



PC: GRNMS

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Amendment 56

Black Sea Bass Stock Assessment Response

Decision Document, December 2024

Background

SEDAR 76 (2023) included data through 2021 and indicated that the black sea bass stock in the South Atlantic has declined substantially. The assessment estimated recruitment to be lower than average since 2011 and declining in each of those years. Despite declines in landings over the same period, spawning biomass has also declined, while fishing mortality has increased. Assessment, landings, and biological information is summarized in the [Fishery Overview](#).

An explanation of current management challenges resulting from the declining biomass/recruitment of black sea bass and status of South Atlantic snapper grouper fisheries was presented in March 2024. A video of this explanation is linked [HERE](#).

In a [letter](#) received from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on May 30, 2024, NMFS stated that black sea bass will continue to be listed as not overfished and not subject to overfishing (the status from the previous assessment), with an expected update to the status determination criteria (SDC), as recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC). NMFS requested that the SDC be updated to MSY proxies based on 40% of the spawning potential ratio (SPR).

In June 2024, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) approved the amendment for scoping and directed that scoping be conducted after additional catch projections were reviewed by the SSC. Review of the additional projections was not completed ahead of the September 2024 meeting, so the Council directed scoping to be delayed until after the December 2024 meeting.

Acceptable Biological Catch

In March 2024, the Council received recommended overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels from the SSC. Due to strong declines in recent recruitment, the projection used to estimate OFL and depict expected long-term rebuilding of the stock assumes the long-term average recruitment (higher), while the projection used to estimate ABC for short-term management decisions assumes a lower recent (2014-2019) average recruitment (Table 1).

Table 1. Black sea bass overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee, based on projections from SEDAR 76 (2023).

OFL RECOMMENDATIONS				
Year	Landed (1000 lbs ww)	Discard (1000 lbs ww)	Landed (number, 1000s)	Discard (number, 1000s)
2025	39	1299	39	3174
2026	68	1430	66	3331
2027	109	1454	100	3354
2028	165	1456	140	3356
2029	211	1457	170	3356
ABC RECOMMENDATIONS				
Year	Landed (1000 lbs ww)	Discard (1000 lbs ww)	Landed (number, 1000s)	Discard (number, 1000s)
2025	35	503	32	1164
2026	54	506	46	1167
2027	-	-	-	-
2028	-	-	-	-
2029	-	-	-	-

*****NOTE: THE SSC'S ADVICE ON USING THESE RECOMMENDATIONS WAS UPDATED AT THEIR OCTOBER 2024 MEETING. SEE THE UPDATES IN THE SSC COMMENT SECTION BELOW AND IN THE OCTOBER 2024 SSC MEETING REPORT.**

Projections become increasingly uncertain for years further away from the terminal year. The SSC's standard policy (as developed through the [Catch Level Projections Workgroup](#)) is to recommend ABC for no more than 5 years beyond the terminal year of data (2021 for SEDAR 76). Due to the timing of assessment completion and the time necessary to develop projections with appropriate assumptions about the future population and fishery, ABC recommendations for black sea bass are provided for 2 years: 2025 and 2026. Under the current ABC recommendations, the 2026 level would remain in place until a future assessment or interim analyses supporting recommended catch levels based on more recent data can be completed.

In June 2024, the Council requested additional projections and SSC consideration of alternative ABC and OFL levels that account for management changes in addition to lowering the annual catch limits, such as changes to minimum size limits or closed seasons. Additional projections were most recently reviewed by the SSC at their October 2024 meeting.

Objectives for this Meeting (December 2024)

- Review Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel comments on potential changes to fishing behavior in response to considered changes in management.
- Review SSC comments from the October 2024 meeting.
- Consider revisions to the plan for changing black sea bass management based on the SSC's recommendations.
- Review and adjust the amendment timeline.

Advisory Panel Comments

The Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC on October 15-17, 2024. The AP primarily discussed how the recreational sector could be expected to respond to a potential retention closure on black sea bass from January through April.

