

# Summary Report

## Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Meeting

### March 26-28, 2024

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) convened in Charleston, SC on March 26-28, 2024.

The AP approved the minutes from the October 2023 meeting and the agenda for the March 2024 meeting.

#### 1. Committee Chair Remarks

Jessica McCawley, Chair of the Snapper Grouper Committee for the Council, provided opening remarks, along with a framework for what the Council was expecting from the AP at the meeting.

#### 2. Updates

**Recent Amendments:** Council staff updated the AP on the status of recent and developing Council actions that were not scheduled for discussion in this AP meeting, including Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan (FMP) Amendments 44 (Yellowtail Snapper), 46 (Private Recreational Permit), 48 (Wreckfish Individual Transfer Quota Program Modernization), 51 (Snowy Grouper), 52 (Golden Tilefish and Blueline Tilefish), and 54 (Joint Comprehensive Electronic Logbook), as well as Regulatory Amendment 35 (Red Snapper and Release Mortality).

**Red Snapper Release Research Projects:** Jessica McCawley presented recently-funded projects that have applications for exempted fishing permits under review by NOAA Fisheries. These projects will test how a snapper grouper aggregate bag limit or full retention of red snapper up to a recreational vessel limit will affect the number of red snapper caught and released by recreational trips in areas off the east coast of Florida.

#### Florida Hogfish Fishery Performance Report

With input from the APs, [Fishery Performance Reports](#) (FPRs) have been developed for several South Atlantic species. The intent of the FPRs is to assemble information from AP members' experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPRs will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP), and the Council to assist in their discussions. A benchmark assessment (SEDAR 94) for the Florida hogfish stock is scheduled for completion in 2025.

Council staff provided an overview of the previous FPRs, landings trends, and other background information. The AP focused their input based on a series of discussion questions, from which the FPR for Florida hogfish will be developed. A copy of the full report, as well as other FPRs, will be uploaded to: <https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/FPRAll/>.

## Vessel Limits for Headboats

In March 2024, the Council requested that the Advisory Panel provide general recommendations on how catch limits per trip or per day for recreational vessels should be applied to headboats. Council staff reviewed current recreational vessel limits and those being considered in developing amendments. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- Headboat businesses are dependent on the concept of being able to keep what is caught.
- **AP Recommendation: Consider vessel limit in proportion to number of anglers (e.g. anglers/6) for federally permitted headboats.**
  - Considerations when developing these alternatives:
    - How would this measure affect the length of the season for that species?
    - This type of measure would benefit fish slightly larger than 6-pack charters (~7-20 anglers) as well as larger headboats (20+).
    - Consider how headboat-specific regulations have been implemented in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Declining catch limits can have the longer-term effect of fewer headboats in the region.
- Consider if/how well we've identified and managed access or retention relative to spawning seasons.
- Should headboats be in their own annual catch limit (ACL)/monitoring category, separate from private/charter?
- Headboats allow fishing access for people that don't have/can't afford a vessel
- Headboat fleet is a small component of the recreational fishery (few vessels); consider the fewer number of trips taken by headboats versus other recreational vessels.
- Limited access discussions should consider headboat contributions to the for-hire component.
- Headboat regulations by the U.S. Coast Guard are stricter than those for charter vessels. The different regulations should be useful in defining the vessels for which headboat-specific regulations would apply.

### 3. Gag and Black Grouper Recreational Vessel Limits and Black Sea Bass On-Demand Pots (SG Regulatory Amendment 36)

Regulatory Amendment 36 considers revising the gag and black grouper recreational vessel limits and revising commercial black sea bass pot requirements to accommodate the use of on-demand black sea bass pots. Council staff summarized the development timeline and actions considered in this amendment thus far. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations, and approved the following motions:

- Note previous general discussion of recreational vessel limits for headboats
- Head boats are not suited to easily switching to fishing for pelagic species
- Potential options to consider for headboats:
  - 4 fish of aggregate (gag and black grouper) for 10-30 passengers; 6 fish for 30.
  - 30% of passenger count, maximum of 10 fish per vessel.

