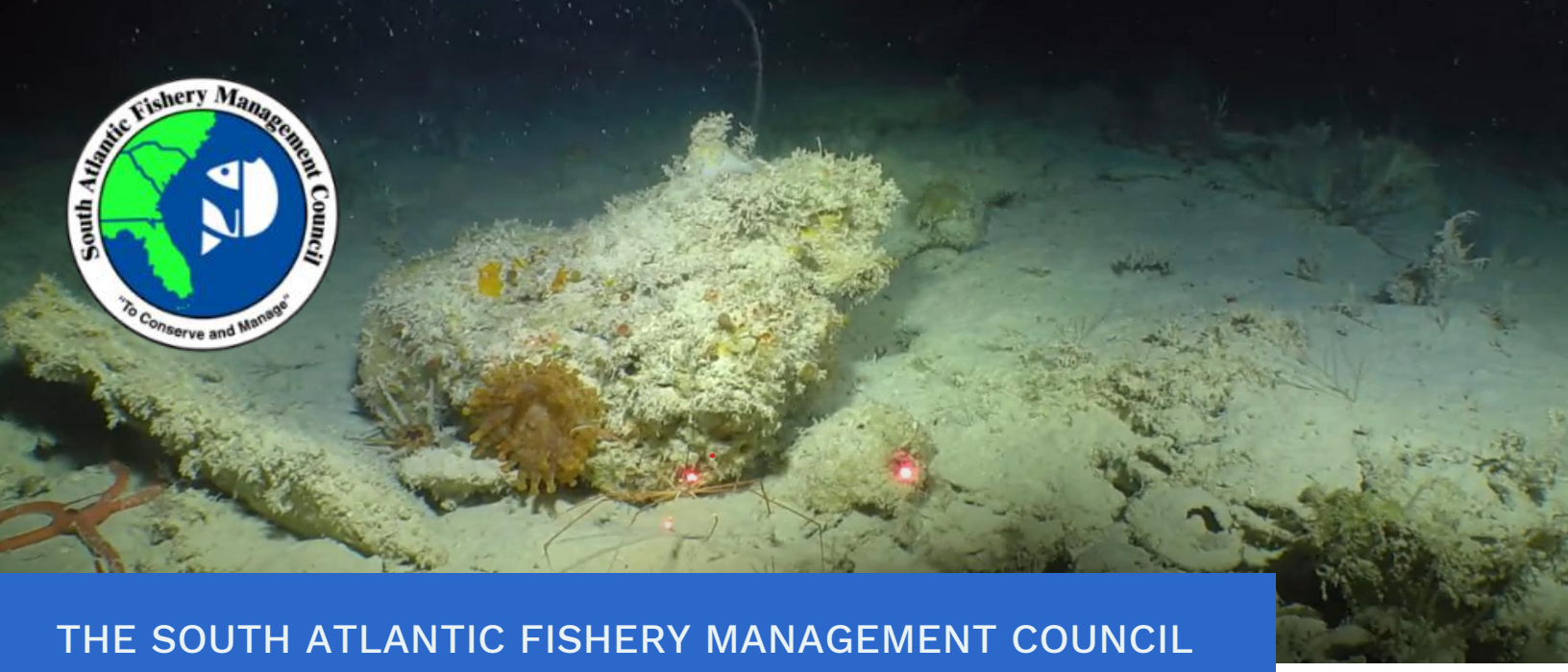


THE SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL

Revising the Sunset Provision for South Atlantic Spawning Special Management Zones (Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 39)

Public Hearing Overview

Public Hearing Date and Time

This hearing will be held **via webinar only**

Date and Time: Monday November 9th at 6pm

Website and Registration Information

To find materials and the registration link for this hearing, visit:

https://safmc.net/events/nov-2026-public-hearings-snapper-grouper-regulatory-amendment-39/

WEBINAR REGISTRATION

Questions?

If you have any questions regarding this action, contact the SAFCM staff lead

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Why is the Council Taking Action?

Snapper Grouper Amendment 36 established 5 spawning special management zones (SSMZs): South Cape Lookout (NC), Georgetown Hole (also referred to as Devil's Hole) (SC), Area 51 (SC), Area 53 (SC), and Warsaw Hole (FL).

