



## THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

# Snapper Grouper Amendment 56

## Black Sea Bass Stock Assessment Response

### Council Decision Document, June 2025

## 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 thereafter. 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), until an update to the status determination criteria (SDC), as recommended by the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), is put in place. NMFS requested that the SDC be updated to MSY proxies based on 40% of the spawning potential ratio (SPR).

Online scoping was conducted from January 22 through 5pm on February 6, 2025. Emailed comments are included in the March 2025 Council Meeting Briefing Book. Comments submitted via the online form are viewable [HERE](#).

In March 2025, the Council reviewed scoping comments and directed staff on the actions and ranges of alternatives that should be developed in the draft amendment.

## Acceptable Biological Catch

In March 2024, the Council received recommended overfishing limit (OFL) and acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels from the SSC. The Council, SSC, and Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) communicated from March 2024 through December 2024 concerning the assumptions that should be included in projections of future catch based on SEDAR 76 and used to develop OFL and ABC recommendations. Due to the lengthening time between projected management implementation (late 2026) and the assessment terminal year (2021), as well as disagreement between recent average abundance trends projected for interim years versus continued declines observed through the Southeast Reef Fish Survey, the Council requested that the assessment information be updated and projections re-run using more recent information, as available.

The SEFSC developed the SEDAR 76 Update assessment, and this assessment is being reviewed by the SSC at their April and May 2025 meetings. The update and SSC's recommendations for OFL and ABC will be presented to the Council in June 2025.

## Advisory Panel Recommendations

The Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) discussed Amendment 56 during its April 2025 meeting. The AP's discussion is more fully described in the meeting report, included in the June 2025 Council Meeting Briefing Book. Summary points from this discussion are included below:

- When considering the recreational bag limit, minimum size limit, and any fixed closed season, the priority for the for-hire (charter/headboat) component is to keep the season open as long as possible, even if this means at lower levels of retention.
  - AP members suggested initially considering a bag limit reduction that is proportional to the expected annual recreational harvest reduction.
- Some AP members continue to support reducing the recreational size limit to 11 inches.
- Recreational fixed closed season
  - Some AP members noted that less fishing happens overall from January through April. A closure during this time may be beneficial for black sea bass spawning.
  - Off NC, black sea bass are an important recreational target during January-April, especially because few other species are open during that time of year.
  - While black sea bass have generally declined off Florida, some are caught off Jacksonville at the beginning of the year while cold winter waters are still there.

## Objectives for this Meeting (June 2025)

- Review the updated stock assessment information. Determine the most appropriate use of this information in developing future management.
- Review the draft actions and alternatives. Provide direction on how to further develop the amendment.

## Draft Actions

The AP also has provided recommendations for several of these actions during the [March 2024](#) and [October 2024](#) meetings.

## Additional Notes

- SEDAR 76 is the first black sea bass stock assessment to incorporate Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES) catch estimates. Therefore, changes to sector allocations will need to be considered along with any catch level changes (Action 2). While the Council stated in March 2025 that they did not intend to consider changes to allocations at this time, additional rationale detailing why these considerations are not needed relative to the change in recreational data streams would be necessary. Otherwise, an action considering changes to sector allocation percentages would need to be added.
  - In addition to adjustments needed to account for the transition to FES-based catch estimates, updates to those catch estimates are expected from MRIP in 2026.
- **The IPT recommends the action addressing the timing of the golden tilefish recreational season be included in the blueline tilefish amendment rather than Amendment 56 due to the number of actions already included in this amendment (with potential for others), NEPA page limit, and closer associations between the recreational fisheries for golden tilefish and blueline tilefish, rather than black sea bass.**
- The Council has stated concerns about why high numbers of nearshore discards (typically smaller fish) are not being reflected in offshore biomass.
  - The magnitude of these nearshore discards (~30-50% annually) and different state water gear regulations could mitigate the impacts of regulatory actions in federal waters.

## Action 1. Revise status determination criteria for black sea bass

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The proxy for maximum sustainable yield of South Atlantic black sea bass is the biomass at a static spawning potential ratio of 30%. The maximum fishing mortality threshold for South Atlantic black sea bass is the fishing mortality rate that produces a static spawning potential ratio of 30%.

