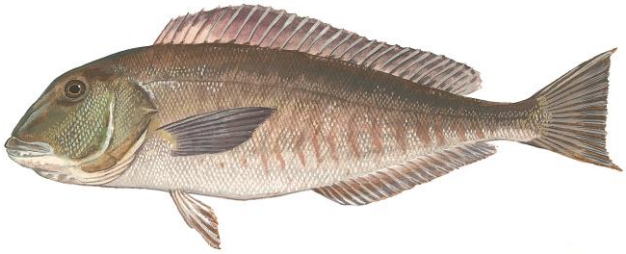
Abbreviated Framework Amendment 5

to the Fishery Management Plan for the
Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region



Acceptable Biological Catch and Annual Catch Limit Adjustment for South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish

Including a Regulatory Impact Review and Regulatory Flexibility Act Analysis

DRAFT

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Abbreviations and Acronyms Used in the FMP Document

ABC	acceptable biological catch
ACL	annual catch limit
ACT	annual catch target
AM	accountability measure
AP	advisory panel
BSIA	best scientific information available
CHTS	Coastal Household Telephone Survey
DPS	distinct population segment
EA	environmental assessment
E.O.	Executive Order
FES	Fishing Effort Survey
FMP	fishery management plan
LBS WW	pounds whole weight
MRIP	Marine Recreational Information Program
MSA	Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act
NMFS	National Marine Fisheries Service
OFL	overfishing limit
PSE	percent standard error
RFA	Regulatory Flexibility Act
RIR	regulatory impact review
SAFMC	South Atlantic Fishery Management Council
SEDAR	Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review
SEFSC	Southeast Fisheries Science Center
SSC	Scientific and Statistical Committee

Abbreviated Framework Amendment 5 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region

Proposed actions: Adjust the acceptable biological catch and annual catch limits for South Atlantic blueline tilefish

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 What Action is Being Proposed?

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (South Atlantic Council) is proposing changes to federal regulations for South Atlantic blueline tilefish through Abbreviated Framework Amendment 5 to the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region (Snapper Grouper FMP). The abbreviated framework action would adjust the annual catch limits (ACL) based on the acceptable biological catch (ABC) recommendations from the South Atlantic Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC).

1.2 Why is the South Atlantic Council Considering Action?

Blueline tilefish is a single genetic stock that ranges from the Mid-Atlantic coast to the northeastern Gulf of Mexico. The South Atlantic Council manages the population from the North Carolina/Virginia border southward to the jurisdictional line in the Florida Keys pursuant to the Snapper Grouper FMP. Due to increased fishing activity in the Mid-Atlantic, the final rule for Amendment 6 to the Tilefish FMP[1] (Amendment 6; 82 FR 52851, 11/15/17; MAFMC 2017) added blueline tilefish north of the North Carolina/Virginia border to the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils' (Mid-Atlantic Council) jurisdiction. Blueline tilefish was previously managed exclusively by the South Atlantic Council.

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

- Responsible for conservation and management of fish stocks
- Consists of 13 voting members: 8 appointed by the Secretary of Commerce, 1 representative from each of the 4 South Atlantic states, the Southeast Regional Director of National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS); and 4 non-voting members
- Responsible for developing fishery management plans and amendments under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) and recommends actions to NMFS for implementation
- Management area is from 3 to 200 miles off the coasts of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and east Florida through Key West with the exception of Coastal Migratory Pelagics, which is from New York to Florida, and Dolphin Wahoo, which is from Maine to Florida

In October 2017, a benchmark assessment (Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review, (SEDAR); SEDAR 50) of the Atlantic stock of blueline tilefish was completed using data through 2015. This assessment included blueline tilefish that are found in both the South Atlantic and the Mid-Atlantic Councils' jurisdictions. The South Atlantic Council's SSC reviewed results of SEDAR 50 (2017) at their October 2017 meeting and determined that the assessment constituted the best scientific information available

[1] More information can be found here: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/management-plan/tilefish-fishery-management-plan and http://www.mafmc.org/tilefish/.

(BSIA), and provided an updated ABC recommendation for blueline tilefish for the area south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. Based on the results of SEDAR 50 (2017), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) determined that blueline tilefish south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, was not undergoing overfishing and was not overfished. Moreover, the status of the stock was unknown north of Cape Hatteras due to insufficient data.

During the December 2017 South Atlantic Council meeting, Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) staff presented SEDAR 50 (2017) assessment results for blueline tilefish to the South Atlantic Council. The SEFSC indicated that due to data issues, blueline tilefish south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, was assessed separately from the population north of Cape Hatteras using an age-aggregated production model, which gave estimates of the overfished and overfishing status for that portion of the stock. At the same meeting, the South Atlantic Council's SSC provided an ABC recommendation for the area south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. A data-limited model was used for the blueline tilefish population north of Cape Hatteras, and due to the limitations of the ABC control rule, the South Atlantic Council's SSC was unable to provide an ABC recommendation for this portion of the stock. Therefore, both Councils' SSCs, along with analysts from SEDAR 50 (2017), formed a joint workgroup (ABC workgroup) whose task was to look into methods for deriving a viable ABC estimate and scientific methods for splitting the ABC north of Cape Hatters between the two Council jurisdictions.

The Mid-Atlantic Council's SSC reviewed results of the ABC workgroup's[2] recommendation at their March 2018 meeting, and the South Atlantic Council's SSC reviewed the results during their May 2018 meeting. In June 2018, the South Atlantic Council received their SSC's recommendations on the ABC for blueline tilefish; however, further development of management measures was delayed by other priorities.

At their October 2018 meeting, the South Atlantic Council's SSC was presented with the results of the revised SEDAR 50 (2017) blueline tilefish stock assessment that utilized the newly calibrated Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) data using the Fishing Effort Survey (FES) in place of the original Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS).[3] The South Atlantic Council's SSC reviewed results from the revision assessment for blueline tilefish during a webinar on February 25, 2019. At their April 2019 meeting, based on the review, the South Atlantic Council's SSC did not deem the revised assessment (including the MRIP's FES data) useful for making catch level recommendations and reaffirmed their previous ABC

[2] The working group recommended the following:

1: The South Atlantic Council's SSC agrees with the Mid-Atlantic Council's SSC that the output of the DLMTool Analysis is an estimate of overfishing limit (OFL), not ABC. The SSC has decided to split the OFL that came from the DLMTool Analysis using the allocation derived from the fishery-independent longline survey and then apply their ABC control rule to derive the ABC for the portion from Cape Hatteras to the NC/VA border (ABC = 55,968 lbs ww).

2. Given all the uncertainties, the South Atlantic Council's SSC accepted the 56% of the north of Cape Hatteras ABC to the Mid-Atlantic Council and 44% to the South Atlantic Council split that was calculated using the independent survey. This method should be used for 3 years and then should be re-evaluated at that time. The South Atlantic Council's SSC is unable to determine status of the portion of the blueline tilefish stock north of Cape Hatteras due to lack of data and means to estimate benchmarks.

[3] For a current (as of January 2024) description of the recreational data collection in the southeast and the surveys used, the reader is hereby referred to Snapper Grouper Amendment 53, Chapter 1.6 (SAFMC 2023c).

recommendations from SEDAR 50 (2017) and the blueline tilefish ABC workgroup. During their June 2019 meeting, the South Atlantic Council discussed moving forward to adjust fishing levels for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic based on their SSC's blueline tilefish ABC recommendation for the South Atlantic region developed as part of SEDAR 50 (2017), in combination with the SSC-approved ABC workgroup recommendation for the area north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. Abbreviated Framework 3 to the Snapper Grouper FMP (SAFMC 2020), which became effective on August 17, 2020, was developed to adjust the total and sector ACLs and the recreational annual catch target (ACT) for blueline tilefish based on the ABC recommendations.[4]

Following SEDAR 50, and implementation of Abbreviated Framework 3, Amendment 52 to the Snapper-Grouper FMP (SAFMC 2023b), which became effective on December 7, 2023, in part, modified the recreational accountability measure (AM)[5] for blueline tilefish. Revising certain management measures for blueline tilefish was expected to help keep the recreational sector within its ACL. The current revised recreational AM states that NMFS will annually announce the length of the recreational fishing season based on catch rates from the previous season. Each year, the fishing season will start on May 1 and end on the date NMFS projects the recreational ACL will be met.

An operational assessment for blueline tilefish (SEDAR 92) was completed in March 2025 with a data terminal year of 2023. In April and May 2025, the South Atlantic Council's SSC reviewed the blueline tilefish stock assessment and did not recommend the surplus production model for use in management. Instead, the SSC supported a data-limited approach based on average catch to establish the ABC for areas north and south of Cape Hatteras. Data-limited approaches do not produce overfishing level (OFL) estimates, so **the OFL for blueline tilefish is unknown**. For the region north of Cape Hatteras, the SSC also recommended incorporating updated data from the South Atlantic Deepwater Longline Survey (SADLS) to inform the allocation of the ABC. This resulted in 70% of the northern ABC being allocated to the Mid-Atlantic and 30% to the South Atlantic.

For the South Atlantic, this allocation equated to an ABC of 193,800 pounds, which was added to the ABC recommendation of 133,000 pounds for the area south of Cape Hatteras. **The total combined ABC recommended for the South Atlantic was 326,800 pounds whole weight (ww).** These ABC recommendations were presented to the South Atlantic Council at their June

[4] An expedited framework procedure, modified through Amendment 27 to the Snapper Grouper FMP (SAFMC 2013) can be used to adjust ABCs and ACLs for snapper grouper species. The expedited framework procedure requires changes be made according to the existing ABC control rule and formulas for specifying ACLs and ACTs that have been approved by the South Atlantic Council and were implemented in a plan amendment to the Snapper Grouper FMP.

[5] Recreational AMs for blueline tilefish established through the final rule for Amendment 32 to the Snapper Grouper FMP (80 FR 16583, March 30, 2015), included an in-season closure for the remainder of the fishing year if recreational landings reach or are projected to reach their respective recreational ACL. The post-season AMs stated that if the recreational ACL was exceeded, then during the following fishing year recreational landings would be monitored for a persistence in increased landings. Additionally, during that following fishing year, if the total ACL was exceeded and the species was overfished, the length of the recreational fishing season would be reduced and the recreational ACL would be reduced by the amount of the recreational ACL overage. However, every year from 2015-2020, recreational landings of blueline tilefish exceeded its recreational ACL.

2025 meeting. The South Atlantic Council requested that staff send a letter to the Mid-Atlantic Council requesting a meeting to jointly address regional apportionments of blueline tilefish. The Mid-Atlantic Council supported the formation of a joint sub-committee to inform future catch level specifications, especially given that blueline tilefish is a single stock along the Atlantic coast. The Mid-Atlantic Council also recommended moving forward with the specifications presented by the SSC at the June 2025 South Atlantic Council meeting as they were developed through a mutually agreed-upon process, supported by a joint SSC recommendation, and reflect the BSIA. At their September 2025 meeting, the South Atlantic Council discussed the need to implement the increased ABC that was recommended by the SSC and initiated this abbreviated framework amendment in order to have the new catch level recommendations in place for the 2026 fishing season.

