



THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Snapper Grouper Amendment 56

*Black Sea Bass Catch Levels and Management
Measures*

Scoping Document

Online Scoping Session

Scoping information, including this document and a video presentation, will be posted on the Council's website. Clarifying questions about the posted materials can be directed to Mike Schmidtke at Mike.Schmidtke@safmc.net. Comments can be posted online, by mail, or by fax, using the information at the end of this document.

[Amendment 56 Webpage](#)

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Background

The South Atlantic (south of Cape Hatteras, NC) stock of black sea bass was most recently assessed through SEDAR 76 (2023), which included data through 2021. This assessment indicated that the black sea bass stock in the South Atlantic has declined substantially since 2011 and is currently at historically low abundances (Figure 1). This decline in abundance was accompanied by a decrease in landings over the same time period, and is estimated to be caused by below average recruitment (reproduction and survival to a catchable age/size).

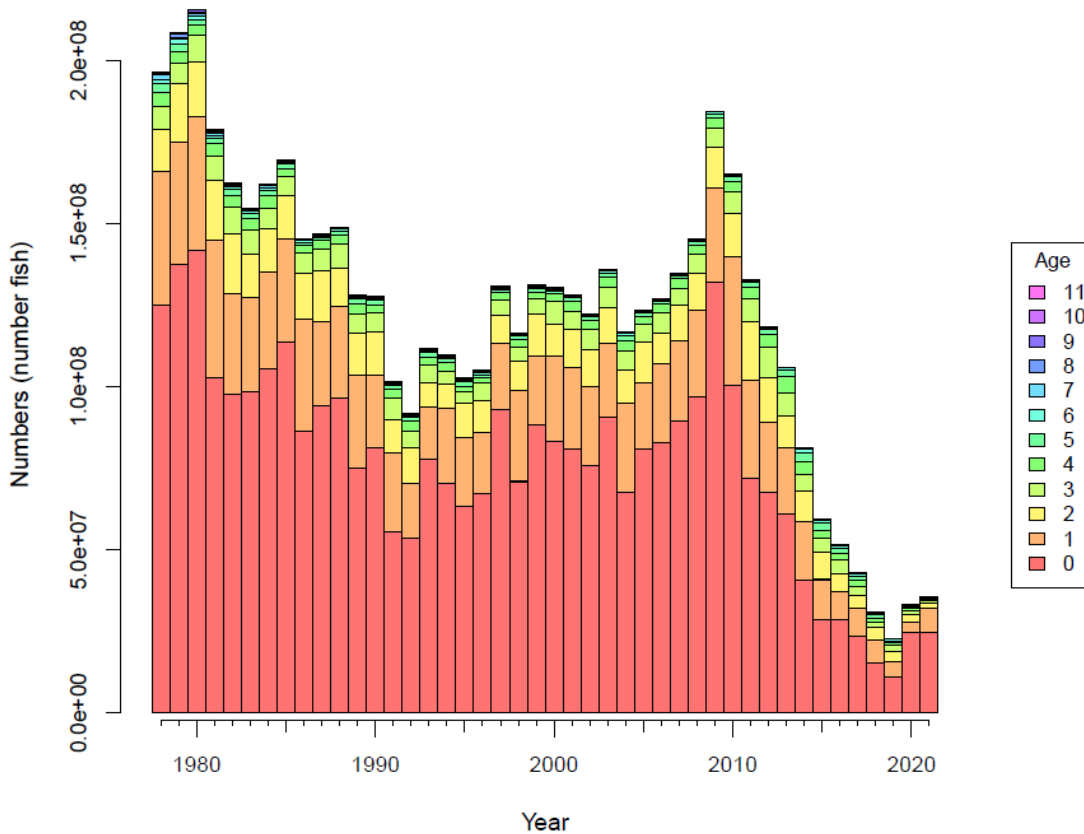


Figure 1. South Atlantic black sea bass estimated abundance (numbers of fish) at age (SEDAR 76).



The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (Council), NOAA Southeast Fisheries Science Center, and the Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) continue to discuss options for future sustainable catch levels. Additional projections of future catch, including data collected since the terminal year of the stock assessment (2021) are being developed for presentation to the Council in June 2025. However, due to the low abundance of black sea bass, the Council does expect future catch limits to be lower than current limits.