The SSMZs were established to protect spawning fish and their habitat, aiming to increase recruitment of juvenile fish. The areas were chosen based on feedback from the South Atlantic Council's (Council) Marine Protected Area Expert Working Group and extensive public input from fishermen and other experts. Area 51 and Area 53 encompass artificial reefs whereas the other three are natural areas. Bottom fishing for snapper grouper species and anchoring is prohibited in the three natural areas. The amendment also established a 10-year sunset provision for the SSMZs except for Area 51 and 53. The sunset provision would allow the applicable regulations in the areas to expire unless the Council takes action to extend it.

The ***purpose*** of this framework amendment is to examine the current spawning protections provided by the established South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole/Devil's Hole, and Warsaw Hole spawning special management zones and modify the sunset provisions to allow for continued protection, research, and monitoring to occur within the areas.

The ***need*** for this framework amendment is to continue to protect spawning fish and spawning habitat in the established spawning special management zones and allow for continued research and monitoring within these areas which would contribute to achieving optimum yield and providing positive social and economic effects for snapper grouper fishermen and fishing communities.

In addition, Amendment 36 included a System Management Plan for Spawning Special Management Zones that serves as a framework for monitoring, research, outreach, enforcement, and evaluation of these zones. The Council also established the System Management Plan Workgroup to help evaluate the protected areas based on biological protection, social and economic impacts, and compliance. The group was also tasked with recommending any changes in the shape, location, and size of the protected areas. Regulatory Amendment 39 considers options to extend or remove the sunset provisions for the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole/Devil's Hole, and Warsaw Hole SSMZs.

Research conducted by The Nature Conservancy, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, and LGL Ecological Research Associates within the SSMZs was presented during an SAFMC Seminar Series in November 2025. Research findings are summarized in the discussion of each action. Currently, inside the SSMZs no vessel may fish for or harvest snapper species, year round. A vessel may possess snapper grouper species within the SSMZs if it is transiting with gear appropriately stowed an the use of anchors, anchor and chain or grapple an chain (with the exception of Area 51 and 53) is prohibited (50 CFR 622.183(a)(2)).

Regulatory Amendment 39 Timeline

June 2026	The Council reviewed an initial set of draft actions and options
September 2026	The Council reviewed a public hearing document, selected a preferred option and approved the amendment for public hearings
December 2026	**The Council will review public hearing comments and consider for final approval**
Early 2027	The amendment will be submitted to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)

Visit the **Regulatory Amendment 39** webpage on safmc.net to keep up with the amendments progress, find the most up to date documents, and submit public comments

Action 1. Modify the sunset provision for the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole spawning special management zones.

Option 1 (No Action). The South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole spawning special management zones have a sunset provisions of 10 years, with the management zones automatically expiring on August 2, 2027.

Option 2. Extend the sunset provision for the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole spawning special management zone by **7 years**, starting August 3, 2027, and ending August 2, 2034.

Preferred Option 3. Extend the sunset provision for the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole spawning special management zones by **10 years**, starting August 3, 2027, and ending August 2, 2037.

Option 4. Extend the sunset provision for the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole spawning special management zones by **20 years**, starting August 3, 2027, and ending August 2, 2047.

Option 5. Remove the sunset provision for the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole spawning special management zones. Removing the sunset provision would retain the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole spawning special management zones and their applicable regulations, until further action is taken.

Table 1. The coordinates of the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole SSMZs.

	Point	North Latitude	West Longitude
South Cape Lookout (NC)	A	33°53.040′	76°28.617′
	B	33°52.019′	76°27.798′
	C	33°49.946′	76°30.627′
	D	33°51.041′	76°31.424′
	A	33°53.040′	76°28.617′
Georgetown Hole (SC)	Point	North Latitude	West Longitude
	A	32°34.311′	78°34.996′
	B	32°34.311′	78°33.220′
	C	32°32.748′	78°33.220′
	D	32°32.748′	78°34.996′
	A	32°34.311′	78°34.996′
Warsaw Hole (FL)	Point	North Latitude	West Longitude
	A	24°22.277′	82°20.417′
	B	24°22.277′	82°18.215′
	C	24°20.932′	82°18.215′
	D	24°20.932′	82°20.417′
	A	24°22.277′	82°20.417′

Table 2. The attributes of the South Cape Lookout, Georgetown Hole, and Warsaw Hole SSMZs.