1.3 What is the Proposed Action and Potential Effects for Blueline Tilefish?

1.3.1 Proposed Action

Abbreviated Framework 3 (SAFMC 2020) set the stock OFL for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic at 328,985 pounds whole weight (lbs ww). It also specified the SSC's ABC recommendation of 233,968 lbs ww from 2020 through 2022 where it would remain in place until modified. The total ACL for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic was set equal to the stock ABC. Existing sector allocations of 50.07% commercial and 49.93% recreational were applied to the updated total ACL which resulted in a 117,148 lbs ww commercial ACL and 116,820 lbs ww recreational ACL.

The proposed OFL for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic would be changed through this abbreviated framework action, based on SEDAR 92 (2025), to 'unknown' due to the use of data limited models in the assessment, which do not produce OFL recommendations. The total ABC of 326,800 lbs ww, for 2026 until modified (**Table 1.3.1**), would be based on the sum of the ABC from areas south and north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, which was the recommendation of the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Councils' SSCs.

Table 1.3.1. Proposed blueline tilefish ABCs (lbs ww) in the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction for the areas south and north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, to the Virginia line based on recommendations from the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Councils' SSCs based on SEDAR 92 (2025).

Year	North of Cape Hatteras to the NC-VA Border ABC	South of Cape Hatteras, NC to the FL Keys ABC	Total South Atlantic ABC (Removals)
2026 until modified	193,800 lbs ww	133,000 lbs ww	326,800 lbs ww

The ABC recommendations from the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic SSCs were provided in *total removals*. As a result, a portion of the recommended ABC must be attributed to dead discards. To determine the appropriate proportion, regional discard information from SEDAR 92 was analyzed. For the region north of Cape Hatteras, commercial discards were split based on

based on location of fishing resulting in ~ 90% of discards attributed to area north of the Virginia/North Carolina line and 10% attributed to the area south of the Virginia/North Carolina line to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. For recreational discards, the number of discards reported in each area was converted to pounds based on the average weight of recreationally landed fish. Discard estimates for the area between the Virginia/North Carolina line and Cape Hatteras were added to estimates for the area south of Cape Hatteras to the Council's jurisdiction boundary. Commercial and recreational discard estimates were then averaged across the last seven years (2017 - 2023) resulting in an average annual discard estimate equal to approximately 3.9% (12,742 pounds) of the recommended ABC. A seven-year average was chosen because it captures recent trends in blueline tilefish discards based on management changes and yearly variations in discard estimates.

Table 1.3.2. Proposed landings ABC, total ACL and sector ACLs for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic.

Year	Total South Atlantic ABC (Landings)	Total South Atlantic ACL	Commercial Sector ACL (50.07%)	Recreational Sector ACL (49.93%)
2026 until modified	314,058 lbs ww	314,058 lbs ww	157,249 lbs ww	156,809 lbs ww

1.3.2 Biological Effects

Blueline Tilefish Life History: *An Overview*

- Occurs in the Western and Mid-Atlantic Ocean, from Massachusetts to southern Florida and Mexico, including the Gulf of Mexico.
- Waters ranging from (98-774 feet) and feed on benthic invertebrates and fishes.
- Can live for 43 years.
- Spawning occurs at night from March to October, with a peak in May.
- Additional information on blueline tilefish biology can be found in Regulatory Amendment 27 to the FMP (SAFMC 2018).

This abbreviated framework action would set the total ACL equal to the ABC recommended by the South Atlantic Council's SSC. The SSC's recommended ABC is the combined ABC values from south of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, and from Cape Hatteras to the North Carolina/Virginia border (**Table 1.3.1**). The 2009 MSA NS 1 guidelines (74 FR 3178; January 16, 2009) illustrate that an ACL may typically be set very close to the ABC. Setting the ACL below the ABC would be appropriate in situations where there is uncertainty in whether management measures are constraining fishing mortality to target levels. The Joint Dealer Reporting Amendment (SAFMC 2014b) and the Joint Generic For-Hire Reporting Amendment (SAFMC 2014c), which were implemented in 2014, have provided more timely and accurate reporting of landings and reduced the incidence of quota overages, as well as management uncertainty for the commercial sector in the snapper grouper fishery.

Increasing blueline tilefish catch levels as proposed in Abbreviated Framework 5 would not be expected to result in negative biological impacts since overall catch would be constrained to the ACL and AMs would prevent the ACL from being exceeded, correct

for overages if they occur (if the stock was in an overfished condition), and prevent overfishing. In addition, the proposed increase in the total ACL for blueline tilefish is based on the SSC's recommended ABC for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic region. Projections from SEDAR 92 (2025) indicates that the blueline tilefish ACL can be increased without having negative effects on the sustainability of the stock.

Projected Commercial and Recreational Sector Season Length under Proposed ACLs

Commercial Sector

Since 2020, commercial harvest of blueline tilefish has closed between August and September because in-season AMs were triggered to prevent the ACL from being exceeded (**Table 1.3.3**). Assuming there is no substantial increase in fishing effort, the proposed increased commercial ACL under the proposed action could be expected to extend future fishing seasons. Given recent in-season closures, any commercial season length analysis after July-September is highly uncertain; hence, only qualitative discussion is presented here.

Table 1.3.3. South Atlantic blueline tilefish commercial landings, ACLs, percentage of the ACL harvested, and closure dates in lbs ww from 2020-2024, including preliminary 2025 landings.

Year	Landings (lbs ww)	ACL	ACL%	Closed
2020	116,511	117,148	99.5%	08/11/2020
2021	119,886	117,148	102.3%	08/11/2021
2022	119,970	117,148	102.4%	09/03/2022
2023	111,972	117,148	95.6%	08/02/2023 (Reopened on 9/11-16/2023)
2024	117,416	117,148	100.2%	08/04/2024

Source: Southeast Regional Office ACL Monitoring Page accessed October 14, 2025.
*2025 commercial landings are still preliminary. The commercial sector closed on July 23, 2025, and reopened on September 21-26, 2025.

Recreational Sector

The recreational sector for blueline tilefish is closed to harvest in the South Atlantic from January 1 through April 30, and from September 1 through December 31, each year. Between 2020 and 2023, the current recreational ACL of 116,820 lbs ww was exceeded in three out of the four years[6] because in-season recreational landings are typically not available until after the fishing season (May through September) concludes (**Table 1.3.4**). After the new recreational AM was implemented through Amendment 52 in December 2023 (SAFMC 2023b), NMFS began projecting and announcing the recreational season before the May 1 start date beginning in the 2024 fishing year.

Compared to the recent recreational landings, and with the new AM in place for NMFS to project the season length based on previous years, the proposed increase in the recreational ACL could extend the season length and reduce the likelihood that the ACL would be exceeded during

[6] In 2022, the recreational season was projected to meet the ACL and closed in July, but landings were lower than projected. Since the recreational season closes in September and Wave 1-4 landings are typically not available until after the season is closed, the season could not be reopened for harvest to meet the ACL.

the fishing season in future fishing years. Additionally, the Joint Generic Charter/Headboat Reporting Amendment (SAFMC 2014c), requires all federally permitted headboats in the South Atlantic to report landings information electronically and on a weekly basis.). These actions contribute to better recreational landings data and estimates of the season length necessary to ensure the ACL can be harvested but is not exceeded.

Table 1.3.4. South Atlantic blueline tilefish recreational landings (including CHTS units) by 2-month waves, ACLs, and closure dates in lbs ww from 2020-2024.

Year	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr	May-Jun	Jul-Aug	Sep-Oct	Nov-Dec	Total Reported	ACL	Percent of ACL	Closed
2020	0	997	36,159	340,162	0	14,631	391,949	116,820	336	-
2021	conf.	conf.	55,069	104,863	227	0	160,531	116,820	137	-
2022	conf.	conf.	21,400	conf.	conf.	conf.	29,624	116,820	25	07/26/2022
2023	conf.	conf.	215,418	132,866	1,282	conf.	351,332	116,820	301	-
2024	conf.	conf.	30,775	conf.	conf.	conf.	33,974	116,820	29	07/29/2024
2025	conf.	conf.	33,027	0	0	0	33,884	116,820	29	07/22/2025

Source: Recreational (CHTS) ACL Monitoring dataset provided on August 19, 2025.

Table 1.3.5. South Atlantic blueline tilefish recreational landings (including FES units) by 2-month waves.

Year	Jan-Feb	Mar-Apr	May-Jun	Jul-Aug	Sep-Oct	Nov-Dec	Total Reported
2020	0	3,679	66,233	712,489	0	58,183	840,585
2021	conf.	conf.	106,962	123,162	1,262	0	231,758
2022	conf.	conf.	44,681	conf.	conf.	conf.	52,905
2023	conf.	conf.	250,080	211,923	2,674	conf.	466,443
2024	conf.	conf.	94,938	conf.	conf.	conf.	98,137
2025	conf.	conf.	206,521	0	0	0	207,377

Source: Recreational (FES) ACL Monitoring dataset provided on August 19, 2025.

The biological effects of the increased recreational and commercial ACLs could be positive for blueline tilefish if fish that were formerly discarded dead were now retained. However, if a blueline tilefish closure were projected to occur during the open recreational season (May through August) or during the commercial season, there is a chance that there would be blueline tilefish regulatory discards when fishermen target co-occurring species like snowy grouper. While an increased ACL has the potential to increase fishing effort, the small magnitude of the increase is not expected to increase effort in a way that could be distinguished from normal interannual variability in fishing effort. Conversely, the proposed increase in the blueline tilefish recreational and commercial ACLs and potential increase in fishing effort could increase discards of co-occurring species if harvest for a co-occurring species was closed when blueline tilefish was open. However, the proposed increase in the ACLs is small, and any negative effects to co-occurring species would be expected to be minimal.

Thus, the proposed action is not expected to substantially change fishing effort or behavior in the blueline tilefish portion of the snapper grouper fishery. Therefore, no substantial adverse biological or population impacts are expected for blueline tilefish or other snapper grouper and co-occurring species due to bycatch.

Expected effects to essential fish habitat (EFH), EFH- habitat areas of particular concern (HAPC) *and protected species*

This action would not modify the way in which the snapper grouper fishery is prosecuted in terms of gear types used. Additionally, the total ACL increase is not expected to result in changes to fishing behavior or effort that could translate into additional effects to protected species. While an increased ACL has the potential to increase fishing effort, the small magnitude of the increase is not expected to increase effort in a way that could be distinguished from normal interannual variability in fishing effort. Therefore, there are no additional or adverse impacts on Endangered Species Act-listed species or designated critical habitats or essential fish habitats or HAPCs including corals, sea grasses, or other habitat types, anticipated as a result of this action.

