



PC: GRNMS

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Amendment 56

Black Sea Bass Stock Assessment Response

Decision Document, September 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).

Acceptable Biological Catch

In March 2024, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) received recommended overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (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	-	-	-	-

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 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, 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. The Council also approved the amendment for scoping and directed scoping to occur after the September 2024 Council meeting. At the time, the Council expected the SSC to review revised projections in August 2024. However, during that meeting, the SSC provided additional direction on the projections and corresponding assumptions to the assessment analysts. Thus, the SSC intends to review the resulting projections at their October 2024 meeting.

Objectives for this Meeting (September 2024)

- Review SSC comments from the August 2024 meeting.
- Review the projected amendment timeline based on additional ABC projections being reviewed by the SSC in October 2024.
- Review current list of potential actions and discuss how fishery behavior is expected to respond to management changes being considered.

Tentative Amendment Timing

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

Committee Action

Direct staff on whether the amendment timeline should be changed or maintained.

Potential 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. **Develop a rebuilding plan**
 - Not required by current stock status (from SEDAR 56).
 - Affects the assumptions/constraints of projections (e.g. 70% $P_{rebuild}$ within 10 years vs. prevent overfishing with respect to 40% SPR-based reference point).
 - A rebuilding plan is anticipated to be necessary after approval of revised SDC.
 - Much uncertainty has been discussed regarding expectations for future recruitment, the ability of the stock to reach historical levels of biomass in the current environment, and the time between assessment terminal year and implementation of new catch levels.
 - Interim analysis is expected to be completed by the end of 2027.

- Rebuilding plans can be implemented through a framework amendment.

9. 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.
 - Current discards are likely to be predominantly size-based, as very few anglers land the 7 per person bag limit of black sea bass (Figure 1).

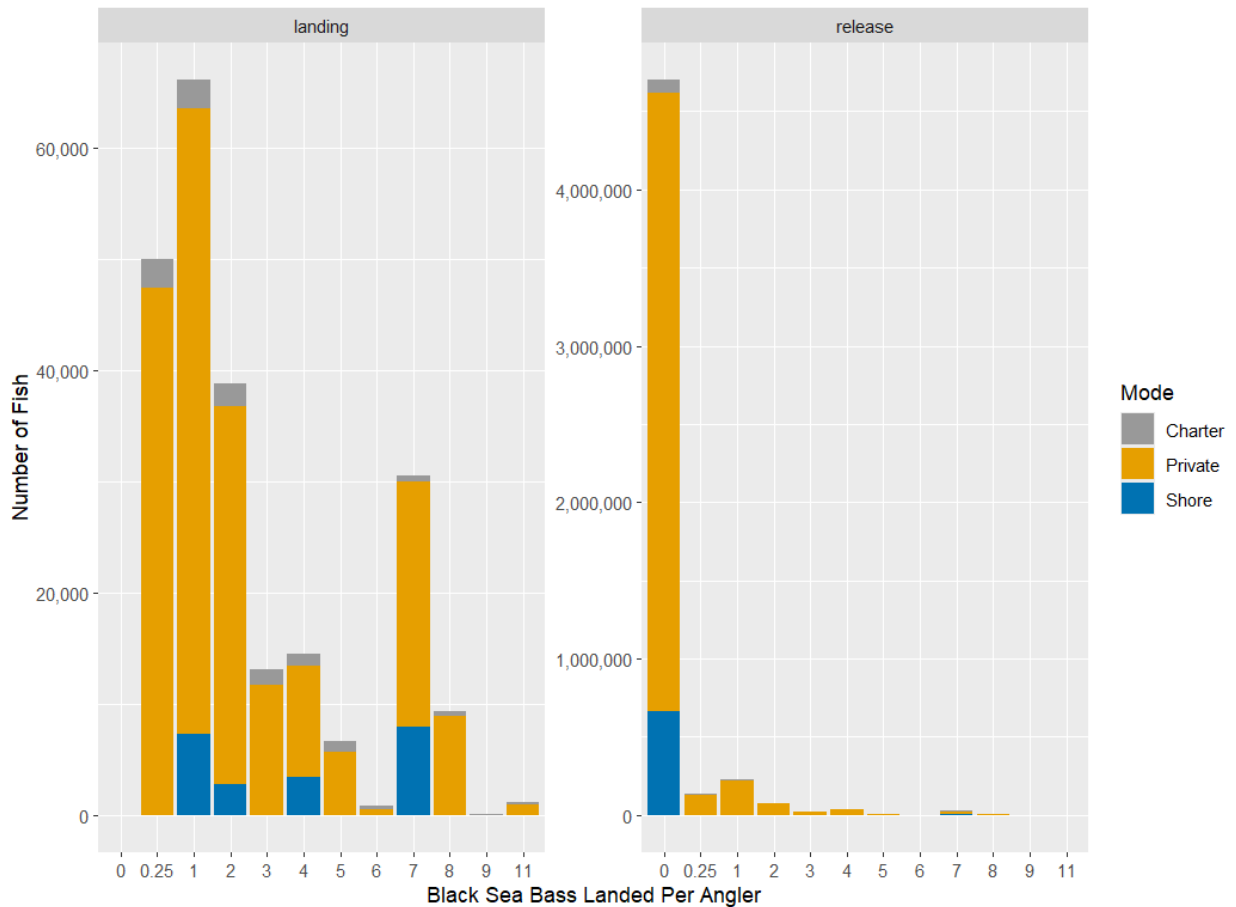


Figure 1. Black sea bass annual average landings (left) and releases (right) according to the number of black sea bass landed per angler from 2020-2023. NOTE: Data for state waters are included.

- Recreational seasonal retention closure.
 - Potentially matching shallow water grouper closure (January-April).
 - Snapper Grouper FMU species closed 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.

- A January-April black sea bass retention closure is included in the requested additional projection runs to be reviewed by the SSC in October 2024.
- In August 2024, the SEFSC and SSC discussed uncertainty associated with assumptions about fishing behavior and effort in response to a January-April retention closure. The SSC noted the need to reduce fishing effort to prevent overfishing (due primarily to discard mortality) under the context of the F_{40%} reference point.
- The working assumption is that the recent landings-based fishing mortality associated with waves 1 and 2 would be converted to discard-based fishing mortality (100% mortality rate to ~15% mortality rate for fish that would have been landed), but there would be no change in fishing effort during those waves.
- Quantitative data to inform assumptions about fishery behavior under a wave 1 and 2 retention closure are limited. However, assumptions may be informed through expert judgment from the Council and its stakeholder advisors.
- Recreational releases of black sea bass by wave and mode are shown in the [Fishery Overview](#) (under Graphs>Recreational Sector Data).
- **Should fishing effort in areas where black bass occur be expected to significantly change in response to a January-April retention closure? If so, by how much (number caught per angler/trip or by percentage)?**
 - How effective are recreational fishermen at targeting and avoiding black sea bass?
 - Consider other species that are already closed during waves 1 and 2, notably shallow water groupers. Are black sea bass typically caught in the same areas as these species?
 - If black sea bass could not be retained, would recreational fishermen continue to fish in areas where they have typically caught black sea bass?

Committee Action

Provide information about how the fishery may respond to regulatory changes being included in the additional catch projections.

State Regulations

Based on current information, 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

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%
Rec 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.