SMZ Location	Distance from Near Shore Point	Size	Species Focus
South Cape Lookout	52.2 nautical miles from Beaufort NC	3.84 sq nautical miles	red grouper and greater amberjack
Georgetown Hole	61.12 nautical miles from Georgetown SC	3.23 sq nautical miles	Gag, scamp
Warsaw Hole	34.7 nautical miles from Key West FL	2.69 Sq nautical miles	warsaw grouper, greater amberjack

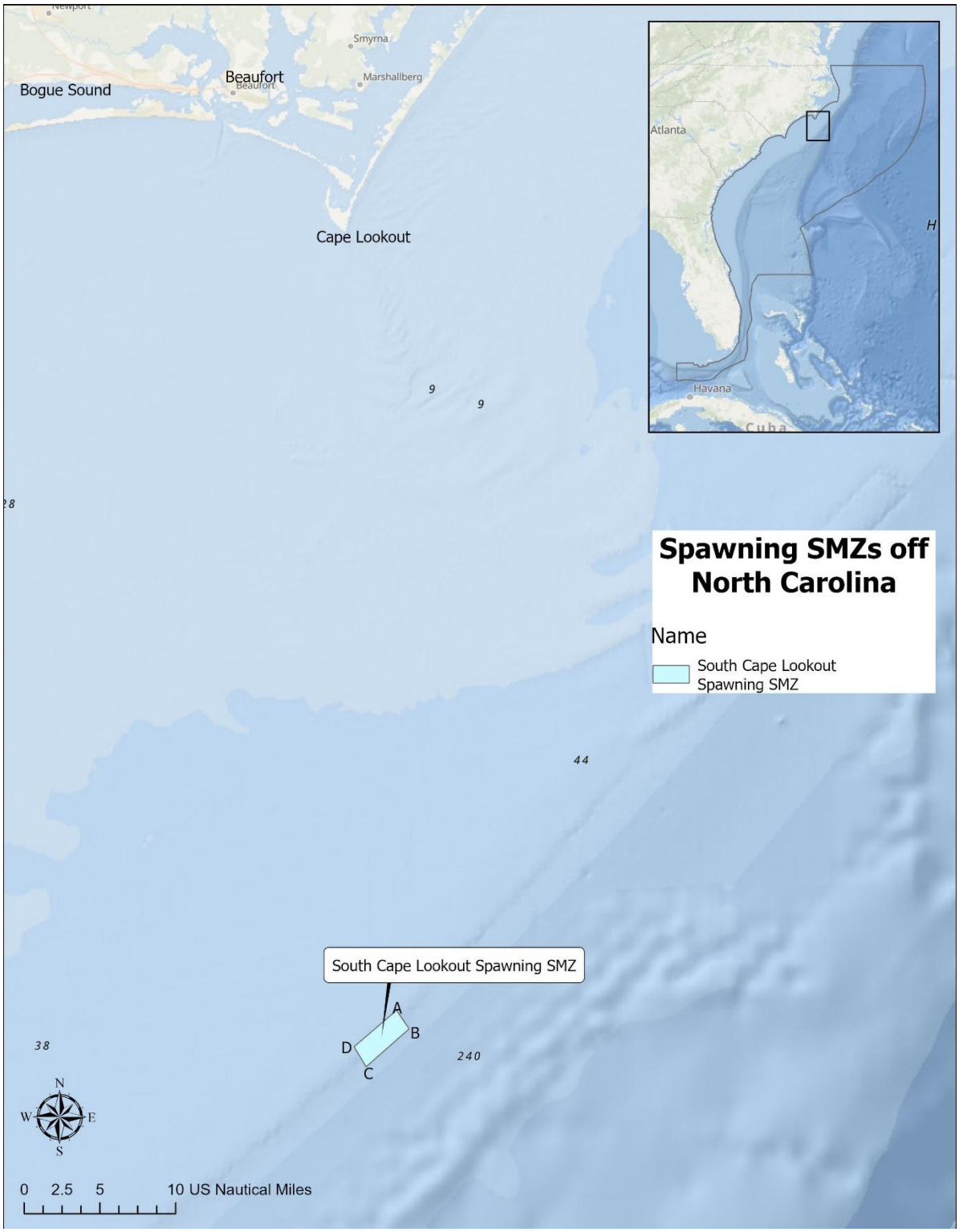


Figure 1. The location of the South Cape Lookout SSMZ. The letters on the corners of the SSMZ location refer to the coordinates in Table 1.