1.3.3 Economic Effects

The following is a summary of the anticipated economic effects. See the Regulatory Impact Review in Chapter 2 for full details of these effects.

The proposed commercial ACL for blueline tilefish in Abbreviated Framework 5 would result in increased economic benefits realized by the commercial sector through increased revenue for commercial vessels generated from additional landings of the species. This action is estimated to result in an annual increase in gross revenue of $198,741 and $65,187 in net economic benefits (as measured in producer surplus or PS) for the commercial sector which also represents the change in net economic benefits for the action as a whole (2024 dollars). In general, dealers are indirectly affected whenever gross revenues to commercial fishing vessels are expected to change (e.g., increases in gross revenues are expected to indirectly benefit dealers and vice versa). Thus, economic benefits to dealers would be directionally the same as stated above for commercial vessels and this action is expected to increase economic benefits for dealers.

There are no estimated changes in economic benefits to the recreational sector as a result of this action. While the recreational ACL would increase from 116,820 lbs ww (inclusive of CHTS terms) to 156,809lbs ww (inclusive of FES terms), the change in how the ACL is being accounted for due to the switch from CHTS to FES terms is considered to be roughly equivalent. Thus, there is no estimated change in landings or economic benefits for the sector.

1.3.4 Social Effects

In general, management measures that increase the number of fish a fisherman can land are expected to be more beneficial to fishermen and fishing communities by increasing access to the resource, so long as overharvest is not occurring to negatively affect the stock in the long term. However, the ACL for any stock does not directly affect resource users unless the ACL is met or exceeded, in which case AMs that restrict or close harvest can result in negative direct social effects for commercial, for-hire, and private recreational fishermen. While the negative effects

are usually short-term, they may at times induce other indirect effects through changes in fishing behavior or business operations that could have long-term social effects. Higher ACLs lower the possibility of triggering AMs and thus provide for greater short-term social benefits, assuming landings and effort information are up-to-date and accurate to allow sustainable harvest. Adjustments to an ACL based on updated information from a stock assessment would be the most beneficial in the long-term to fishermen and fishing communities, because ACLs would be based on current conditions.

The proposed blueline tilefish ACLs would increase access for the commercial sector, which has met or exceeded their sector ACLs in recent years (**Tables 1.3.3**). This has triggered AMs that have resulted in harvest closures, resulting in short-term negative effects to fishermen and fishing communities. While the proposed recreational ACL is not comparable to the current recreational ACL due to SEDAR 92 utilizing newly calibrated MRIP data with FES in place of the original CHTS, based on historical landings, it is expected that the recreational sector would be able to fully harvest their proposed ACL (**Tables 1.3.4** and **1.3.5**) The increase in access associated with a higher ACL is expected to be beneficial to fishing communities because it may extend the fishing season longer than under the current ACL with positive social effects associated with increased opportunities to fish and revenue generated when compared to not revising the ACL.

Overall, if the revised ACL ensures sustainable harvest of blueline tilefish as envisioned, there would be long-term positive social effects throughout the blueline tilefish portion of the snapper grouper fishery in the form of consistent access to the resource.

1.4 South Atlantic Council's Conclusion

Public Comments and Recommendations.

The Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) received a briefing on this abbreviated framework amendment at their October 27-29, 2025, meeting. The AP had no comments or recommendations.

A public hearing for this abbreviated framework amendment was held during the South Atlantic Council's December 2025 meeting. A summary of comments will be included after the December 2025 meeting.

DRAFT South Atlantic Council Rationale for their Choice for Action.

The South Atlantic Council is adjusting fishing levels for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic based on the SSC's updated ABC recommendation for the South Atlantic region developed as part of SEDAR 92 (2025), in combination with the joint SSC recommendations for the area north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

The South Atlantic Council discussed the need to implement the increased ABC that was recommended by the SSC and discussed the timeline necessary to get the new catch level recommendations in place for the 2026 fishing season. The South Atlantic Council chose to initiate this abbreviated framework amendment to the Snapper Grouper FMP to address the

SSC's updated ABC recommendation. To address catch level recommendations through an abbreviated framework amendment, sector allocation percentages would need to be maintained (50.07% commercial and 49.93 recreational), even though the recreational catch estimation method changed to incorporate the MRIP FES in the SEDAR 92 stock assessment. An analysis of recreational and commercial landings,[7] with recreational landings calibrated to estimation methods using CHTS as well as the FES indicates that there is a relatively small difference between recreational and commercial landings relative to current sector allocation percentages. Based on this analysis the South Atlantic Council determined that the overall benefit to the fishery of quickly implementing the increased ABC is greater than potential benefits of waiting for a more prolonged process that would include re-evaluating sector or regional apportionment percentages. The South Atlantic Council still intends to work with the Mid-Atlantic Council to explore jurisdictional allocations later, through a separate process. The South Atlantic Council can also consider long-term changes to South Atlantic sector allocations at that time.

The proposed action to adjust fishing levels for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic region would best meet the objectives of the Snapper Grouper FMP, as amended, while complying with the requirements of the MSA and other applicable law.

[7] Estimates of sector ACLs for blueline tilefish based on recent SSC recommendations presented to the South Atlantic Council in September 2025: https://safmc.net/documents/blueline-tilefish-preliminary-sector-acls-in-the-south-atlantic-region-pdf/

Chapter 2. Regulatory Impact Review

2.1. Introduction

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) requires a Regulatory Impact Review (RIR) for all regulatory actions that are of public interest to satisfy the obligations under Executive Order (E.O.) 12866, as amended. In conjunction with the analysis of direct and indirect effects in the "Environmental Consequences" section of this Amendment, the RIR: 1) provides a comprehensive review of the level and incidence of impacts associated with a regulatory action; 2) provides a review of the problems and policy objectives prompting the regulatory proposals and an evaluation of the major alternatives which could be used to solve the problem; and 3) ensures that the regulatory agency systematically and comprehensively considers all available alternatives so that the public welfare can be enhanced in the most efficient and cost effective way. The RIR also serves as the basis for determining whether any proposed regulations are a "significant regulatory action" under certain criteria provided in E.O.12866. In addition, the RIR provides some information that may be used in conducting an analysis of the effects on small entities pursuant to the Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA). This RIR analyzes the effects this regulatory action would be expected to have on the recreational and commercial sectors of the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery.

2.2. Problems and Objectives

The problems and objectives for the proposed actions are presented in Section 1.1 and 1.2 of this abbreviated framework amendment and are incorporated herein by reference.

2.3. Description of Fisheries

2.3.1. Economic Environment

2.3.1.1. Commercial Sector

Economic information pertaining to the commercial sector of the snapper grouper fishery is provided in the Comprehensive Commercial Electronic Logbook Amendment (2024), Amendment 45 to the Snapper Grouper FMP (SAFMC 2023a), Liese (2023), and Buck (2018), and is incorporated herein by reference. Select updates to this information specific to blueline tilefish are provided below. The major sources of data summarized in this section are the NMFS Southeast Regional Office (SERO) Permits Information Management System, the Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) Social Science Research Group (SSRG) Socioeconomic Panel[8] data set, and the SEFSC Fishing Communities Web Query Tool. Inflation adjusted values are reported in 2024 dollars, through application of the annual, not seasonally adjusted GDP implicit price deflator provided by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

[8] This data set is compiled by the SEFSC Social Science Research Group from Federal Logbook System data, supplemented by average prices calculated from the Accumulated Landings System. Because these landings are self-reported, they may diverge slightly from dealer-reported landings presented elsewhere.

Permits

Any fishing vessel that harvests and sells any of the snapper grouper species from the South Atlantic exclusive economic zone (EEZ) must have a valid South Atlantic commercial snapper grouper permit, which is a limited access permit. In 2024, there were 508 valid or renewable[9] South Atlantic Snapper Grouper unlimited permits and 86 valid or renewable 225-lb trip-limited permits. Also, commercial harvest of snapper grouper species in the EEZ may only be sold to dealers with a federal dealer permit. In 2024, there were 316 entities with a federal Gulf and South Atlantic Dealers permit.

Landings, Value, and Effort

From 2020 to 2024, the number of federally permitted commercial vessels that landed South Atlantic blueline tilefish decreased from 161 to 122, representing a decline of approximately 24.2% (39 vessels). Annual landings of blueline tilefish saw a decline during this period, from 109,939 lbs gw in 2020 to 91,467 lbs gw in 2024, an overall decrease of 16.8% (18,472 lbs gw). On average over the five-year period (2020-2024), blueline tilefish was landed on approximately 18.7% of South Atlantic trips where blueline tilefish or other species were caught (778 blueline tilefish trips out of 4,175 other species trips), and it accounted for about 19.8% of the dockside revenue on blueline tilefish trips ($420,364 blueline tilefish revenue out of $1,752,899 combined blueline tilefish and jointly caught 'other species' revenue). On average annually (2020-2024), blueline tilefish landings comprised approximately 4.0% of the total all species revenue for these vessels ($420,364 blueline tilefish revenue out of $10,436,072 total dockside revenue). The average all species vessel-level revenue for blueline tilefish harvesters decreased from $82,215 in 2020 to $71,756 in 2024, a change of -$10,459. The average annual price per lb gw for blueline tilefish from 2020 to 2024 in 2024 dollars was approximately $4.20 ($420,364 average dockside revenue from blueline tilefish / 100,035 lbs gw average blueline tilefish landings) (Table 2.3.1.1.1 and Table 2.3.1.1.2).

Liese (2023)[10] generated annual vessel-level estimates of costs (as a percentage of revenue) and net revenue from operations for vessels that harvested deepwater species, such as blueline tilefish, in the South Atlantic. Estimates of producer surplus (PS) can be calculated from the cost information contained in Liese (2023) in conjunction with estimates of annual revenue from the SEFSC-SSRG Socioeconomic Panel. PS is total annual revenue minus the costs for fuel, other supplies, hired crew, and the opportunity cost of an owner's time as captain. Net revenue from operations, which most closely represents economic profits to the owner(s), is total annual revenue minus the costs for fuel, other supplies, hired crew, vessel repair and maintenance, insurance, overhead, and the opportunity cost of an owner's time as captain, as well as the vessel's depreciation. According to Liese (2023), PS for commercial vessels that harvested South Atlantic deepwater species was approximately 32.8% of their annual gross revenue, on average, from 2014 through 2018. Net revenue from operations was 3.7% of their annual gross revenue, on average, during this period. Applying these percentages to the results provided in Table 2.3.1.1.2 would result in an estimated per vessel average annual PS of $25,737 (2024 dollars) and an average annual net revenue from operations of $2,903 per year.

[9] A renewable permit is an expired limited access permit that cannot be actively fished but can be renewed for up to one year after expiration.

[10] This report is available via the NOAA repository: https://repository.library.noaa.gov/view/noaa/56480.

