



THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

# Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 37

*Annual Catch Targets, Accountability Measures,  
and Management Measure Modifications for  
Black Sea Bass*

## **Public Hearing Dates and Time**

November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025 at 6:00 pm (via webinar only)

## **Registration Link and More Details**

<https://safmc.net/public-hearings-and-scoping/>

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## Background

South Atlantic black sea bass were assessed through Southeast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) 76. Due to various concerns from the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and Council over future catch projection assumptions, several iterations of projections were developed between 2023 and 2025. The SEDAR 76 Update stock assessment, which added data through 2023 and included some modeling changes, was completed in March 2025. All iterations of the assessment indicated strong declines in black sea bass spawning stock biomass and abundance since 2012.

In preparation for catch level recommendations from the SEDAR 76 Update, the Council began developing Amendment 56 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region. In April – May 2025, the SSC reviewed the SEDAR 76 Update, and recommended acceptable biological catch (ABC) levels, beginning in 2027, based on this stock assessment. In June 2025, the SEDAR 76 Update and SSC recommendations were presented to the Council.



The Council expressed concerns with modeling decisions and assumptions used to develop reference points, estimate stock status, and project future sustainable catch levels. The Council also noted expected changes to recreational catch estimates based on the Marine Recreational Information Program's (MRIP) review of its Fishing Effort Survey (FES), and determined that a potential rebuilding plan and long-term management changes for black sea bass would be best informed by incorporating these catch estimates. Therefore, the Council requested additional review of the SEDAR 76 Update to address any modeling changes and incorporate updated recreational catch information before using it to develop long-term management.

The Council postponed work on Amendment 56 until after this review and any additional modifications to the black sea bass stock assessment are completed. Updates to the stock assessment and revised MRIP catch estimates are expected in 2026, at which time the Council will receive new ABC advice from their SSC. New scientific advice and revised ABCs from the SSC will inform Amendment 56 to address long-term changes to South



Atlantic black sea bass management based on the most recent version of the stock assessment.

## Why is the Council considering taking action?

While additional review and modifications of the stock assessment are underway, the Council recognizes the persistent, strong declines in biomass, abundance, fishery-independent indices, and landings, as reflected in the SEDAR 76 Update. Therefore, to increase stock biomass and recruitment in the short-term and limit further population decline, the Council is considering actions intended to: 1) reduce fishing mortality from harvest and dead discards, and 2) increase spawning output and recruitment through spawning season closures.

## Amendment timing

June 2025	Amendment initiated
September 2025	Review the draft amendment, select preferred alternatives, and approve for public hearings
November 3 <sup>rd</sup> and 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2025	Conduct public hearings
December 2025	Review public comment, approve all actions, and approve for formal review
Mid-Late 2026	Regulations effective



## **Actions and Alternatives**

Decision tools have been developed for the commercial and recreational sectors to evaluate predicted effects from the actions considered in this amendment. The decision tools and their instructions are posted under on the [Regulatory Amendment 37 Public Hearing Webpage](#). Expected effects from select combinations of alternatives are included in the Notes under actions listed below. The reader is encouraged to explore additional combinations using the Decision Tools.

### **Action 1. Establish annual catch targets and revise the accountability measures for South Atlantic black sea bass**

Purpose of Action: Reduce annual harvest of South Atlantic black sea bass by establishing and managing the fishery to annual catch targets set lower than recent levels of harvest.

#### **Sub-Action 1a. Establish annual catch targets for black sea bass**

Alternative 1 (No Action). No annual catch targets are currently in place for South Atlantic black sea bass.

Preferred Alternative 2. Establish a commercial annual catch target of 48,557 pounds whole weight and a recreational annual catch target of 63,143 pounds whole weight for South Atlantic black sea bass. The annual catch limits for each sector would remain unchanged.

#### **Sub-Action 1b. Revise in-season accountability measures for the commercial sector**

Alternative 1 (No Action). If the National Marine Fisheries Service estimates that commercial landings of South Atlantic black sea bass will reach or are projected to reach the commercial quota, currently set at the commercial annual catch limit, the National Marine Fisheries Service will close the commercial harvest of black sea bass for the remainder of the fishing year.

Preferred Alternative 2. If the National Marine Fisheries Service estimates that commercial landings of South Atlantic black sea bass will reach or are projected to reach the commercial quota, set at the commercial annual catch target in Sub-Action 1a, Alternative 2, the National Marine Fisheries Service will close the commercial harvest of black sea bass for the remainder of the fishing year.



## Sub-Action 1c. Revise accountability measures for the recreational sector

Alternative 1 (No Action). The National Marine Fisheries Service will project the length of the South Atlantic black sea bass recreational fishing season based on when the recreational annual catch limit is projected 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.

Preferred Alternative 2. The National Marine Fisheries Service will project the length of the South Atlantic black sea bass recreational fishing season based on when the recreational annual catch target is projected 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.

### Notes

- Preferred Alternative 2 for all sub-actions would set and implement in-season management to ACTs for each sector at 50% of the average annual sector landings for the 5 most recent years of catch information (Table 1).
- Preferred Alternative 2 would establish a commercial ACT of 48,557 lbs ww and a recreational ACT of 63,143 lbs ww.