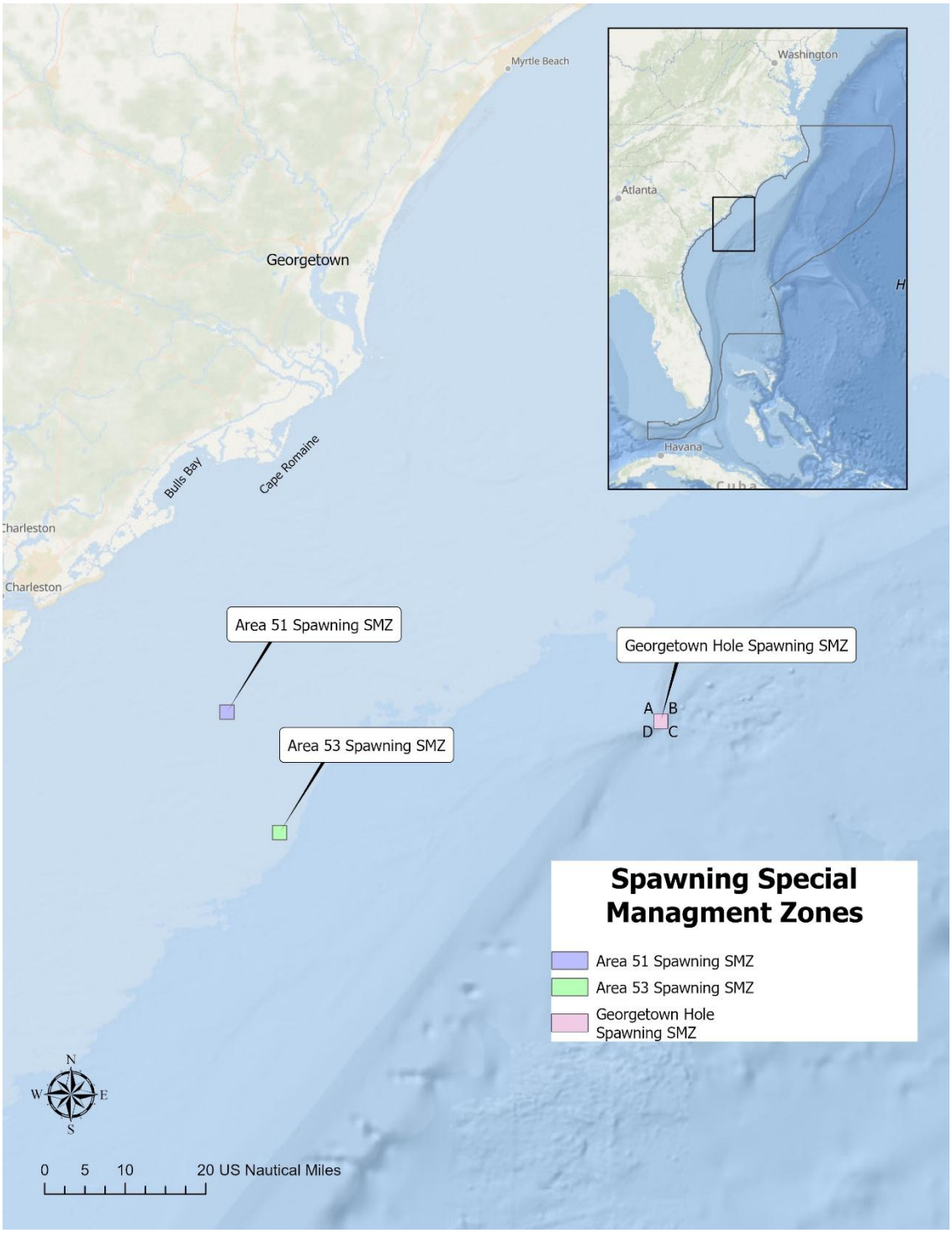


Figure 2. The location of the Georgetown Hole, Area 51, and Area 53 spawning special management zones. Note that Area 51 and Area 53 do not have sunset provisions and are not being considered in **Action 1**. The letters on the corners of the SSMZ location refer to the coordinates in Table 1.