**MOTION 1:** RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL ADD AN ALTERNATIVE TO ACTION 1 FOR RECREATIONAL FOR-HIRE VESSELS THAT ARE FEDERALLY INSPECTED AND PERMITTED TO CARRY MORE THAN 6 PASSENGERS, TO HAVE AN AGGREGATE GAG AND BLACK GROUPER VESSEL LIMIT OF 2 FISH FOR EVERY 6 PASSENGERS ON BOARD, NOT TO EXCEED A MAXIMUM NUMBER OF FISH PER VESSEL PER TRIP, RANGING FROM 6-12 FISH, NOT TO INCLUDE CAPTAIN AND CREW LIMITS.  
**APPROVED BY THE AP (14-1-0ABS)**

**Action 1. Revise the recreational vessel limits for gag and black grouper**

**MOTION 2:** RECOMMEND THAT THE COUNCIL SELECT ALTERNATIVE 2 (PRIVATE), ALTERNATIVE 3 (FOR-HIRE) MODIFIED WITH THE REMOVAL OF THE HEADBOAT COMPONENT, AND THE NEW ALTERNATIVE RECOMMENDED FOR THE HEADBOAT COMPONENT AS PREFERRED FOR ACTION 1.  
**APPROVED BY THE AP (15-0-0ABS)**

**Alternative 2.** Remove the single species recreational private vessel limits for gag and black grouper. Establish an aggregate **private recreational vessel limit** of 2 gag or black grouper per vessel per day, not to exceed the daily bag limit of 1 gag or black grouper per person per day, whichever is more restrictive.

**Alternative 3.** Remove the single species recreational for-hire vessel limits for gag and black grouper. Establish an aggregate **for-hire (charter and headboat) recreational vessel limit** of 2 gag or black grouper per vessel per trip, not to exceed the daily bag limit of 1 gag or black grouper per person per day, whichever is more restrictive.

**MOTION 3:** RECOMMEND ALTERNATIVE 3 (BUOY CAN BE STORED WITHIN THE POT) AS PREFERRED FOR ACTION 2.  
**APPROVED BY THE AP (14-0-1ABS)**

**Action 2. Revise transit stowage requirements for black sea bass pots with on-demand gear.**

**Alternative 3.** On-demand black sea bass pots must be unbaited and buoys must be disconnected from the gear or stowed within the sea bass pot during transit through a marine protected area or special management zone.

#### **4. Snapper Grouper Management Strategy Evaluation Input**

The Council is conducting a Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) to explore long-term management strategies for the South Atlantic snapper grouper fishery. The Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel provided guidance on management objectives and strategies for Red Snapper, Gag, and Black Sea Bass through an online survey completed during the meeting. The AP members indicated they were most concerned with management not being responsive to new information and changes in stock conditions and the potential for additional restrictions due to release mortality associated with red snapper. The AP identified a lack of robust and trusted data to estimate recreational catch estimates (landings and releases) as the biggest concern for gag and black sea bass. Additional comments and concerns were recorded by Council staff and will be included in documentation for the MSE.

## **5. Amendment 55 Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper**

The amendment proposes to establish a Scamp Yellowmouth Grouper Complex in response to SEDAR 68 Operational Assessment and establish the following for the complex: stock determination criteria, the rebuilding timeframe, acceptable biological catch, annual catch limits (ACL), sector allocations, management measures for both sectors, and accountability measures. In addition, the amendment would reorganize and update the Other South Atlantic Shallow Water Grouper Complex. In March 2024 the Council reviewed a decision document that included an initial analysis. After reviewing the analysis, the Council selected preferred alternatives for certain actions and are scheduled to approve the amendment for public hearings in June 2024. The AP reviewed the decision document, provided the following comments and recommendations, and approved the following motions:

### **Action 6. Reduce the recreational fishing season for scamp and yellowmouth grouper**

**Alternative 1 (No Action):** The recreational fishing season for scamp and yellowmouth grouper in the exclusive economic zone is open May 1 – December 31. A spawning season closure is in place annually from January 1 through April 30.

**Preferred Alternative 2:** Reduce the recreational fishing season for scamp and yellowmouth grouper in the exclusive economic zone to be open May 1 through August 31. The season will be closed January 1 through April 30 (spawning season closure) and September 1 through December 31.

**MOTION 4: RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL DESELECT PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE 2 FOR ACTION 6 AND SELECT ALTERNATIVE 1 (NO ACTION) FOR ACTION 6 (REDUCING THE RECREATIONAL SEASON).**

15-0-1ABS

**APPROVED BY THE AP (15-0-1ABS)**

- One AP member mentioned opening the season in January, noting that spawning activity is not observed during this time and suggested that the spawning season be evaluated for efficacy for all the shallow water groupers.
- It was noted that the headboat and charter industry needs late summer access to the fishery and that scamp is very important for their business.
- Recreational representatives on the AP noted that a more restrictive recreational ACL would be preferable versus reducing the recreational season.
- The AP questioned the need for additional management measures if the ACL is not currently being met for either species.
- With consideration of the timeline restrictions of Amendment 55, the AP suggested that the Council consider separate headboat allocations where appropriate.
- The AP had concerns about the number of discards if the season is closed before December 31<sup>st</sup>.

### **Action 7. Modify the recreational retention limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper**

#### **Sub-Action 7a. Modify the recreational bag limit**

**Alternative 1 (No Action):** The recreational bag limit is 3 scamp or 3 yellowmouth grouper per person per day within the 3-grouper aggregate.