Table 1. Commercial (2019-2023) and recreational (2019/20-2023/24) landings of South Atlantic black sea bass for the five most recent years of data at the time of amendment development. Annual catch targets (ACT) proposed through Sub-Action 1a – Preferred Alternative 2 are 50% of the 5-year average.

	Commercial Landings (lbs ww)		Recreational Landings (lbs ww)
2019	199,058	2019/2020	170,190
2020	80,690	2020/2021	104,202
2021	57,250	2021/2022	117,789
2022	78,566	2022/2023	110,660
2023	70,005	2023/2024	128,587
Average	97,114	Average	126,285
Commercial ACT	48,557	Recreational ACT	63,143

Source: [NOAA Annual Catch Limit monitoring website](#)



## **Action 2. Establish a spawning season closure for South Atlantic black sea bass**

Purpose of Action: Reduce harvest of South Atlantic black sea bass during their spawning season, allowing for greater survival, spawning output, and recruitment.

Alternative 1 (No Action). There is no spawning seasonal closure for black sea bass in or from South Atlantic federal waters south of Cape Hatteras, NC.

Preferred Alternative 2. Establish a commercial seasonal closure during which commercial sale, purchase, harvest, or possession of black sea bass in or from South Atlantic federal waters south of Cape Hatteras, NC, is prohibited and the commercial trip limit is zero.

Sub-Alternative 2a. The commercial seasonal closure occurs from January 1 through January 31.

Preferred Sub-Alternative 2b. The commercial seasonal closure occurs from February 1 through the end of February.

Preferred Sub-Alternative 2c. The commercial seasonal closure occurs from March 1 through March 31.

Sub-Alternative 2d. The commercial seasonal closure occurs from April 1 through April 30.

Preferred Alternative 3. Establish a recreational seasonal closure during which recreational harvest or possession of black sea bass in or from South Atlantic federal waters south of Cape Hatteras, NC, is prohibited and the bag limit is zero.

Sub-Alternative 3a. The recreational seasonal closure occurs from January 1 through January 31.

Preferred Sub-Alternative 3b. The recreational seasonal closure occurs from February 1 through the end of February.

Preferred Sub-Alternative 3c. The recreational seasonal closure occurs from March 1 through March 31.

Sub-Alternative 3d. The recreational seasonal closure occurs from April 1 through April 30



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## Notes

- Sub-alternatives under Preferred Alternative 2 and Preferred Alternative 3 consider closures in 1-month increments, from January through April.
  - The Council selected two sub-alternatives as preferred to establish a closure that lasts two months, from February 1 through March 31, for both sectors.
- Spawning season closures are intended to protect and increase the stock biomass by allowing fish to spawn for some time in their spawning season without any fishing mortality from harvest (though there may still be some fishing mortality from fish that are caught and released). As such, the Council reasoned both sectors should be closed at the same time.
- Peak spawning season for black sea bass: February – May (Farmer et al. 2017).

## Season Effects

- Seasonal projection analyses were developed based on average commercial and recreational catch rates from 2021-2023. All results are included in the Decision Tools. Select combinations of results are included in the tables below.
- A spawning closure is expected to lengthen the commercial season (Table 2). Commercial landings are greatest in January and February (recent average harvests during each of these months are over two times greater than any other month). Therefore, a closure during these months would have the strongest impact on extending the rest of the open season.



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Table 2. Predictions for when the black sea bass commercial annual catch target (48,557 lbs ww) would be met under Action 2 sub-alternatives 2a through 2d for the commercial sector. The fishing year begins on January 1; predictions are based on monthly landings for 2021-2023.

Action 2 Alternatives	<i>Projected Closure Date</i>	<i>Fishing Days</i>
Alternative 1: No Action (No Spawning Closure)	30-May	149
Sub-Alternative 2a: Closure Jan 1 - Jan 31	23-Dec	325
Preferred Sub-Alternative 2b: Closure Feb 1 - end of Feb	1-Dec	306
Preferred Sub-Alternative 2c: Closure Mar 1 - Mar 31	29-Jul	178
<b>Preferred Sub-Alternatives 2b and 2c: Closure Feb 1 – Mar 31</b>	<b>No In-Season Closure</b>	<b>306</b>
Sub-Alternative 2d: Closure Apr 1 - Apr 30	2-Aug	183

- Season length for the recreational sector is likely to be affected by additional actions discussed later in this document.
- The combination of the preferred spawning season closure and other recreational management measures being considered is presented in Tables 3 & 4.
- Recent (2021-2023) average recreational landings are greatest in May and June and are generally higher between January and June than the rest of the year.



## **Action 3. Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass**

Purpose of Action: Reduce the recreational harvest rate of South Atlantic black sea bass to allow for a longer season under a lower annual catch target and allow survival and growth of a greater portion of the population to later life stages.

Alternative 1 (No Action). The recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass is 7 fish per person per day.

Alternative 2. Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 1 fish per person per day.