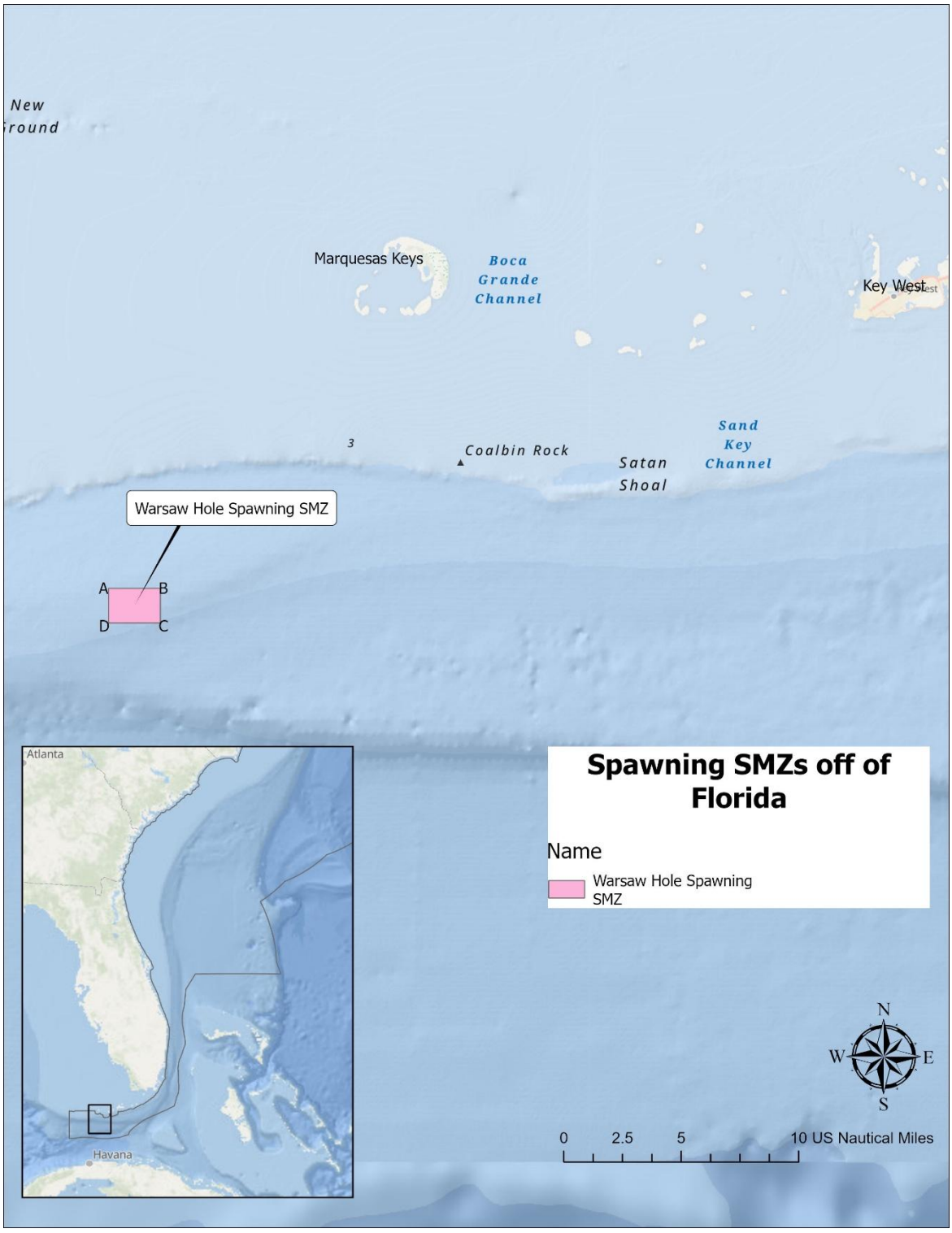


Figure 3. The location of the Warsaw Hole spawning special management zone. The letters on the corners of the SSMZ location refer to the coordinates in Table 1.