**Alternative 2.** Revise the proxy for maximum sustainable yield of South Atlantic black sea bass to be the biomass at a static spawning potential ratio of 35%. Revise the maximum fishing mortality threshold for South Atlantic black sea bass to be the fishing mortality rate that produces a static spawning potential ratio of 35%.

**Alternative 3.** Revise the proxy for maximum sustainable yield of South Atlantic black sea bass to be the biomass at a static spawning potential ratio of 40%. Revise the maximum fishing mortality threshold for South Atlantic black sea bass to be the fishing mortality rate that produces a static spawning potential ratio of 40%.

**Alternative 4.** Revise the proxy for maximum sustainable yield of South Atlantic black sea bass to be defined based on the best scientific information available at the time of the most recent stock assessment. Revise the maximum fishing mortality threshold for South Atlantic black sea bass to be defined based on the best scientific information available at the time of the most recent stock assessment.

- The Council is scheduled to have further discussions about status determination criteria and reference point proxies at the June 2025 meeting.
- The assessment panel recommended the 40% SPR-based reference points instead of the current 30% SPR-based reference points used 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.
- The Council wants to consider a wider range of alternatives than only the current (30% SPR) and recommended (40% SPR) proxies, including an alternative that sets the proxy based on the best scientific information available (i.e., the proxy could change as scientific recommendations change).

## **Action 2. Revise acceptable biological catch, annual catch limit, and optimum yield**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The current acceptable biological catch for South Atlantic black sea bass is 643,000 pounds whole weight. The total annual catch limit is 643,000 pounds whole weight. The commercial sector annual catch limit is 276,490 pounds whole weight. The recreational sector annual catch limit is 366,510 pounds whole weight. The optimum yield is the yield at 75%F<sub>MSY</sub>.

- The Council will receive SSC recommendations for alternative catch levels at the June 2025 meeting.
- Regulatory Amendment 19 (2013) last specified the optimum yield (OY) as equal to the yield at 75%F<sub>MSY</sub>, with a value of 1,756,450 lbs ww. The total annual catch limit (ACL) was also set equal to the OY in this amendment.
- The total ACL was more recently revised through Abbreviated Framework 2 (2019), which specified the current value of 643,000 lbs ww. OY was not revised through Abbreviated Framework 2.
- SEDAR 76 is the first black sea bass stock assessment to incorporate Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) Fishing Effort Survey (FES) catch estimates. Therefore, OY will need to be re-estimated to account for the change in recreational data.

## **Action 3. Change the fishing year start date for black sea bass**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The federal commercial fishing year for South Atlantic black seas bass begins on January 1. The federal recreational fishing year for black sea bass begins on April 1.

**Alternative 2.** Revise the recreational fishing year for South Atlantic black sea bass to begin on January 1.

**Draft Alternative 3.** Revise the recreational and commercial fishing years for South Atlantic black sea bass to begin on November 1.

- The IPT developed Draft Alternative 3 as a potential option to align the beginning of the fishing year with the annual pot closure. This prioritizes access for commercial fishermen that would choose to use on-demand pots during that time of year.
- The commercial start date (January 1) is in the middle of the pot closure, which would potentially be a desired fishing time for on-demand pot users, if the closed area is opened to pot fishermen using on-demand gear (considered under Action 4). Therefore, the IPT developed **Draft Alternative 3**.
- The IPT noted that we do not always have data that are representative of the fishery at different start dates.
  - Fishing behavior for a given month during the middle of the season can differ from behavior during that same month at the start of the season.
  - This can lead to some uncertainty in projections that should be noted.

## **Action 4. Re-open nearshore areas to on-demand black sea bass pots**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** From November 1 through 30 and from April 1 through 30 each year, the black sea bass pot closure applies to waters inshore of points referenced through [THIS LINK](#); approximately Daytona Beach, Florida, to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. From December 1 through March 31, the black sea bass pot closure applies to waters inshore of points 1-28 referenced through [THIS LINK](#); approximately Cape Canaveral, Florida, to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

**Alternative 2.** Revise the area closure to only apply to black sea bass pots that are not equipped with on-demand gear.

- This action is possible due to new on-demand technology that does not pose an entanglement threat to protected marine mammals.
- On-the-water enforcement could be difficult if on-demand pots are allowed but traditional roped pots are not.