Generally, the AP's discussion indicated that **recreational snapper grouper fishing effort in areas where black sea bass are encountered is unlikely to change in response to a retention closure on black sea bass from January-April**. Some of the specific comments on this topic noted in the Meeting Summary Report include:

- A Jan-April closure would be detrimental to the charter/headboat fishery because few other species are available to keep at that time.
- NC/SC border – The species composition of headboat catches seems to be fairly constant over the last 30 years
- SC – If black sea bass cannot be retained, effort is likely to still occur in areas where black sea bass are caught due to the mixture of species at those locations and typical practices from recreational anglers
- NC/SC border – Reef-associate bottom species are all mixed together; little effectiveness in targeting/avoiding black sea bass specifically
 - Fewer black sea bass are found in deeper water. When they are caught in deeper water, they are typically larger fish.
- Some members were against an April closure because few other fish are available in nearshore areas of NC at that time of year.

The AP additionally discussed effects of changes to size and bag limits and the impacts of interactions with undersized black sea bass in state waters. A full description of discussions is available in the October 2024 AP Meeting Summary Report, provided in the December 2024 Council Meeting Briefing Book.

Scientific and Statistical Committee Comments

The SSC convened in Charleston, SC on October 22-24, 2024, to review additional catch projections of the SEDAR 76 stock assessment of black sea bass. These projections were developed using varying assumptions about recruitment, fishing mortality rates, and management measures.

The SSC recommended against using the presented projections to provide management advice (this includes the previously recommended projections shown above). The SSC recommended

developing an ‘enhanced projection method’ using updated index values, updated age-data for the index, updated catch data, and any other updated data available to provide catch levels for 2026 and possibly later years.

Potential Management Actions

Required

The following actions are required components of Amendment 56 in accordance with the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) or Council policy:

1. **Reduce catch levels (ABC, annual catch limit [ACL], and optimum yield [OY])**
2. **Revise status determination criteria (SDC)**
 - The assessment panel recommended the 40% SPR-based reference points instead of the current 30% SPR-based reference points during the last stock assessment (SEDAR 76 2023), and the SSC endorsed this recommendation. Additionally, NMFS requested these reference points be incorporated into the FMP through this amendment.
3. **Review sector allocation percentages**
 - Required discussion per the Council’s [Allocation Review Trigger Policy](#), with the completion of a new stock assessment and revised catch level recommendations.

Other Actions

The following actions are not required for Amendment 56, but may be considered based on previous Council and AP discussions:

4. **Accountability measures**
 - Change the current recreational measure in which NMFS sets the season each year.
5. **Change fishing year start date**
 - Recreational: April 1
 - Commercial: January 1
6. **Re-opening nearshore areas to on-demand black sea bass pots.**
 - Current seasonal pot closures: November 1-April 30 (closure area changes during December 1-March 31)
7. **Consider allocating the commercial ACL by gear (pots and hook-and-line).**
 - Consideration of this change was noted in the 2022 Fishery Performance Report
8. **Recreational management measures**
 - Discard reducing measures (e.g., single hook rigs)
 - Recreational bag limit reduction.
 - Recreational size limit reduction.
 - Likely to increase retention, but unlikely to affect overall catch without a decrease in the bag limit, as well.
 - Recreational seasonal retention closure.

- Potentially matching shallow water grouper closure (January-April).
- Snapper Grouper FMU species closed to recreational harvest during January-April: black grouper, blueline tilefish, gag, East Florida/Florida Keys hogfish, red grouper, red porgy, scamp, snowy grouper, wreckfish, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney.
 - Greater amberjack closed in April.

Committee Action

Provide guidance on actions to consider in this amendment.

Tentative Amendment Timing

June 2024	Reviewed decision document and approved for scoping
September 2024	Discussed changes to amendment timeline and reviewed assumptions for ABC projections.
December 2024	SSC comments/recommendations for additional catch level projections
Winter 2025	Scoping hearings (?)
March 2025	Review scoping comments and provide guidance on draft actions and alternatives (?)
June 2025	Analyses and initial actions and alternatives
Summer 2025	Review modifications to the amendment, select preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings
September 2025	Conduct public hearings
December 2025	Review public comment and approve all actions
March 2026	Approve for formal review
Late 2026	Regulations effective

The SSC’s recommended course of action to develop updated projections for 2026 and beyond may require restructuring of the management actions considered for black sea bass. As a plan amendment, Amendment 56 is unlikely to be completed in time for new catch levels to be implemented at the beginning of 2026. If the Council wants new catch levels in place at the beginning of 2026, alternative amendment types, such as an abbreviated framework that would only update the ABC, OY, and ACLs to be consistent with projections based on fishing at the recommended reference level of $F_{40\%}$ (not updating the SDC or changing other management measures), could be considered. Such an amendment could be developed concurrently with Amendment 56 but would be completed sooner. Following implementation of Amendment 56 (including implementation of the recommended $F_{40\%}$ -based SDC), NOAA Fisheries anticipates

that the black sea bass stock will be determined to be overfished, and the Council will need to develop an amendment that implements a rebuilding plan. A rebuilding plan can be implemented through a framework (regulatory) amendment, which takes less time to develop than a plan amendment.

