Potential regulation changes to address the needs of South Atlantic headboats

March 2026

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Outline

1. Recap of discussions to date

2. Results of Council request:

“investigate vessel limits and current catch rates per every six passengers for black grouper, gag, scamp, and snowy grouper; and define and explain the requirements to be considered a headboat.”

March 2024

While discussing SG Regulatory Amendment 36, the Council requested that the Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel provide general recommendations on how *catch limits per trip or per day for recreational vessels should be applied to headboats*.

The AP offered general comments and recommendations and specific suggestions for gag and black grouper for Regulatory Amendment 36.

Snapper Grouper AP Recommendations - General

- Consider vessel limit in proportion to the number of anglers for federally permitted headboats.
  - Would benefit vessels larger than 6-pack charters (~7-20 anglers) and larger headboats (20+ passengers).
  - Consider how headboat-specific regulations have been implemented in the Gulf.
  - Examples that could be explored: Four fish for 10-30 passengers; six fish for 30 passengers; 30% of passenger count, maximum of 10 fish per vessel.

Snapper Grouper AP Recommendation - For Regulatory Amendment 36

Consider allowing *for-hire vessels that are federally inspected and permitted to carry more than 6 passengers* to have an aggregate gag and black grouper vessel limit of 2 fish for every 6 passengers on board, not to exceed a maximum number of fish per vessel per trip, ranging from 6-12 fish, not to include captain and crew limits.

December 2024

Staff presented a description of the headboat fishery, trends in efforts, commonly caught species , and CPUE for select species: Headboat Fishery in the South Atlantic Region

The Council requested additional detailed information (e.g. vessel capacity, discards, etc.) be provided in a report for review in June 2025 to begin discussing potential management changes (outside of those considered in SG Reg 36) that better address the needs of the headboat component.

June 2025

- In June 2025, staff presented highlights from a report prepared by the SEFSC. The Snapper Grouper Committee expressed the intent to continue the discussion focusing only on snapper grouper species.

- Full Report: Southeast Region Headboat Survey data for the June 2025 South Atlantic Fishery Management Council Meeting

September 2025

- In September 2025 the Council directed staff to "investigate vessel limits and current catch rates per every six passengers for black grouper, gag, scamp, and snowy grouper; and define and explain the requirements to be considered a headboat."

- The Council also requested feedback from its Law Enforcement Advisory Panel on enforceability of establishing vessel limits for every 6 passengers for certain snapper grouper species and any other enforcement issues that could arise.

January 2026

The Law Enforcement AP provided the following:

Enforceability depends on clear, simple rules and ability to verify passenger counts and fish onboard.

Avoid percentage-based limits. Use simple multiples or clear vessel-cap based limits.

Require headboats to maintain passenger records that can be reviewed at boarding to facilitate verification of allowable catch.

Multiple vessel sizes and capacities may complicate management; any vessel-specific entitlement (based on COI or permit) would require accessible information for LE to be effective.

Vessel-based limits could effectively increase total catch. Management must assess conservation impacts and potential reallocation across user groups.

Headboat definition

Headboat means a vessel that holds a valid Certificate of Inspection (COI) issued by the USCG to carry more than six passengers for hire.

A headboat with a commercial vessel permit is considered to be operating as a headboat when it carries a passenger who pays a fee or,

In the case of persons aboard fishing for or possessing South Atlantic snapper-grouper: when there are more persons aboard than the number of crew specified in the vessel's COI

Data and Methods to Investigate Management Changes

- Data reported through the Southeast Region Headboat Survey, 2021 - 2025
- Point estimates were developed based on reported catch with rules to replace kept fish or released fish on a trip depending on:
  - Regulations that have been in place (fish per person),
  - Currently under review (fish per vessel), and
  - Requested scenario (1 fish per 6 anglers).
- Bootstrap resampling was used to develop confidence intervals around the point estimate created above.

Gag and Black Grouper

Gag and Black Grouper

Year	Difference between 2 fish per vessel and 1 fish per 6 anglers	Average Whole Weight (ww)	% of ACL (ww)
2023	-72	10.20632	0.7%
2024	-62	11.57493	0.7%
2025	-71	16.31098	1.1%

Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper

Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper

Year	Scenario	Simulated Total Kept	Difference from 1 fish 6 anglers	Estimated Whole Weight Change	ACL (lbs whole weight)	% Change Relative to ACL
2021	3 pp	616	182	722	116,369	0.6%
2022	3 pp	612	273	1,088	116,369	0.9%
2023	3 pp	855	324	1,753	116,369	1.5%
2024	3 pp	653	212	964	116,369	0.8%
2025	3 pp	580	186	972	23,678	4.1%
2021	1 pv	189	-245	-972	116,369	-0.8%
2022	1 pv	135	-204	-813	116,369	-0.7%
2023	1 pv	197	-334	-1,807	116,369	-1.6%
2024	1 pv	159	-282	-1,283	116,369	-1.1%
2025	1 pv	157	-237	-1,238	23,678	-5.2%
2021	1p6a	434				
2022	1p6a	339				
2023	1p6a	531				
2024	1p6a	441				
2025	1p6a	394				

Snowy Grouper

- Some data would be confidential.
- Limited number of releases (<1% of total catch).
- Increasing bag limit could result in more targeted trips.
- Exceeded Recreational ACL in 2024 and 2025

Conclusions

- Changing to number of fish per number of anglers will have varying impacts.
- Most stocks analyzed are in rebuilding plans and some are reaching ACLs.
- Gag and Black Grouper: changing to 1 fish per 6 anglers likely to have minimal impact relative to the recreational ACL.
- Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper: changing from regulations under review to 1 fish per 6 anglers could increase catch relative to ACL by over 5%.
- Snowy Grouper: had few releases and increasing number of fish retained on a trip could increase number of targeted trips.