Preferred Alternative 3. Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 2 fish per person per day.

Alternative 4. Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 3 fish per person per day.

Alternative 5. Reduce the recreational bag limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 4 fish per person per day.

### **Notes**

- Differences between state and federal regulations can affect the efficiency of managing the South Atlantic black sea bass stock.
- Although the current bag limit is seven fish per person per day, over 60% of recreational angler trips that harvested black sea bass harvested one or less than one black sea bass per person (MRIP Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) and Southeast Regional Headboat Survey data from 2019-2023).
- If a lower bag limit results in more trips meeting the bag limit and fishermen switching to a different fishing method (e.g., trolling) or moving to a different area where they would be less likely to encounter black sea bass, then the number of black sea bass discards could be reduced.
  - Currently, the majority of discards are due to fish being below the minimum size limit rather than being caught after the bag limit has been met.



## Season Effects

- Reducing the recreational bag limit is expected to extend the recreational season under the currently preferred recreational ACT proposed in Action 1 and preferred spawning closure proposed in Action 2 (Table 3).

Table 3. Predictions for when the black sea bass recreational annual catch target (63,143 lb ww) would be met under each of the Action 3 alternatives for the recreational sector, and assuming the currently preferred spawning closure from Action 2 (February-March) and no change to the current minimum size limit (13 inches total length). The fishing year begins on April 1; predictions are based on monthly landings for the 2021/22-2023/24 fishing years.

Action 3 Alternatives	Closure Date	Fishing Days
Alternative 1 (No Action): 7 fish per person per day	16-Sep	168
Alternative 2: 1 fish per person per day	-	306
<b>Preferred Alternative 3: 2 fish per person per day</b>	<b>9-Jan</b>	<b>283</b>
Alternative 4: 3 fish per person per day	24-Nov	237
Alternative 5: 4 fish per person per day	31-Oct	213

NOTE: This table shows an average scenario based on a recent set of years. Information used to project the recreational season will be conducted as described in the FMP, using the most recent years of information available.



## **Action 4. Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass**

Purpose of Action: Reduce the number of recreational dead releases by enabling anglers to reach (lower, via Action 2) bag limits faster and move to other fishing areas or methods.

Preferred Alternative 1 (No Action). The recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass is 13 inches total length.

Alternative 2. Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 12 inches total length.

Alternative 3. Reduce the recreational minimum size limit for South Atlantic black sea bass to 11 inches total length.

### **Notes**

- The intent is for this action, along with a reduction in the bag limit, is to reduce fishing mortality by reducing discards of black sea bass, which is the primary source of black sea bass removals (in numbers of fish).
- With a lower bag limit (Action 2) and anglers being more likely to retain fish that are caught under a smaller minimum size limit, it is more likely that they will hit their bag limit earlier in the trip, potentially motivating them to switch to a different fishing method (e.g., trolling) or move to a different area where they would be less likely to encounter black sea bass, reducing dead discards.

### **Season Effects**

- Reducing the recreational minimum size limit is expected to reduce the recreational season length; whereas maintaining the current 13-inch size limit (Preferred Alternative 1) will result in a longer recreational season (Table 4, next page).



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Table 4. Predictions for when the black sea bass recreational annual catch target (63,143 lb ww) would be met under each of the Action 4 alternatives for the recreational sector, and assuming the currently preferred spawning closure from Action 2 (February-March) and bag limit from Action 3 (2 fish). The fishing year begins on April 1; predictions are based on monthly landings for the recreational sector and size information from state at-sea headboat observers for the 2021/22-2023/24 fishing years.

Action 4 Alternatives	Closure Date	Fishing Days
<b>Preferred Alternative 1 (No Action): 13 in TL</b>	<b>9-Jan</b>	<b>283</b>
Alternative 2: 12 in TL	28-Jun	88
Alternative 3: 11 in TL	26-May	55

NOTE: This table shows an average scenario based on a recent set of years. Information used to project the recreational season will be conducted as described in the FMP, using the most recent years of information available.



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

The Council wants to hear what you think about these proposed changes.

### **1. Do you support the Council's preliminary preferred alternatives? Why or why not?**

#### Preliminary Preferred Alternatives

Action 1 – Harvest levels:

- Commercial ACT = 48,557 lbs ww
- Recreational ACT = 63,143 lbs ww
- Adjust accountability measures for in-season management to the ACTs.

Action 2 – Spawning: Prohibit harvest of black sea bass for both sectors during February and March.

Action 3 – Bag Limit: Reduce the recreational bag limit to 2 fish per person per day.

Action 4 – Minimum Size Limit: Maintain the current recreational minimum size limit of 13 inches total length.

### **2. Do you think other alternatives should be selected as preferred? If so, why?**



## **How Do I Comment?**

Comments must be received by 5:00 PM on Friday, November 14, 2025. There are several ways that you can submit your comment to the Council including:

### Comments taken during webinars

Monday, November 3, 2025 at 6 PM

Wednesday, November 12, 2025 at 6 PM

### Written comments

Written comments may be read and submitted on Regulatory Amendment 37 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