Committee Action

Direct staff on the desired management response for black sea bass, including the type and timing of amendments to be developed. Direct staff on whether the Amendment 56 timeline should be changed or maintained. Direct staff on when to conduct scoping for Amendment 56.

Appendix A. Summary of Regulations

Species	Black Sea Bass
OFL	703,000 lbs ww (2021+)
ABC	643,000 lbs ww (2021+) (AF 2)
Total ACL	643,000 lbs ww (2021+) (AF 2)
Commercial ACL	276,490 lbs ww (2021+) (AF 2)
Recreational ACL	366,510 lbs ww (2021-2022+) (AF 2)
Commercial Allocation	43.00%
Recreational Allocation	57.00%
Commercial AM (Amendment Language)	If commercial landings, as estimated by the SRD, reach or are projected to reach the quota specified in §622.190(a)(5), the AA will file a notification with the Office of the Federal Register to close the commercial sector for the remainder of the fishing year.
Recreational AM (Amendment Language)	NMFS will project the length of the recreational fishing season based on when NMFS projects the recreational ACL is expected to be met and announce the recreational fishing season end date in the Federal Register prior to the start of the recreational fishing year on April 1. On and after the effective date of the recreational closure notification, the bag and possession limit for black sea bass in or from the South Atlantic EEZ is zero. This bag and possession limit applies in the South Atlantic on board a vessel for which a valid Federal charter vessel/headboat permit for South Atlantic snapper-grouper has been issued, without regard to where such species were harvested, i.e. in state or Federal waters.
Commercial In-season Closure?	Yes
Commercial Payback?	Yes
Rec In-season Closure?	No- NMFS will announce rec season each year (Reg 14). Rec season for 2024 is Apr 1- Mar 31 (all year)
Rec Payback?	No (removed in Reg 14)
Fishing year	Jan 1-Dec 31 comm Apr 1- Mar 31 rec (Reg 14)
Commercial Management Measures	Trip limit 1,000 lbs gw (1,180 lbs ww); 11" TL. (Am18A) H&L trip limit 300 lbs gw Jan -Apr (Reg 14 effective 12/8/14) Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)

Recreational Management Measures	13" TL (Am 18A); 7-fish bag limit (Reg Am 25) Sale of recreationally caught fish prohibited.
Seasonal closures	Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)
Spawning season	Peak spawning March-May offshore with minor spawning Sept-Nov
Size at first spawning	Black sea bass change sex from female to male. The minimum size of maturity for females 3.6 in SL. All females are mature by 7.1 in SL.

Appendix B. State Regulations

Based on current information, the effects of changes to recreational management should all be considered with the expectation that state regulations (summarized below) remain unchanged. A large portion of the recreational catch occurs in state waters (Table 2).

Federal: 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

North Carolina (S of Cape Hatteras): 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

South Carolina: 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

Georgia: 15 fish per person per day bag limit; 12-inch minimum size limit

Florida: 7 fish per person per day bag limit; 13-inch minimum size limit

Table 2. South Atlantic recreational catches (shore, charter, and private trips) of black sea bass from 2019-2023 for inland, state ocean (≤ 3 miles), and federal ocean (> 3 miles) waters.

Year	Inland	Ocean ≤ 3 miles	Ocean > 3 miles
	Landings (number)		
2019	4,778	17,423	388,759
2020	23,296	16,028	187,633
2021	65,012	10,306	195,872
2022	30,954	8,006	269,466
2023	97,263	19,855	232,122
	Releases (number)		
2019	2,361,811	1,167,075	4,208,745
2020	2,343,704	811,823	2,818,590
2021	2,205,874	1,110,027	2,238,182
2022	3,713,356	1,503,126	3,329,941
2023	3,563,520	1,035,373	1,522,056
	Catch (number)		
2019	2,366,589	1,184,498	4,597,504
2020	2,367,000	827,851	3,006,223
2021	2,270,886	1,120,333	2,434,054
2022	3,744,310	1,511,132	3,599,407
2023	3,660,783	1,055,228	1,754,178

Source: MRIP Public Data