**Alternative 2.** Establish an aggregate complex bag limit of 2 fish (either scamp or yellowmouth grouper) per person per day within the 3-grouper aggregate.

**Alternative 3.** Establish an aggregate complex bag limit of 1 fish (either scamp or yellowmouth grouper) per person per day within the 3-grouper aggregate.

**Sub-Action 7b. Establish a recreational vessel limit**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** There is no vessel limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper.

**Alternative 2.** Establish a private recreational aggregate vessel limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper of:

**Sub-Alternative 2a.** 2 fish (either scamp or yellowmouth grouper) per vessel per **day**, not to exceed the daily bag limit, whichever is more restrictive.

**Sub-Alternative 2b.** 4 fish (either scamp or yellowmouth grouper) per vessel per **day**, not to exceed the daily bag limit, whichever is more restrictive.

**Alternative 3.** Establish a for-hire (charter vessel/headboat) recreational aggregate vessel limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper of:

**Sub-Alternative 3a.** 2 fish (either scamp or yellowmouth grouper) per vessel per **trip**, not to exceed the daily bag limit, whichever is more restrictive.

**Sub-Alternative 3b.** 4 fish (either scamp or yellowmouth grouper) per vessel per **trip**, not to exceed the daily bag limit, whichever is more restrictive.

**MOTION 5: IF A VESSEL LIMIT IS IMPOSED, RECOMMEND THE COUNCIL ADD AN ALTERNATIVE FOR RECREATIONAL FOR-HIRE VESSELS THAT ARE FEDERALLY INSPECTED AND PERMITTED TO CARRY MORE THAN 6 PASSENGERS, TO HAVE AN AGGREGATE SCAMP AND YELLOWMOUTH GROUPER VESSEL LIMIT OF 1-4 FISH FOR EVERY 6 PASSENGERS ON BOARD, NOT TO EXCEED A MAXIMUM NUMBER OF FISH PER VESSEL PER TRIP, RANGING FROM 8-16 FISH, NOT TO INCLUDE CAPTAIN AND CREW LIMITS.**

**APPROVED BY AP (15-0-0ABS)**

- Some AP members noted that **Alternative 3** (1 fish per person per day) for Action 7a would be preferred.
- Some AP members preferred relying on reducing the bag limit only to constrain harvest instead of establishing a vessel limit.
- **Consensus Recommendation: The AP would prefer to retain recreational access to the fishery from May-December, by reducing the bag limit or establishing a vessel limit instead of reducing the season.**

**Action 8. Establish an aggregate commercial trip limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper**

**Alternative 1 (No Action).** There is no commercial trip limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper.

**Alternative 2.** Establish an aggregate commercial trip limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper of 200 pounds gutted weight.

**Preferred Alternative 3.** Establish an aggregate commercial trip limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper of 300 pounds gutted weight.

**Alternative 4.** Establish an aggregate commercial trip limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper of 400 pounds gutted weight.

**Alternative 5.** Establish an aggregate commercial trip limit for scamp and yellowmouth grouper of 500 pounds gutted weight.

- The AP noted that the preferred 300 lbs gw trip limit may have a negative effect on vessels that take 3–7-day trips.
- The AP had concerns about whether a 300 lbs gw trip limit would be viable or economical enough to justify a trip.
- There was discussion on pounds vs season and AP wondered if it would be more important to have more pounds on the trip and a potentially shorter season.

## **6. Recreational Seasons for Deep Water Snapper Grouper Species**

In March 2024, the Council requested that the Advisory Panel provide recommendations on the timing of seasons for deep water snapper grouper species. Council staff reviewed current seasons for deep water species. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- **The AP generally supported the idea of aligning start dates for deep water species.** AP members specifically noted a desire to align the start dates for golden tilefish (Jan 1) and snowy grouper (May 1), as well as dates for yellowedge grouper (Jan 1), blueline tilefish (May 1), and snowy grouper.
- Aligning seasons for co-caught species can reduce discard potential.
- In consideration of potential alignment, the Council should consider the fishery’s ability to access those species based on factors including:
  - Time of year.
  - Effect on season length.
- NC needs blueline tilefish open later in the summer (July/August).
  - Not necessarily longer; July/August is the most critical time for having access to blueline tilefish off NC.
- The AP had some discussion and question about whether it would be feasible to have 2 start dates (e.g. Jan 1, July 1) with a split ACL split to allow better access for different areas in the region.
  - Exploration of this option should account for regional differences in start and stop dates.

