



PC: GRNMS

THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Amendment 56

Black Sea Bass Stock Assessment Response

Decision Document, March 2025

Background

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

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

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

In June 2024, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council) approved the amendment for scoping and directed that scoping be conducted after additional catch projections were reviewed by the SSC. Discussions about catch projections are still ongoing (see Acceptable Biological Catch section of this document), but the Council directed staff in December 2024 to conduct scoping for the amendment ahead of the March 2025 meeting. Scoping was conducted from January 22 through February 6, 2025, and comments are summarized in this document.

Acceptable Biological Catch

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

The SEFSC is developing the updated assessment and projections and is expected to present results for SSC review at their April 2025 meeting. The update and SSC's recommendations for OFL and ABC will be presented to the Council in June 2025.

Objectives for this Meeting (March 2025)

- Review scoping comments.
- Provide guidance to staff on the actions and range of alternatives that should be developed in this amendment.

Scoping

Online scoping was conducted from January 22 through 5pm on February 6, 2025. A scoping summary and accompanying informational video were posted on the Council's website and advertised to solicit public comment. Six written comments were received through the Council's online public comment form or via email (some comments submitted through the online form were duplicated or referred to emailed comments). Emailed comments are included in the March 2025 Council Meeting Briefing Book. Comments submitted via the online form are viewable [HERE](#).

Commenters included private recreational and for-hire fishery stakeholders from Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina, as well as three non-government organizations (NGO).

One comment discussed how fishing has become easier and more efficient through the use of trolling motors.

Two comments from private recreational stakeholders stated opposition to a closed season for black sea bass. These comments also expressed support for consideration of changing the bag and size limits. One of these comments additionally expressed support for single-hook rigs.

Three comments received from NGOs supported re-opening seasonally-closed nearshore areas to commercial black sea bass pots equipped with on-demand gear.

Potential Management Actions

Required

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

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

Other Actions

The following actions may be considered for inclusion in this amendment based on previous Council and AP discussions:

- 4. Revise accountability measures**
 - Change the current recreational measure in which NMFS sets the season each year.
- 5. Change fishing year start date**
 - Recreational: April 1
 - Commercial: January 1
- 6. Re-open nearshore areas to on-demand black sea bass pots.**
 - Current seasonal pot closures: November 1-April 30 (closure area changes during December 1-March 31)
- 7. Revise recreational management measures**
 - Discard reducing measures (e.g., single hook rigs)
 - Close nearshore areas for black sea bass retention that coincide with the spawning season (potentially in alignment in time and space with roped pot closure)
 - Recreational bag limit reduction.
 - Recreational size limit reduction.
 - Likely to increase retention, but unlikely to affect overall catch without a decrease in the bag limit, as well.
 - Recreational seasonal retention closure.
 - Potentially matching shallow water grouper closure (January-April).
 - Snapper Grouper FMU species closed to recreational harvest during January-April: black grouper, blueline tilefish, gag, East Florida/Florida

Keys hogfish, red grouper, red porgy, scamp, snowy grouper, wreckfish, red hind, rock hind, yellowmouth grouper, yellowfin grouper, graysby, and coney.

- Greater amberjack closed in April.

Committee Action

Provide guidance on actions and alternatives to consider in this amendment.

Tentative Amendment Timing

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

Committee Action

Review the timeline for Amendment 56 and provide guidance for any necessary changes.

Appendix A. Summary of Regulations

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

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

Appendix B. State Regulations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Source: MRIP Public Data