Liese (2023) also provides annual trip-level estimates of costs (as a percentage of trip revenue) and trip net revenue for vessels that harvested blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic. According to Liese (2023), labor, including both hired and owner's time, consumed 47.5% of trip revenue and fuel and supplies consumed 23.9%, leaving a trip net revenue margin of 28.6%, on average, from 2014 through 2018. Based on the relatively high average percentage of trip-level level revenue that is composed of blueline tilefish landings from 2020 through 2024 (19.8%), it is assumed that blueline tilefish are a targeted catch for the hook and line sector. Therefore, in assessing the economic effects of the actions contained in this amendment, it is assumed that when landings and revenue are subject to change, there is an expectation of a meaningful change in fishing behavior, effort, or trip-level operating costs.

Table 2.3.1.1.1. Number of vessels, number of trips, and landings (lbs gw) by year from 2020 through 2024 for South Atlantic blueline tilefish.

Year	# of vessels that caught blueline tilefish (> 0 lbs gw)	# of trips that caught blueline tilefish	Blueline tilefish landings (lbs gw)	Other species' landings jointly caught w/ blueline tilefish (lbs gw)	# of South Atlantic trips that only caught other species	Other species' landings on South Atlantic trips w/o blueline tilefish (lbs gw)	All species landings on Gulf trips (lbs gw)
2020	161	905	109,939	446,363	4,248	2,552,340	213,496
2021	137	847	115,894	355,380	3,549	2,016,019	115,716
2022	122	794	94,543	440,989	3,064	1,989,042	106,457
2023	123	651	88,334	267,136	3,301	1,774,708	70,306
2024	122	694	91,467	289,839	2,823	1,639,580	29,473
Average	133	778	100,035	359,941	3,397	1,994,338	107,090

Source: SEFSC-SSRG Socioeconomic Panel (August 2025 version).
Note: South Atlantic trips refer to trips taken in Council jurisdictional waters and Gulf trips refer to trips taken in Gulf Fishery Management Council jurisdictional waters.

Table 2.3.1.1.2. Number of vessels and ex-vessel revenue by year (2024 dollars) from 2020 through 2024 for South Atlantic blueline tilefish.

Year	# of vessels that caught blueline tilefish (> 0 lbs gw)	Dockside revenue from blueline tilefish	Dockside revenue from 'other species' jointly caught w/ blueline tilefish	Dockside revenue from 'other species' caught on South Atlantic trips w/o blueline tilefish	Dockside revenue from 'all species' caught on Gulf trips	Total dockside revenue	Average total dockside revenue per vessel
2020	161	$438,608	$2,081,162	$9,819,907	$753,524	$13,236,580	$82,215
2021	137	$473,912	$1,655,201	$7,611,379	$406,798	$10,203,562	$74,479
2022	122	$392,782	$2,239,546	$8,113,018	$400,430	$11,170,900	$91,565
2023	123	$376,661	$1,278,534	$6,905,811	$247,938	$8,815,099	$71,667
2024	122	$419,855	$1,510,052	$6,690,645	$133,665	$8,754,217	$71,756
Average	133	$420,364	$1,752,899	$7,828,152	$388,471	$10,436,072	$78,467

Source: SEFSC-SSRG Socioeconomic Panel (August 2025 version).

Imports

Imports of foreign seafood products compete within the domestic seafood market, and in the U.S., imports dominate many segments of that market. Imports also tend to be price setters (products that are able to set prices in a market, due to the influence of having a majority of market share). Seafood imports can have downstream effects on the local fish market. At the harvest level, imports can affect ex-vessel prices fishermen receive for landings. As substitutes to domestic production, imports tend to cushion the adverse economic effects on consumers resulting from a reduction in domestic landings. The following describes the imports[11] of fish products that directly compete with the domestic harvest of blueline tilefish, including snappers and groupers. Import data for blueline tilefish, in particular, are not available.

Groupers

Imports of fresh and frozen grouper products, which also directly compete with domestic harvest of snapper and grouper species, including blueline tilefish, are described in this section. As shown in Table 2.3.1.1.4, imports of fresh grouper products peaked in 2023. Total value of fresh grouper imports has been increasing in recent years and averaged $63 million annually. The average price per pound (lb) product weight (pw) for fresh grouper products was $5.33 from 2020-2024, and these products primarily originated from Mexico, Brazil, and Panama in 2024.

Table 2.3.1.1.4. Annual pounds and value of fresh grouper imports, 2020-2024.

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Pounds of fresh Grouper imports (product weight, million pounds)	10.4	12.2	11.7	12.6	12.0
Value of fresh Grouper imports (millions $, 2024$)	$46.4	$65.4	$66.9	$68.2	$68.4
Average price per lb (2024$)	$4.46	$5.36	$5.72	$5.41	$5.70

Source: NOAA Foreign Trade Query Tool accessed 10/21/25.

As shown in Table A-3.3.1.5, imports of frozen grouper products exhibited a low in 2020 at 0.8 million lbs pw and peaked at 2.2 million lbs pw in 2021. Total value of imports from frozen grouper decreased from 2019 to 2020 but increased to $5.8 million in 2021. The average price per lb pw for frozen grouper products was $2.30 from 2020-2024. Imports of frozen grouper products primarily originated in India, Taiwan, and Mexico in 2024.

Table 2.3.1.1.5. Annual pounds and value of frozen grouper imports, 2020-2024.

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Pounds of frozen Grouper imports (product weight, million pounds)	0.8	2.2	1.3	1.2	1.1
Value of frozen Grouper imports (millions $, 2024$)	$1.7	$5.8	$2.9	$2.7	$2.5
Average price per lb (2024$)	$2.13	$2.64	$2.23	$2.25	$2.24

Source: NOAA Foreign Trade Query Tool accessed 10/21/25.

[11] NOAA Fisheries Service purchases fisheries trade data from the Foreign Trade Division of the U.S. Census Bureau. Data are available for download at https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/national/sustainable-fisheries/foreign-fishery-trade-data

Snappers

Imports of fresh and frozen snapper products, which directly compete with domestic harvest of snapper species are described in this section. As shown in Table A-3.1.1.6, imports of fresh snapper products were 32.4 million lb pw in 2020. They peaked at 36.0 million lb pw in 2021. Total value of snapper imports increased to a five-year high of $169 million in 2021 (2024$). The average price per pound for fresh snapper products was $4.48 from 2020-2024 and prices varied over this period. Imports of fresh snapper products primarily originated in Mexico, Nicaragua, or Panama in 2024.

Table 2.3.1.1.6. Annual pounds and value of fresh snapper imports, 2020-2024.

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Pounds of fresh Snapper imports (product weight, million pounds)	32.4	36	32.2	32.1	30.5
Value of fresh Snapper imports (millions $, 2024$)	$129.4	$169.0	$150.9	$142.6	$139.5
Average price per lb (2024$)	$3.99	$4.69	$4.69	$4.44	$4.58

Source: NOAA Foreign Trade Query Tool accessed 10/21/25.

As shown in Table 2.3.1.1.7, total value of imports of frozen snapper increased from $55.2 million (2024$) in 2020 to a five-year high of $75.7 million in 2021 (2024$). The average price per pound for frozen snapper products was $3.86. Frozen snapper product imports primarily originated in Brazil, Indonesia, or Suriname in 2024.

Table 2.3.1.1.7 Annual pounds and value of frozen snapper imports, 2020-2024.

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Pounds of frozen Snapper imports (product weight, million pounds)	15.9	18.2	16.9	11.7	14.8
Value of frozen Snapper imports (millions $, 2024$)	$55.2	$75.7	$70.8	$42.5	$57.2
Average price per lb (2024$)	$3.47	$4.16	$4.19	$3.63	$3.86

Source: NOAA Foreign Trade Query Tool accessed 10/21/25.

Business Activity

The commercial harvest and subsequent sales and consumption of fish generate business activity as fishermen expend funds to harvest the fish and consumers spend money on goods and services, such as seafood purchased at a local fish market and served during restaurant visits. These expenditures spur additional business activity in the region(s) where the harvest and purchases are made, such as jobs in local fish markets, grocers, restaurants, and fishing supply establishments. In the absence of the availability of a given species for purchase, consumers would spend their money on substitute goods, such as other finfish or seafood products, and services, such as visits to different food service establishments. As a result, the analysis presented below represents a distributional analysis only; that is, it only shows how economic effects may be distributed through regional markets and should not be interpreted to represent the impacts if these species are not available for harvest or purchase.

In addition to these types of impacts, economic impact models can be used to determine the sources of the impacts. Each impact can be broken down into direct, indirect, and induced

economic impacts. "Direct" economic impacts are the results of the money initially spent in the study area (e.g., country, region, state, or community) by the fishery or industry being studied. This includes money spent to pay for labor, supplies, raw materials, and operating expenses. The direct economic impacts from the initial spending create additional activity in the local economy, i.e., "indirect" economic impacts. Indirect economic impacts are the results of business-to-business transactions indirectly caused by the direct impacts. For example, businesses initially benefiting from the direct impacts will subsequently increase spending at other local businesses. The indirect economic impact is a measure of this increase in business-to-business activity, excluding the initial round of spending which is included in the estimate of direct impacts. "Induced" economic impacts are the results of increased personal income caused by the direct and indirect economic impacts. For example, businesses experiencing increased revenue from the direct and indirect impacts will subsequently increase spending on labor by hiring more employees, increasing work hours, raising salaries/wage rates, etc. In turn, households will increase spending at local businesses. The induced impact is a measure of this increase in household-to-business activity.

Estimates of the U.S. average annual business activity associated with the commercial harvest of blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic were derived using the model developed for and applied in NMFS (2024) and are provided in Table 2.3.1.1.8.[12] This business activity is characterized as jobs (full- and part-time), output impacts (gross business sales), income impacts (wages, salaries, and self- employed income), and value-added impacts, which represent the contribution made to the U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP). These impacts should not be added together because this would result in double counting. These results are based on average relationships developed through the analysis of many fishing operations that harvest many different species. Separate models to address individual species are not available. For example, the results provided here apply to a general "reef fish" category, rather than just blueline tilefish, and a harvester job is "generated" for approximately every $41,670 (2024 dollars) in ex-vessel revenue. These results contrast with the number of harvesters (vessels) with recorded landings of blueline tilefish presented in Table 2.3.1.1.1.

Between 2020 and 2024, landings of South Atlantic blueline tilefish resulted in approximately $420,364 (2024 dollars) in gross revenue on average. In turn, this revenue generated employment, income, value-added, and output impacts of 45 jobs, $1 million, $1.5 million, and $4.2 million per year, respectively, on average (Table 2.3.1.1.8).

[12] A detailed description of the input/output model is provided in (NMFS 2011).

Table 2.3.1.1.8. Average annual business activity (2020 through 2024) associated with the commercial harvest of blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic.