## **7. Black Sea Bass Stock Assessment Response (SG Amendment 56) (Attachment 9)**

SEDAR 76 included data through 2021 and indicated that the Black Sea Bass stock in the South Atlantic is overfished. Council staff presented the [Fishery Overview](#) and initial management issues being considered in the development of Amendment 56. The AP provided the following comments and recommendations:

- The AP discussed having low confidence in the data and information used to describe the recreational fishery.
- AP members believe red snapper are impacting the black sea bass stock through predation on juvenile black sea bass and competition for habitat and food sources.
- An AP member from Ponce Inlet, FL, commented that with lower numbers of black sea bass, he is seeing more large bluefish come through his fish house.
- **The AP recommends aligning the minimum size limits for black sea bass in both sectors.**
  - Notes for 12-inch minimum size limit for both sectors:
    - Could reduce recreational regulatory discards
    - Could provide some rebuilding benefit by increasing the commercial size limit
    - With pot fishing occurring in deeper waters, some of those fish do still experience barotrauma.
    - This could allow more females to survive to larger sizes before their transition.
  - Other potential size limit options (aligned for both sectors): 11.5 or 11 inches.
  - Any recreational size limit reduction could be detrimental for the for-hire component if it causes the season to shorten.
- The timing and length of the open season is the most critical piece for the for-hire component of the recreational sector.
  - The Council could consider an approach of prioritizing the length of the recreational season and explore adjustments to size and bag limits to meet that season length.
- Decreasing the size limit is likely to lead to an increased retention rate and a decreased discard rate. Consider how this adjusts catch levels and can potentially contribute to increased accuracy or precision in data collection efforts.
- Requirement of single hook rigs for the recreational sector could reduce the discard rate and affect catch levels.
- Reopening the nearshore pot area.
  - Recreational for-hire has experienced benefit during the closure
  - Some AP members may be interested in a hybrid approach, potentially increasing pot access but not in the same way as before the closure
  - Headboats typically operate from the shoreline to 10 miles to target black sea bass
  - Consideration should be given to how pot locations can be identified and communicated with other fishermen.
- Some AP comments were against any re-allocation between sectors. No members expressed support for re-allocation.
- AP members noted the increase in black sea bass abundance north of Cape Hatteras. They asked whether there are plans to reassess the stock definition and connectivity between the Mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic stocks.

## 8. Other Updates

**Best Fishing Practices Outreach:** Council and Sea Grant staff presented recent updates on the Best Fishing Practices Campaign, including details on the upcoming Best Fishing Practices Master Volunteer Program and 2024 outreach efforts. The AP provided upcoming events and

tackle shops for staff to consider visiting, and fishing organizations that may be interested in partnering with the SAFMC.

**Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR):** SAFMC staff provided an update of recently finished, ongoing, and upcoming SEDAR projects. Volunteers were requested to participate in the upcoming Florida Hogfish Benchmark and South Atlantic Red Snapper Research Track stock assessments. Andrew Fish volunteered to participate in the Florida Hogfish Data Workshop, and Paul Nelson and Andy Piland volunteered to participate in the South Atlantic Red Snapper Data Workshop.

**Citizen Science:** Council staff provided information on Citizen Science Program activities, including the 2023-2025 Citizen Science Research Priorities, the Citizen Science Program's Project Idea Portal, and the SMILE project. Staff shared highlights from the SAFMC Release project's 2023 Annual Data Summary and Participant Recognition Program's 2024 milestones. Additionally, staff shared an overview of the photos gathered for the FISHstory project through the scanning events and outreach efforts conducted during fall 2023. Through these efforts the FISHstory archive grew by ~600 photos and includes photos from the Outer Banks, NC to the FL Keys. The project is still working to gather additional photos. Some AP members provided additional historic photos during the meeting and helped staff connect to others in their community that have photos to share with the project.

### **Chair/Vice Chair Election**

The AP passed the following motions concerning the Chair and Vice Chair positions:

**MOTION 6: ELECT JAMES PASKIEWICZ AS CHAIR OF THE SNAPPER GROUPE  
ADVISORY PANEL.**

**APPROVED BY AP**

**MOTION 7: ELECT CHRIS KIMREY AS VICE CHAIR OF THE SNAPPER GROUPE  
ADVISORY PANEL.**

**APPROVED BY AP**

### **9. Other Business**

- Chip Collier requested weather/blowout information from AP members; example types of information include buoy(s) used, wind direction/speed, wave height, and wave periodicity that would prevent fishing.
  - AP members provided some preliminary information; more detailed information can be provided to Chip via communication after the AP meeting.
  - AP members noted factors that can affect decisions of whether to conduct trips in questionable weather, including: distance from shore, cost, night before information.
- The AP also requested to mix the ordering of the agenda to schedule update presentations and potential new topics of concern to the AP to occur throughout meeting rather than all at once at the end.