## **Action 5. Revise the recreational bag limit for black sea bass**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The recreational bag limit for black sea bass is 7 fish per person per day.

**Alternative 2.** Reduce the recreational bag limit for black sea bass to 3 fish per person per day.

**Alternative 3.** Reduce the recreational bag limit for black sea bass to 4 fish per person per day.



**Alternative 4.** Reduce the recreational bag limit for black sea bass to 5 fish per person per day.

**Alternative 5.** Reduce the recreational bag limit for black sea bass to 6 fish per person per day.

**Alternative 6.** Increase the recreational bag limit for black sea bass to 8 fish per person per day.

- Season length analyses will be developed after ACL alternatives (Action 2) are chosen.

## **Action 6. Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for black sea bass**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The recreational minimum size limit for black sea bass is 13 inches total length.

**Alternative 2.** Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for black sea bass to 12 inches total length.

**Alternative 3.** Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for black sea bass to 11 inches total length.

## **Action 7. Recreational annual fixed closed season for black sea bass**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** There is no fixed closed season for recreational possession of black sea bass south of Cape Hatteras, NC.

**Alternative 2.** Recreational harvest and possession of black sea bass in or from South Atlantic federal waters south of Cape Hatteras, NC, is prohibited and the bag limit is zero from January 1 through April 30.

**Alternative 3.** Recreational harvest and possession of black sea bass in or from South Atlantic federal waters south of Cape Hatteras, NC, is prohibited and the bag limit is zero from March 1 through April 30.

- Snapper Grouper FMU species that are 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.
- The Council requested analysis of historical time periods of closures to see whether discards were reduced. These will be developed for a future meeting.
- Analyses will also explore recent trip compositions (% black sea bass) by month/wave and state.

## Action 8. Prohibit multi-hook rigs in the recreational snapper grouper fishery

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** The recreational sector is required to use non-offset, non-stainless steel circle hooks when fishing for South Atlantic snapper grouper species with hook-and-line gear and natural baits north of 28° N latitude. The recreational sector is required to use nonstainless steel hooks when fishing for South Atlantic snapper grouper species with hook-and-line gear and natural baits south of 28° N latitude.

**Alternative 2.** The recreational sector is required to use **one non-offset, non-stainless steel circle hook per line** when fishing for South Atlantic snapper grouper species with hook-and-line gear and natural baits **north of 28° N latitude**, and no more than one hook per line may be used. The recreational sector is required to use **one non-stainless steel hook per line** when fishing for South Atlantic snapper grouper species with hook-and-line gear and natural baits **south of 28° N latitude**, and no more than one hook per line may be used.

- IPT members noted similar enforcement concerns as were included in discussion of this action for Regulatory Amendment 35.

### Council Action

Review draft actions and alternatives and modify as needed.

### Tentative Amendment Timing

<b>June 2024</b>	Reviewed decision document and approved for scoping
<b>September 2024</b>	Discussed changes to amendment timeline and reviewed assumptions for ABC projections.
<b>December 2024</b>	SSC comments/recommendations for additional catch level projections
<b>January 22-February 6, 2025</b>	Scoping
<b>March 2025</b>	Review scoping comments and provide guidance on draft actions and alternatives
<b>June 2025</b>	<b>Review SSC catch recommendations and initial actions and alternatives</b>
<b>September 2025</b>	Review a draft amendment, select preferred alternatives (as necessary), and approve for public hearings
<b>Fall 2025</b>	Conduct public hearings
<b>December 2025</b>	Review public comment and approve all actions
<b>March 2026</b>	Approve for formal review
<b>Late 2026</b>	Regulations effective

## 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.



<b>Seasonal closures</b>	Pot closure Nov 1- Apr 30 (Reg 16)
<b>Spawning season</b>	Peak spawning March-May offshore with minor spawning Sept-Nov
<b>Size at first spawning</b>	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 ( $\leq 3$  miles), and federal ocean ( $> 3$  miles) waters.

Year	Inland	Ocean $\leq 3$ miles	Ocean $> 3$ miles
	<b>Landings (number)</b>		
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
	<b>Releases (number)</b>		
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
	<b>Catch (number)</b>		
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