Harvesters	Direct	Indirect	Induced	Total
Employment impacts	8	1	2	11
Income impacts	$227	$42	$102	$371
Total value-added impacts	$242	$152	$174	$568
Output Impacts	$420	$342	$338	$1,101
Primary dealers/processors	**Direct**	**Indirect**	**Induced**	**Total**
Employment impacts	2	1	1	3
Income impacts	$74	$68	$65	$207
Total value-added impacts	$79	$87	$122	$288
Output impacts	$238	$180	$238	$655
Secondary wholesalers/distributors	**Direct**	**Indirect**	**Induced**	**Total**
Employment impacts	1	0	1	2
Income impacts	$44	$13	$46	$104
Total value-added impacts	$47	$22	$79	$148
Output impacts	$118	$43	$154	$315
Grocers	**Direct**	**Indirect**	**Induced**	**Total**
Employment impacts	3	0	1	4
Income impacts	$91	$30	$46	$166
Total value-added impacts	$97	$49	$77	$222
Output impacts	$155	$79	$151	$385
Restaurants	**Direct**	**Indirect**	**Induced**	**Total**
Employment impacts	20	1	3	25
Income impacts	$364	$110	$209	$683
Total value-added impacts	$388	$197	$351	$937
Output impacts	$710	$309	$693	$1,712
Harvesters and seafood industry	**Direct**	**Indirect**	**Induced**	**Total**
Employment impacts	34	4	8	45
Income impacts	$800	$264	$467	$1,531
Total value-added impacts	$853	$507	$804	$2,163
Output impacts	$1,642	$952	$1,575	$4,169

Note: All monetary estimates are in thousands of 2024 dollars.*
Source: Calculated by NMFS SERO using the model developed for and applied in NMFS (2024).
*Converted to 2024 dollars using the annual, not seasonally adjusted GDP implicit price deflator provided by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

2.3.1.2. Recreational Sector

The recreational sector is composed of the private and for-hire modes. The private mode includes anglers fishing from shore (all land-based structures) and private/rental boats. The for-hire mode is composed of charter vessels and headboats. Charter vessels generally carry fewer passengers and charge a fee on an entire vessel basis, whereas headboats carry more passengers and payment is per person. The type of service, from a vessel- or passenger-size perspective, affects the flexibility to search different fishing locations during the course of a trip and target different species because larger concentrations of fish are required to satisfy larger groups of anglers.

Permits

For anglers to fish for or possess snapper grouper species in or from the South Atlantic EEZ on for-hire vessels, those vessels are required to have an open access South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Charter/Headboat permit (snapper grouper for-hire permit). In 2024, there were 2,106 valid for-hire snapper grouper permits. This sector operates as an open access fishery and not all permitted vessels are necessarily active in the fishery, as evidenced in Souza and Liese (2019). Some vessel owners may have obtained open access permits as insurance for uncertainties in the fisheries in which they currently operate.

Although the for-hire permit application collects information on the primary method of operation, the permit itself does not identify the permitted vessel as either a headboat or a charter vessel and vessels may operate in both capacities. However, only federally permitted headboats are required to submit harvest and effort information to the NMFS Southeast Region Headboat Survey (SRHS).[13] Participation in the SRHS is based on determination by the SEFSC that the vessel primarily operates as a headboat. During 2024, 63 South Atlantic headboats were registered in the SRHS (R. Cheshire, NMFS SEFSC, pers. comm. 2025). The majority of these headboats were located in Florida/Georgia (36), followed by South Carolina (20) and North Carolina (7). As a result, of the 2,106 vessels with snapper grouper for-hire permits, up to 63 may primarily operate as headboats.[14]

There are no specific permitting requirements for recreational anglers to harvest snapper grouper species. Instead, anglers are required to possess either a state recreational fishing permit that authorizes saltwater fishing in general or be registered in the federal National Saltwater Angler Registry system, subject to appropriate exemptions. As a result, it is not possible to identify with available data how many individual anglers would be expected to be affected by this proposed amendment.

Angler Effort

Recreational effort derived from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP) database can be characterized in terms of the number of trips as follows:

- Target effort - The number of individual angler trips, regardless of duration, where the intercepted angler indicated that the species or a species in the species group was targeted as either the first or the second primary target for the trip. The species did not have to be caught.
- Catch effort - The number of individual angler trips, regardless of duration and target intent, where the individual species or a species in the species group was caught. The fish did not have to be kept.

[13] All federal charter/headboat permit holders, including charter vessel owners or operators, are required to comply with the Southeast For-Hire Integrated Electronic Reporting (SEFHIER) program. Under this program, all such permit holders must submit logbooks weekly, by 11:59 pm, local time, the Tuesday following a reporting week (Monday-Sunday). Those vessels selected to report to the SRHS (i.e., federally permitted headboats) will continue to submit their reports under the SEFHIER requirements directly to the SRHS program. For more information, see: https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/southeast/recreational-fishing-data/southeast-hire-integrated-electronic-reporting-program/.

[14] This estimate is based on the SEFSC criteria; however, there may be additional vessels not included in the SRHS that also identify as headboats.

- Total recreational trips - The total estimated number of recreational trips in the South Atlantic, regardless of target intent or catch success.

Estimates of blueline tilefish target and catch effort are provided in Table 2.3.3.2.1 and Table 2.3.3.2.2, respectively. The overall number of target and catch trips fluctuated during 2020 through 2024, with a peak in 2020. Target and catch trips were only recorded off North Carolina and Florida. The private/rental mode was the dominant mode of fishing for blueline tilefish target and catch trips (Table 2.3.3.2.1 and Table 2.3.3.2.2). There were no recorded shore mode trips for blueline tilefish.

Table 2.3.3.2.1. South Atlantic blueline tilefish recreational target trips, by mode and state, 2020-2024.

	FL	NC	Total
Charter Mode			
2020	1,472	13,874	15,346
2021	2,101	7,062	9,164
2022	2,159	1,031	3,190
2023	1,247	15,059	16,306
2024	1,799	992	2,791
Average	1,756	7,604	9,359
Private/Rental Mode			
2020	12,301	16,864	29,165
2021	2,307	6,753	9,060
2022	3,623	0	3,623
2023	20,297	2,718	23,015
2024	5,513	5,340	10,853
Average	8,808	6,335	15,143
All Modes			
2020	13,773	30,738	44,511
2021	4,408	13,816	18,224
2022	5,782	1,031	6,813
2023	21,544	17,777	39,321
2024	7,312	6,332	13,644
Average	10,564	13,939	24,503

	FL	NC	Total
Charter Mode			
2020	0	5,574	5,574
2021	0	929	929
2022	0	614	614
2023	0	0	0
2024	0	0	0
Average		1,423	1,423
Private/Rental Mode			
2020	0	15,866	15,866

2021	953	0	953
2022	934	0	934
2023	8,501	0	8,501
2024	156	0	156
Average	2,109	3,173	5,282
All Modes			
2020	0	21,440	21,440
2021	953	929	1,882
2022	934	614	1,548
2023	8,501	0	8,501
2024	156	0	156
Average	2,109	4,597	6,705

Source: MRIP database, NMFS (October 2025)
Note: Headboat data are unavailable.

Table 2.3.3.2.2. South Atlantic blueline tilefish recreational catch trips, by mode and state, 2020-2024.

	FL	NC	Total
Charter Mode			
2020	1,472	13,874	15,346
2021	2,101	7,062	9,164
2022	2,159	1,031	3,190
2023	1,247	15,059	16,306
2024	1,799	992	2,791
Average	1,756	7,604	9,359
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2020	12,301	16,864	29,165
2021	2,307	6,753	9,060
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2024	5,513	5,340	10,853
Average	8,808	6,335	15,143
All Modes			
2020	13,773	30,738	44,511
2021	4,408	13,816	18,224
2022	5,782	1,031	6,813
2023	21,544	17,777	39,321
2024	7,312	6,332	13,644
Average	10,564	13,939	24,503

Source: MRIP database, NMFS (October 2025)
Note: Headboat data are unavailable.

Target trips were greatest during MRIP wave 4 (July-Aug) (Figure 2.3.3.2.1). Catch trips were also highest in wave 4 but also were often recorded in wave 3 (May-June) (Figure 2.3.3.2.2).

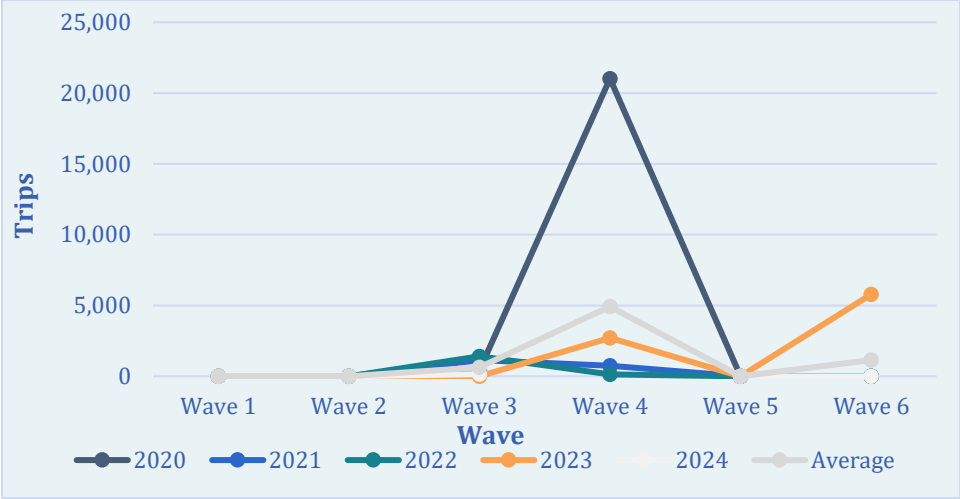

Figure 2.3.3.2.1. South Atlantic blueline tilefish recreational target trips, by MRIP wave.
Source: MRIP database, NMFS (October 2025).

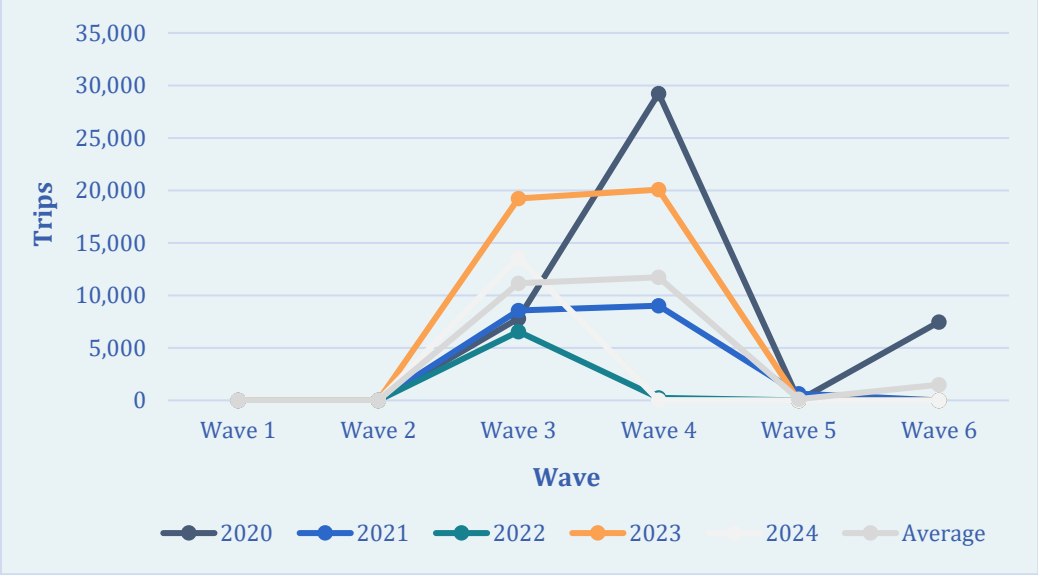

Figure 2.3.3.2.2. South Atlantic blueline tilefish recreational catch trips, by MRIP wave.
Source: MRIP database, NMFS (October 2025).

