to reduce rehashing of the same unresolvable arguments and discussions of unknowns.
- Third, develop a plan for moving forward to improve the fishery under a new science reality.

The proposed plan has 3 main components:

- Goalposts: provide high level guidance for evaluating individual decisions
- Basic Principles: establish a series of facts and shared expectations so deliberation can move forward efficiently
- Action Goals: Short, mid- and long-term plans

1. Snapper Grouper Fishery Goalposts

- What are goalposts?
 - Principles and standards that help guide individual decisions
 - Devised to guide innovative management actions
 - Informed on feedback received from constituents, APs, port meetings, public comment, etc.
 - Reflect FMP goals and objectives
 - Established for commercial and recreational sectors
- How are Goalposts used?
 - Council identifies Goalposts that provide broad, high level direction and possible clarity on what it wants to achieve
 - FMP and committee actions are considered in light of their ability to make progress toward the goalposts
 - Discretionary actions included in amendments (those that do not address statutory requirements) should make progress toward goalposts

2. Basic Principles

- What are the “Basic Principles”?
 - A series of simple, factual statements to which Council consents and agrees.
 - As the Goalposts determine where we are going, the Basic Principles establish the boundaries of the playing field
- What is the purpose?
 - By agreeing up front, further debate and discussion can be avoided on these points, allowing our time to be spent on making substantive progress on fishery issues
 - Intended to prevent ‘rhetoric creep’ in Council discussion, as we all know where we stand on these points

3. Action Goals

- Short Term Actions
 - Within the next 6 months, or through the December 2025 meeting
 - Immediate steps that can be taken to begin applying the new approach
 - Incorporating these ideas into ongoing management actions
 - Quick victories to build momentum and proof of concept
 - Respond to directives from NMFS from CCC meeting including establishing priorities with regional office
 - Respond to seafood competitiveness EO
- Mid-Term Actions
 - 6 - 24 months
 - Further developing the approach and working out the inevitable bugs
 - Applying the concepts to upcoming management items
 - Implementing changes in our procedures if needed

- Agree to this process for the SG committee discussions, gameplan, goalposts, etc.
- Items that are just starting or planned to start soon, address statutory deadlines and scientific recommendations, are feasible and compatible with agency directives, and provide value to the overall fishery
- Think of overall ways to do innovation to accomplish goalposts
- [Long-Term Actions](#)
 - Indeterminate time horizon
 - Following through with the gameplan and continuing to consider innovation without defaulting to old habits
 - Include items that may be challenging, push the regulatory/MSA envelope, require research and new information, are not limited by statutory deadlines, but offer high ‘bang for the buck’

Why are we optimistic this can work:

The South Atlantic Council has a history of innovative and ecosystem level actions to address fishery issues. Prior to the SFA and its single-species focused guidelines, the Council favored actions directed at effort and fishing practices in recognition of the challenges of multi-species fisheries. Reviewing some of these past actions may help inform future directions and illustrate the past management philosophy.

- Removal of fish traps and roller rig trawls
- Longline limits
- Protection of habitat, including protection of Oculina
- Spawning aggregation protections and focused MPAs
- Black sea bass trap reduction program
- Ropeless gear support
- Commercial effort reduction through 2 for 1 and limited entry
- Avoided commercial snapper grouper ITQ, in favor of increased participation, employment, and opportunity.
- Circle hook and descending device requirements
- Best Fishing Practices Outreach
- Significant support for outreach and education
- Citizen Science program to engage fishermen in data collection
- Initiated SEDAR process for transparent assessments