Given the known poor condition of the South Atlantic black sea bass stock, and the need to develop a timely response, the Council is conducting scoping for Amendment 56 prior to its March 2025 meeting.

What is scoping?

Scoping is an early step in the development of an amendment, in which the Council solicits public input on what actions should (or should not) be considered in an amendment. Amendment actions are typically developed with several alternatives (e.g. Action: Consider changing the minimum size limit. Alternatives: 1) keep the current 13-inch size limit, 2) reduce to a 12-inch limit, or 3) reduce to an 11-inch size limit). Comments on why an action or an alternative is or is not necessary are also critical to inform the Council of the fishery's needs.

Later in the process, during the public comment period, the Council will again solicit public input on which of the considered alternatives should be selected as the preferred management action.

Why is the Council considering taking action?

Per the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), the results of SEDAR 76, and scientific advice provided during that assessment and its review, the Council is required to take management actions for black sea bass to implement appropriate catch limits.

In addition to actions required by the MSA, the Council's Allocation Review Trigger Policy requires consideration of changes to sector allocations upon completion of a stock assessment (the Council is not required to change allocations, but they must decide whether changes will be made and provide rationale for their decision).



The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

The Council may also consider several other management changes for black sea bass, which could help improve the stock's condition while providing fishing opportunities. These potential changes have accumulated over several years from various public comments and Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel discussions.

What actions is the Council required to consider?

1. Reduce catch limits to be within the acceptable biological catch levels recommended by the SSC to prevent overfishing.
2. Change status determination criteria to be consistent with the best scientific information available, as recommended by the Southeast Fisheries Science Center and endorsed by the SSC.
3. Change sector allocation percentages.

What other actions could the Council consider?

4. Change the accountability measure that requires NMFS to set the recreational season length each year.
5. Change the fishing year start date(s).
 - This is the date when landings tracked against the annual catch limit "reset"
 - Current start date for the recreational sector: April 1
 - Current start date for the commercial sector: January 1
6. Remove or change seasonal closures to nearshore areas for on-demand black sea bass pots.
 - Current seasonal pot closures: November 1-April 30 (closure area changes during December 1-March 31).
7. Allocate the commercial ACL by gear to the pot and hook-and-line components of the commercial sector.
8. Change recreational management measures.
 - Prohibit the use of multiple hooks per line while snapper grouper fishing.
 - Reduce the recreational bag limit (currently 7 fish per person per day).
 - Reduce the recreational minimum size limit (currently 13 inches total length).
 - Implement a recreational seasonal retention closure.



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- Potentially January-April, matching the existing seasonal closures for shallow water grouper and other snapper grouper species.

Potential Amendment timing

Timing	Council Action
June 2024	Reviewed decision document and approved for scoping
September-December 2024	Additional discussions about ABC projections
January 22 - February 6 2025	Scoping (online)
March 2025	Review scoping comments and provide guidance on draft actions and alternatives
June 2025	Review analyses and draft actions and alternatives
September 2025	Review draft amendment, select initial preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings
Fall 2025	Public hearings
December 2025	Review public comment and approve all actions
March 2026	Approve for Secretarial review
Late 2026-Early 2027	Regulations effective



What are your thoughts? The Council wants to hear from you!

The Council wants to hear from you on ways to improve the black sea bass fishery. The following questions are not prescriptive, but may be a helpful tool to organize your ideas for comments.

1. Have there been noticeable changes to the black sea bass population or black sea bass fishery in your area?
2. What aspect of the black sea bass fishery is most important to you (e.g. consistent catch without necessarily keeping, ability to keep more fish per trip, longer open season, ability to keep at a specific time of year, etc.)?
3. Should the Council continue to consider any of the non-required actions (4-8, as listed above)?
 - a. If so, which of these actions is the highest priority?
 - b. What alternatives should be considered under each action?



How Do I Comment?

Comments must be received by 5:00 PM on Thursday, February 6, 2025. There are several ways that you can submit your comment to the Council including:

Written comments

Written comments may be read and submitted on Amendment 56 using the online public comment form at the following links:

[Submit Comment](#)

[Read Public Comments](#)

Comments by mail

Send comments to: John Carmichael, Executive Director, SAFMC. 4055 Faber Place Drive, Suite 201. N. Charleston, SC 29405

Comments by fax

843-769-4520