Similar analysis of recreational angler trips is not possible for the headboat mode because headboat data are not collected at the angler level. Estimates of effort by the headboat mode are provided in terms of angler days, or the total number of standardized full-day angler trips.[15] From 2020 through 2024, headboat effort in the South Atlantic, in terms of angler days, fluctuated with a five-year low in 2020 (Table 2.3.3.2.3). Headboat effort was the highest, on average, during the summer months of June through August (Figure 2.3.3.2.3).

[15] Headboat trip categories include half-, three-quarter-, full-, and 2-day trips. A full-day trip equals one angler day, a half-day trip equals .5 angler days, etc. Angler days are not standardized to an hourly measure of effort and actual trip durations may vary within each category.

Table 2.3.3.2.3. South Atlantic headboat angler days and percent distribution by state (2020 through 2024).

	Angler Days			Percent Distribution		
Year	FL/GA*	NC	SC	FL/GA	NC	SC
2020	84,005	14,154	34,080	64%	11%	26%
2021	120,367	19,719	47,908	64%	10%	25%
2022	104,989	16,140	38,748	66%	10%	24%
2023	105,673	16,115	35,814	67%	10%	23%
2024	109,336	12,654	32,529	71%	8%	21%
Average	104,874	15,756	37,816	66%	10%	24%

*East Florida and Georgia are combined for confidentiality purposes.
Source: NMFS SRHS (2023).

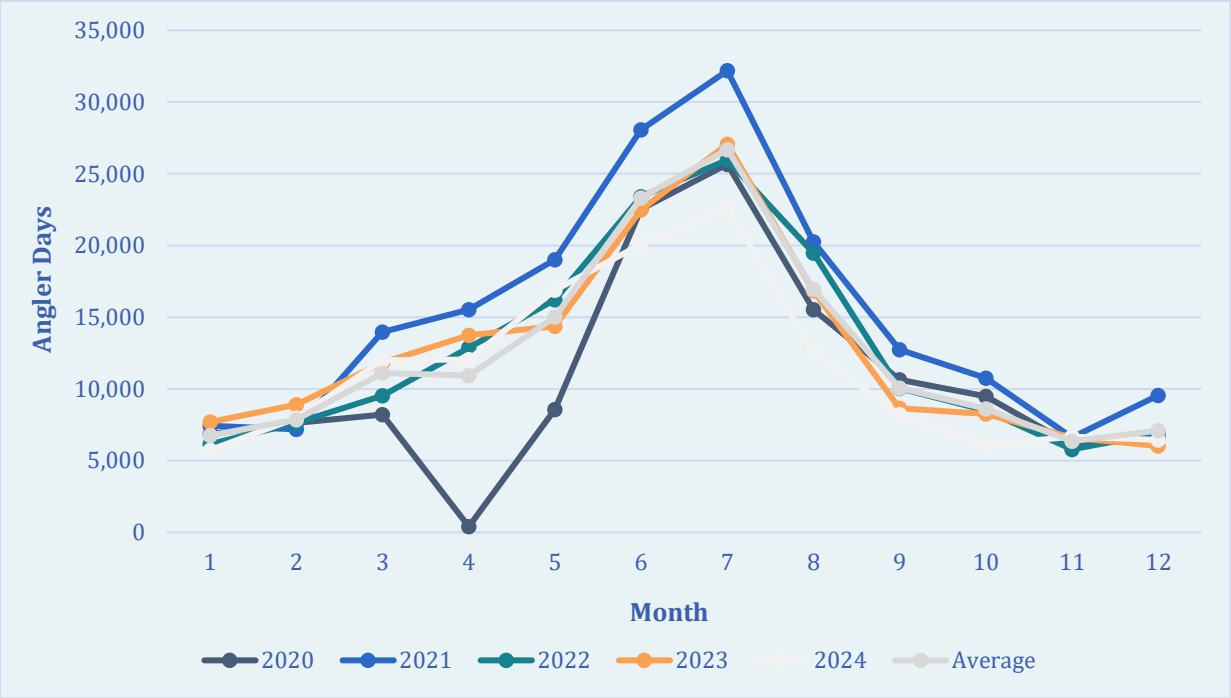

Figure 2.3.3.2.2. South Atlantic headboat angler days by month and year (2020-2024).
Source: NMFS SRHS (2024).

Economic Value

Participation, effort, and harvest are indicators of the value of saltwater recreational fishing. However, a more specific indicator of value is consumer surplus (CS), which is the difference between the maximum amount an angler would be willing to pay for a fish and the amount they actually do pay.[16] CS represents a savings of one's income that can be spent later on other goods and services, leading to an overall increase in utility or satisfaction for the angler and a benefit to the economy. All else equal, the amount anglers are willing to pay and the costs of fishing can vary depending on expected catch rates, harvest rates, and existing regulations. The economic value of changes in expected catch rates, harvest rates, or existing regulations can be measured by any associated changes in CS. However, because recreationally-caught fish are non-market

[16] Holding income and the prices of other goods constant.

goods and there are no transaction data available, CS cannot be measured directly. Instead, using survey elicitation methods and stated or revealed preference models, it is possible to estimate willingness to pay (WTP) values[17] that are a close approximation to the individual CS an angler would derive from an additional fish that is caught and kept. Direct estimates of the WTP for blueline tilefish are not currently available; however, Carter and Liese (2012) estimated a mean WTP value for catching and keeping a second grouper on an angler trip at approximately $131 (2024 dollars).

The foregoing estimates of economic value should not be confused with economic impacts associated with recreational fishing expenditures. Although expenditures for a specific good or service may represent a proxy or lower bound of value (a person would not logically pay more for something than it was worth to them), they do not represent the net value (benefits minus cost), nor the change in value associated with a change in the fishing experience.

Estimates of average annual gross revenue for South Atlantic charter vessels and headboats in 2009 are provided in Holland et al. (2012). In 2024 dollars, the average annual gross revenue for a South Atlantic headboat was approximately $265,000, while the average annual gross revenue for a South Atlantic charter vessel was approximately $150,000. However, a more recent estimate of average annual gross revenue for South Atlantic headboats is available from D. Carter (NMFS, pers. comm., 2018). D. Carter (NMFS, pers. comm., 2018) recently estimated that average annual gross revenue for South Atlantic headboats was approximately $364,373 (2024 dollars) in 2017. This estimate is likely the best current estimate of annual gross revenue for South Atlantic headboats, as it is based on a relatively large sample and is more recent. The difference in the Holland et al. (2012) and D. Carter (NMFS, pers. comm., 2018) estimates for headboats suggests that the estimate for charter vessels based on Holland et al. (2012) is likely an underestimate of current average annual revenue for charter vessels in the South Atlantic. Estimates of annual PS and economic profit for South Atlantic charter vessels and headboats are not available.

With regard to for-hire trips, economic value can be measured by PS per angler trip, which represents the amount of money that a vessel owner earns in excess of the cost of providing the trip. Estimates of revenue, costs, and trip net revenue for trips taken by charter vessels and headboats in 2017 are available from Souza and Liese (2019). They also provide estimates of trip net cash flow per angler trip, which are an approximation of PS per angler trip. According to Table 2.3.3.2.4, after accounting for transactions fees, supply costs, and labor costs, net revenue per trip was 40% of revenue for South Atlantic charter vessels and 54% of revenue for Southeast headboats or $665 and $2,179 (2024 dollars), respectively. Given the average number of anglers per trip for each fleet, PS per angler trip is estimated to be $141 for South Atlantic charter vessels and $77 for Southeast headboats (Table 2.3.3.2.4).

[17] These are measures of compensating surplus, or the amount of money that an angler would be willing to pay in order to harvest the additional fish, while maintaining the same level of utility.

Table 2.3.3.2.4. Trip-level economics for offshore trips by South Atlantic charter vessels and Southeast headboats in 2017 (2024 dollars).

	South Atlantic Charter Vessels	Southeast Headboats*
Revenue	100%	100%
Transaction fees (% of revenue)	3%	6%
Supply costs (% of revenue)	29%	19%
Labor costs (% of revenue)	28%	22%
Net revenue per trip including labor costs (% of revenue)	40%	54%
Net revenue per trip	$665	$2,179
Average # of anglers per trip	4.7	28.2
Trip net cash flow per angler trip	$141	$77

Source: Souza and Liese (2019).

*Because the sample size for headboats in Souza and Liese (2019) is small (n=30), they do not break headboats out by sub-region.

Business Activity

The desire for recreational fishing generates economic activity as consumers spend their income on various goods and services needed for recreational fishing. This income spurs economic activity in the region where recreational fishing occurs. It should be clearly noted that, in the absence of the opportunity to fish, the income would presumably be spent on other goods and services and these expenditures would similarly generate economic activity in the region where the expenditure occurs. As such, the analysis below represents a distributional analysis only. Estimates of the business activity (economic impacts) associated with recreational angling for South Atlantic blueline tilefish were calculated using average trip-level impact coefficients derived from the 2022 Fisheries Economics of the U.S. report (NMFS 2024) and underlying data provided by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Office of Science and Technology. Economic impact estimates in 2022 dollars were adjusted to 2024 dollars using the annual, not seasonally adjusted GDP implicit price deflator provided by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Business activity (economic impacts) for the recreational sector is characterized in the form of value-added impacts (contribution to the GDP in a state or region), output impacts (gross business sales), income impacts (wages, salaries, and self-employed income), and jobs (full- and part-time). Estimates of the average annual economic impacts (2020-2024) resulting from South Atlantic recreational blueline tilefish target trips are provided in Table 2.3.3.2.5. These estimates only apply at the state-level, as opposed to the regional (or national) level, and may underestimate the actual amount of total business activity, because state-level impact multipliers do not account for interstate and interregional trading. It is important to note that these economic impacts estimates are based on trip expenditures only and do not account for durable expenditures. Durable expenditures cannot be reasonably apportioned to individual species or species groups. As such, the estimates provided in Tables 2.3.3.2.5 may be considered a lower bound on the economic activity associated with those trips that targeted blueline tilefish.

Estimates of the business activity associated with headboat effort are not available. Headboat vessels are not covered in MRIP, so, in addition to the absence of estimates of target effort, estimation of the appropriate business activity coefficients for headboat effort has not been conducted.

Table 2.3.3.2.5. Estimated economic impacts from South Atlantic blueline tilefish recreational target trips by state, using state-level multipliers (2024 dollars).

	NC	FL
Charter Mode		
Target Trips	1,423	0
Value Added Impacts	$573	$0
Sales Impacts	$934	$0
Income Impacts	$407	$0
Employment (Jobs)	10	0
Private/Rental Mode		
Target Trips	3,173	2,109
Value Added Impacts	$82	$54
Sales Impacts	$142	$90
Income Impacts	$46	$25
Employment (Jobs)	1	1
All Modes		
Target Trips	4,596	2,109
Value Added Impacts	$655	$54
Sales Impacts	$1,076	$90
Income Impacts	$453	$25
Employment (Jobs)	11	1

Source: Effort data from MRIP; economic impact results calculated by NMFS SERO using NMFS (2024) and underlying data provided by the NOAA Office of Science and Technology.

2.4. Effects of Management Measures

Action. Revise the annual catch limit for blueline tilefish

The following discussion describes the expected economic effects of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) **Preferred Action** relative to the **Status Quo (No Action)**.

In general, total annual catch limits (ACLs) that allow for more fish to be landed can result in increased positive economic effects if harvest increases without notable long-term effects on the health of a stock. The ACL does not directly impact the fishery for a species unless harvest changes, fishing behavior changes, or the ACL is exceeded, thereby potentially triggering AMs such as harvest closures or other restrictive measures. As such, ACLs that are set above the observed landings in the fishery for a species and do not change harvest or fishing behavior may not have realized economic effects each year. Nevertheless, ACLs set above observed harvest levels do create a gap between the ACL and typical landings that may be utilized in years of exceptional abundance or accessibility to a species, thus providing the opportunity for increased

landings and a reduced likelihood of triggering restrictive AMs. As such, there are potential economic benefits from ACLs that allow for such a gap. The opposite is true for ACLs that constrain harvest or fishing effort within a fishery or reduce the previously described gap between average landings and the ACL.

The **Status Quo (No Action)** is not a viable alternative. Although not viable since it does not implement BSIA, **Status Quo (No Action)** would be expected to constrain harvest. The ACL is set equal to the acceptable biological catch (ABC) under **Status Quo (No Action)** and **Council's Preferred Action**, with the differences between the two in part occurring due to the current versus updated ABC and how the non-headboat recreational component of the total ACL would be accounted for moving forward. Specifically, the current ABC is inclusive of MRIP Coastal Household Telephone Survey (CHTS) measurements to account for private recreational and charter landings while the updated ABC would be inclusive of MRIP-FES measurements for these landings. Projections that allow for conversion between both measurements for the recreational sector are not available, as there is no forward-looking conversion between the two. As such, a direct comparison of **Status Quo (No Action)** to the **Council's Preferred Action** is not possible. Additionally, recent regulatory changes implemented through Snapper Grouper Amendment 52 reduced the recreational bag limit and changed the recreational accountability measures starting in 2024. As such, landings from years prior to 2024 in FES terms do not provide an adequate baseline to project the economic effects of this action on future fishing years. Thus, 2024 and 2025 recreational landings are used as a baseline to estimate the economic effects for the recreational sector of this action as these are the only full year of recreational landings under the current regulatory environment that are available.

Under **Status Quo (No Action)** the blueline tilefish fishery would continue to be managed under the existing total and sector annual catch limits (ACLs), which have been thoroughly harvested in many years and presumably would continue to be fully or almost fully utilized. There would be no change in short-term economic benefits under this alternative. **Status Quo (No Action)** would allow for comparatively lower short-term catch levels and lower associated short-term economic benefits than the **Council's Preferred Action** due to comparatively lower allowable commercial landings. **Status Quo (No Action)** would also not implement BSIA, since the non-headboat portion of the recreational sector would continue to be monitored in CHTS instead of FES terms.

The **Council's Preferred Action** would establish a revised total ACL and sector ACLs for the commercial and recreational sectors. In doing so, short-term economic benefits would increase due to an increase in harvest that would be likely realized by the commercial sector. The estimated change in potential landings and associated economic benefits under the **Council's Preferred Action** in comparison to **Status Quo (No Action)** is provided in Table A-4.1. The **Council's Preferred Action** is estimated to result in an annual increase in net economic benefits of $65,187 for the commercial sector (as measured in producer surplus or PS) which also represents the change in net economic benefits for the action as a whole (2024 dollars). There are no estimated changes in economic benefits to the recreational sector as a result of this action. While the recreational ACL would increase from 116,820 lbs ww (inclusive of CHTS terms) to 156,809 lbs ww (inclusive of FES terms), the change in how the ACL is being accounted for due to the switch from CHTS to FES terms is considered to be roughly equivalent. Additionally,

given the aforementioned recent change in recreational regulations, previous years of landings before the 2024 fishing year are not representative of the future regulatory environment for the recreational sector. Average recreational landings from 2024-2025 were 152,757 lbs ww in FES terms and 33,929 lbs ww in CHTS terms, both of which are below the current and potential future sector ACL. Thus, there is no estimated change in landings or economic benefits for the sector. This assumption includes no notable direct change to for-hire fishing activity and thus no change in direct economic effects for the for-hire component of the recreational sector. As such, there are no estimated changes in PS or consumer surplus (CS) provided for the recreational sector.

Table 2.4.1. Estimated annual change in landings, gross revenue, and associated net economic benefits (PS) to the commercial sector from a comparison of Status Quo (No Action) to the Council's Preferred Action.

Change in commercial landings (lbs gw)	Change in gross revenue (2024 dollars)	Change in PS (2024 dollars)
47,319	$198,741	$65,187

To estimate the change in net economic benefits for the commercial sector, the difference between the existing sector ACL (117,148 lbs ww) and new sector ACL (157,249 lbs ww) is applied to a whole weight (ww) to gutted weight (gw) conversion factor of 1.18, the appropriate price ($4.20/lbs gw; Tables 2.3.3.1.1. and 2.3.3.1.2.), and a scaling factor of 32.8% of gross revenue (Section A-3) to estimate PS for the commercial sector. It is assumed that the ex-vessel price would not change due to the change in commercial landings. Although there are no currently available estimates of the demand elasticity for blueline tilefish, it is assumed that there would be no expected change to CS from the commercial perspective since there is likely a high degree of substitutability of blueline tilefish for other species among seafood consumers and blueline tilefish are available from other regions such as the Mid-Atlantic and Gulf regions. Estimates of net and gross revenues or economic profit are not available for snapper grouper dealers, therefore, it is not possible to quantitatively estimate the effect of changes in purchases on their profits. However, in general, dealers are indirectly affected whenever gross revenues to commercial fishing vessels are expected to change (e.g., increases in gross revenues are expected to indirectly benefit dealers and vice versa). Thus, economic benefits to dealers would be directionally the same as stated above for commercial vessels.

2.5. Net Benefits of Regulatory Action

It is important to specify the time period being considered when evaluating benefits and costs. According to the Office of Management and Budget's Circular A-4,[18] "The stream of annualized estimates should begin in the year in which the final rule will begin to have effects, even if the rule does not take effect immediately…The time frame for your analysis should cover a period long enough to encompass all the important benefits and costs likely to result from the rule."

For current purposes, the reasonably "foreseeable future" is considered to be the next 5 years. There are two primary reasons for considering the next 5 years the appropriate time period for evaluating the benefits and costs of this regulatory action rather than a longer (or shorter) time

[18] See https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/CircularA-4.pdf

period. First, this regulatory action does not include a predetermined sunset provision. Second, based on the history of management in the snapper grouper fishery in the South Atlantic, regulations such as those considered in this amendment are often revisited within approximately 5 years.

The analyses of the estimated changes in economic benefits indicates no change in net economic benefits to the recreational sector, an increase of $65,187 in annual net economic benefits to the commercial sector, and an increase in annual total net economic benefits of $65,187. These effects would be recurring annually. In discounted terms and over a 5-year time period using the analyses provided in this amendment, the total net present value of the change in net economic benefits is $267,279 (2024 dollars) using a 7% discount rate and $298,537 using a 3% discount rate.

2.6. Determination of Significant Regulatory Action

Pursuant to E.O. 12866, a regulation is considered a "significant regulatory action" if it is likely to result in: 1) an annual effect of $100 million or more or adversely affect in a material way the economy, a sector of the economy, productivity, competition, jobs, the environment, public health or safety, or State, local, or tribal governments or communities; 2) create a serious inconsistency or otherwise interfere with an action taken or planned by another agency; 3) materially alter the budgetary impact of entitlements, grants, user fees, or loan programs or the rights or obligations of recipients thereof; or 4) raise novel legal or policy issues arising out of legal mandates, the President's priorities, or the principles set forth in this executive order. Based on the information provided above, these actions have been determined to not be economically significant for the purposes of E.O. 12866. In absolute terms, the expected recurring total costs and annual benefits of this amendment are $65,187 in the first year of implementation (2024 dollars) and there are no anticipated costs or transfers. This is also the year of maximum cost and benefits in absolute terms.

Thus, this action has been determined to not be economically significant for the purposes of E.O. 12866.

Chapter 3. Regulatory Flexibility Act Analysis

To Be Completed

Chapter 4. References

Buck, K. M. 2018. Socio-economic profile of the snapper grouper commercial fishery in the South Atlantic region. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

Liese, C. 2023. Economics of the U.S. South Atlantic Snapper-Grouper Fishery - 2018. NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFS-SEFSC-774. 118 p. https://doi.org/10.25923/b4k8-1890.

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SAFMC 2014a. Amendment 32 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review, and Social Impact Assessment/Fishery Impact Statement. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

SAFMC 2014b. Modifications to Federally Permitted Seafood Dealer Reporting Requirements with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review, and Social Impact Assessment/Fishery Impact Statement. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

SAFMC 2016. Regulatory Amendment 25 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

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SAFMC 2023b. Amendment 52 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

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SEDAR 50. 2017 – Stock Assessment Report: South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 542 pp. available online at: https://sedarweb.org/assessments/sedar-50/.

SEDAR 92. 2025 – Stock Assessment Report: South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 542 pp. available online at: https://sedarweb.org/assessments/sedar-92-atlantic-tilefish/.

Appendix A: History of Recent Management of Blueline Tilefish

Snapper grouper regulations in the South Atlantic were first implemented in 1983. The reader is referred to the following link for the management history, summary of changes under each amendment, implementation dates, an up-to-date list of amendments under development and more, for all of the species in the Snapper Grouper FMP:
https://safmc.net/fisherymanagementplans/snapper-grouper/

Below are amendments to the Snapper Grouper FMP addressing blueline tilefish within the EEZ off the South Atlantic.

Emergency Action, Regulatory Amendment 21, and Amendment 32

In 2013, a Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR; SEDAR 32 (2013)) stock assessment was conducted that applied to the blueline tilefish stock along the entire U.S. east coast. SEDAR 32 (2013) used data through 2011 and found the stock of blueline tilefish in the Atlantic to be overfished and undergoing overfishing. The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (South Atlantic Council) Scientific and Statistical Committee's (SSC) recommended an acceptable biological catch (ABC) of 224,100 lbs whole weight (ww), referred to as the "stock" ABC. At their December 2013 meeting, the South Atlantic Council initiated development of Amendment 32 to the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region (Snapper Grouper FMP) (Amendment 32) and voted to request emergency action to reduce overfishing of blueline tilefish immediately while Amendment 32 was being developed.

- The **emergency rule** for the Snapper Grouper FMP, which was effective on April 17, 2014 (74 FR 21636), temporarily set the blueline tilefish annual catch limit (ACL) at the yield at 75 percent of the fishing mortality (F) that produces the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) ($75\%F_{MSY}$ = 224,100 pounds whole weight (lbs ww)).
- **Regulatory Amendment 21** to the Snapper Grouper FMP (SAFMC 2014a), effective on November 6, 2014, changed the definition of the minimum stock size threshold (MSST) for several snapper grouper species with low natural mortality, including blueline tilefish. Under the revised definition (MSST = 75% SSBMSY), the blueline tilefish stock was no longer considered overfished.
- **Amendment 32** to the Snapper Grouper FMP (SAFMC 2014b), effective on March 30, 2015, removed blueline tilefish from the Deepwater Complex, and established the ACL for blueline tilefish at 98% of the ABC. The South Atlantic Council specified a buffer of 2% to account for landings north of North Carolina based on average landings at the time. The ABC was based on projections at the recommended P* level according to the South Atlantic Council's ABC control rule. The commercial and recreational ACLs were specified based on existing sector allocations (50.07% commercial and 49.93% recreational).

However, although the blueline tilefish stock was assessed as one stock along the entire U.S. east coast, regulations resulting from the final rule for Amendment 32 only applied to vessels in the South Atlantic Council's area of jurisdiction. Both the South Atlantic Council and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Mid-Atlantic Council) were concerned about rapidly increasing commercial and headboat/charter landings of blueline tilefish north of the North Carolina/Virginia boundary, particularly in New Jersey. In response, both the South Atlantic and Mid-Atlantic Councils requested NMFS take emergency action north of the South Atlantic Region.

Emergency Action in the Mid-Atlantic

In February 2015, in response to reports from increased blueline tilefish landings north of North Carolina, the Mid-Atlantic Council requested that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) take emergency action to implement a commercial trip limit of 300 lbs ww and a recreational possession limit of seven fish per person within its jurisdiction. The Mid-Atlantic Council also initiated development of an amendment to their Golden Tilefish FMP to include blueline tilefish in the Fishery Management Unit (FMU) and implement permanent management measures before the emergency rule regulations expired.

At the March 2015 South Atlantic Council meeting, the South Atlantic Council voted to request NMFS take emergency action to apply the Amendment 32 measures north of the North Carolina/Virginia border. Representatives from the Mid-Atlantic Council attended this meeting. The South Atlantic Council's request was contingent on their SSC review of SEDAR 32's applicability to the area north of North Carolina; that SSC review was scheduled to occur at the SSC's April 2015 meeting. At their April 2015 meeting, the SSC (including members who are also on the Mid-Atlantic Council's SSC) determined that the SEDAR 32 assessment constituted the best scientific information available and should be applicable to the blueline tilefish stock throughout its range along the U.S. east coast. Therefore, on May 6, 2015, the South Atlantic Council Chair submitted an emergency rule request to NMFS that reflected the South Atlantic Council's motion passed at their March 2015 Council meeting.

On June 4, 2015, NMFS approved the Mid-Atlantic Council's request for emergency action to control harvest of blueline tilefish and reduce the risk of overfishing on this stock, and implemented a commercial trip limit of 300 lbs ww and a recreational possession limit of seven fish per person. On November 30, 2015, the emergency rule was extended through June 3, 2016, giving the Mid-Atlantic Council time to develop long-term management measures for blueline tilefish in Federal waters north of the Virginia and North Carolina border.

In September 2015, the South Atlantic Council's SSC raised concerns about the utility of projections from SEDAR 32 (2013) in specifying the ABC and concluded that the ABC projections did not represent the best scientific information available and were not adequate to support blueline tilefish fishing level recommendations for either current or future years. Based on that determination, the South Atlantic Council's SSC revised their blueline tilefish ABC recommendation to set the ABC at the equilibrium yield at 75%F_{MSY}, equal to 224,100 lbs ww for 2016 and 2017, for blueline tilefish along the entire U.S. east coast based on results of the SEDAR 32 (2013) stock assessment. The 224,100 lbs ww was also the ACL contained in the emergency rule issued in April 2014 while the South Atlantic Council developed Amendment 32

to implement fishing levels based on the SEDAR 32 (2013) projections. The South Atlantic Council accepted the SSC's recommendations and determined that this revised ABC, referred to as the "stock ABC," was sufficient to prevent overfishing of blueline tilefish. In a letter to the South Atlantic Council dated October 23, 2015, NMFS stated that it would not implement the South Atlantic Council's emergency rule request. NMFS's justification for not implementing the request, as stated in the letter, was based on the following: the South Atlantic Council's SSC had increased their recommendation for the blueline tilefish ABC; the South Atlantic Council was intending to move forward with a framework amendment (Regulatory Amendment 25 to the Snapper Grouper FMP) to implement less restrictive management measures and catch levels for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic; and temporary measures via an emergency rule were already in place to limit blueline tilefish harvest in the Mid-Atlantic.

Regulatory Amendment 25 to the Snapper Grouper FMP

Also in September 2015, the South Atlantic Council's Snapper Grouper Committee reviewed an Options Paper for Amendment 38 to the Snapper Grouper FMP, to extend the blueline tilefish fishery management FMU north of the North Carolina and Virginia border and adjust fishing levels to account for landings in the area north of the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction[19]. However, the South Atlantic Council opted to not move forward with development of Amendment 38 at the time pending the completion of studies on the stock structure of blueline tilefish and to allow time for the Mid-Atlantic Council to develop a management strategy for blueline tilefish in their jurisdiction. Instead, actions to adjust fishing levels for blueline tilefish (based on the SSC's recommendations) and revise management measures were moved to Regulatory Amendment 25. Alternatives in Regulatory Amendment 25 provided percentages to deduct from the recommended ABC to account for blueline tilefish landings in the area north of the South Atlantic Council's jurisdiction (north of the North Carolina/Virginia border). Based on a comparison of the landings between the South Atlantic and Greater Atlantic Regions (Maine through Virginia) which indicated that 22 percent of the landings from 2011–2014 originated in the Greater Atlantic Region, Regulatory Amendment 25 set the total ACL (and optimum yield (OY)) for the South Atlantic region at 78 percent of the stock ABC (ACL=OY=78%(stock ABC). These fishing level specifications included a temporary buffer between the ABC and the total ACL to account for the high level of uncertainty in the current fishing levels pending an update to the blueline tilefish stock assessment that was expected in 2017, and results from genetic studies to establish the stock structure of blueline tilefish. In addition to increasing the OY and ACLs for blueline tilefish based on the revised ABC recommendation from the South Atlantic Council's SSC, the final rule for Regulatory Amendment 25, effective August 12, 2016, also increased the commercial trip limit from 100 to 300 lbs gutted weight, and established a recreational bag limit for blueline tilefish of 3 fish/person/day during May through August within the grouper aggregate bag limit.

Vision Blueprint Commercial Regulatory Amendment 27 to the Snapper Grouper FMP

Commercial management measures for blueline tilefish were implemented through Vision Blueprint Commercial Regulatory Amendment 27 (Regulatory Amendment 27), which was approved at the September 2018 South Atlantic Council meeting for formal review by the

[19] The South Atlantic Council had considered extending the FMU previously during development of Amendment 18 to the Snapper Grouper FMP, but did not take action at the time.

Secretary of Commerce. The final rule for Regulatory Amendment 27 published in the *Federal Register* on January 27, 2020, and was effective February 26, 2020. The commercial trip limit for blueline tilefish was reduced from 300 pounds gutted weight (lbs gw) to 100 lbs gw from January 1 through April 30.

Abbreviated Framework Amendment 3 to the Snapper Grouper FMP

The South Atlantic Council is adjusting fishing levels for blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic based on the SSC's updated ABC recommendation for the South Atlantic region developed as part of SEDAR 50 (2017), in combination with the approved ABC workgroup recommendations for the area north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. The blueline tilefish OFL was set to 328,985 lbs ww, the ABC was set to 233,968 lbs ww from 2020 through 2022 where it would remain until modified, total ACLwas set equal to the ABC and existing sector allocations of 50.07% commercial and 49.93% recreational were used, resulting in a 117,148 lbs ww commercial ACL, 116,820 lbs ww recreational ACL, and a recreational ACT of 70,886 lbs ww.

Amendment 52 to the Snapper Grouper FMP

From 2017 through 2020, landings of blueline tilefish in the South Atlantic region often exceeded the recreational sector annual catch limit (ACL). The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (Magnuson-Stevens Act) National Standard 1 Guidelines contain the following language: *If the catch exceeds the ACL for a given stock, or stock complex, more than once in the last four years, the system of ACLs and AMs should be reevaluated and modified if necessary to improve its performance and effectiveness*. Therefore, the Council revised accountability measures (AM) to render them more effective at maintaining recreational landings at or below the ACL. The in-season recreational closure was removed and the Council specified that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) would annually announce the length of the recreational fishing season based on catch rates from the previous season. The fishing season will start on May 1 and end on the date the NMFS projects the recreational annual catch limit will be met. In addition to modifying AMs, the amendment reduced recreational blueline tilefish bag limit to 2 fish per person per day and prohibited retention by captain and crew.

References:

SAFMC 2014a. Regulatory Amendment 21 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

SAFMC 2014b. Amendment 32 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review, and Social Impact Assessment/Fishery Impact Statement. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

SAFMC 2016. Regulatory Amendment 25 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory

Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

SAFMC 2019. Vision Blueprint Regulatory Amendment 27 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Impact Review, and Social Impact Assessment/Fishery Impact Statement. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

SAFMC 2020. Abbreviated Framework 3 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

SAFMC 2023. Amendment 52 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region with Environmental Assessment, Regulatory Flexibility Analysis, Regulatory Impact Review. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, 4055 Faber Place Drive, Ste 201, Charleston, S.C. 29405.

SEDAR 32. 2013 – Stock Assessment Report: South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 378 pp. available online at: https://sedarweb.org/assessments/sedar-32/

SEDAR 50. 2017 – Stock Assessment Report: South Atlantic Blueline Tilefish. SEDAR, North Charleston SC. 542 pp. available online at: https://sedarweb.org/assessments/sedar-50/