Summary of Research Within the SSMZs

Review the study here: https://safmc.net/events/seminar-series-do-we-still-need-to-protect-fish-spawning-grounds/



South Cape Lookout

- The **focal species** for the South Cape Lookout SSMZ are **red grouper** and **greater amberjack**.
- This SSMZ has less high-relief bottom area than the other two SSMZs.
- **Indirect evidence (observations) of spawning activity:**
  - High densities of vermilion snapper.
  - Interspersed sandy areas that were considered potential red grouper spawning habitat.
- **Species found in spawning condition (direct evidence/gonad samples):**
  - Scamp, red grouper, gag, silk snapper, blackfin snapper, vermilion snapper, and almaco jack
- **Other species of note observed within this SSMZ**
  - Advanced age red grouper, scamp, red porgy, gray triggerfish, graysby, and rock hind.
  - Immature snowy grouper.



Georgetown Hole

- The **focal species** for the Georgetown Hole SSMZ are **scamp** and **gag**.
- **Indirect evidence (observations):**
  - Scamp in spawning coloration.
  - Black belly gag present.
- **Species found in spawning condition (direct evidence/gonad samples):**
  - Scamp and gag
- **Other species of note observed within this SSMZ:**
  - Warsaw grouper
  - Speckled hind
  - Blackfin snapper

Warsaw Hole

- The **focal species** for the Warsaw Hole SSMZ are **warsaw grouper** and **greater amberjack.**
- **Indirect evidence (observations):**
  - Large aggregations of greater amberjack, believed to be related to spawning.
- **Species found in spawning condition (direct evidence/gonad samples):**
  - Warsaw grouper, red snapper, greater amberjack
- **Other species of note observed within this SSMZ:**
  - Advanced age (>10 yrs) red snapper
  - Speckled hind
  - Black Grouper

Effects Analysis Summary

Biological Effects

- Longer or permanent protection would provide greater biological benefits by maintaining habitat and spawning-area protection for longer.
- Overall, expected biological benefits rank (highest benefit to lowest benefit): **Option 5**, **Option 4**, **Option 3**, **Preferred Option 2**, and **Option 1 (No Action).**

Economic Effects

- Maintaining the closures provides potential long-term economic benefits by supporting spawning stock biomass, spawning capacity, catch rates, and potentially larger/higher-quality fish.
- Allowing harvest within the SSMZs would provide economic benefit to both recreational and commercial fishermen.
- Although allowing harvest under **Option 1 (No Action)** could provide relatively small short-term economic gains, maintaining the SSMZs is expected to provide
- greater long-term economic benefits by supporting healthier and more productive snapper grouper stocks.

Social Effects

- **Potential effects on fishing communities:**
  - Fishing closures can have negative short-term social effects by restricting fishermen's access to fishing grounds.
  - However, the existing SSMZs can provide long-term social benefits by supporting the sustainability of important commercial and recreational species.
  - Healthier fish stocks could result in benefits such as spillover and increased access to improved fish populations.
  - These potential social benefits would be lost under **Option** 1 **(No Action)** if the SSMZs expire.
- **Benefits of having a sunset provision:**
  - Sunset provisions create an opportunity for the Council to periodically review the effectiveness of the SSMZs.
  - Reviews would incorporate new research and monitoring information to determine whether the SSMZs are meeting management goals.
  - If the SSMZs are not effective, they could be modified or removed.
  - **Option 5**, which removes the sunset provision, would not provide the same assurance of periodic effectiveness reviews.
- **Potential downside of a sunset provision**:
  - Under **Options 2–4**, SSMZs could potentially be removed if funding, staffing, or other limitations prevent an adequate evaluation.
  - If an SSMZ is removed even though it is effectively protecting spawning fish, this could result in negative long-term biological effects.
  - If the SSMZs are removed, benefits the stocks derive from spawning area protection would not be realized.
- **Importance of the length of the sunset period:**
  - A longer period of protection allows biological benefits to accumulate and gives researchers more time to collect monitoring data.
  - Therefore, longer sunset periods are generally expected to provide greater social benefits.
- Overall ranking of expected social benefits (highest benefit to lowest benefit): **Option 4**, **Option 3**, **Preferred Option 2**, **Option 5**, and **Option 1 (No Action).**

Council Discussion and Rationale

The Council's discussion on the action in Regulatory Amendment 39 has centered around the **effectiveness of the SSMZs**, and whether **extending the sunset provisions** would allow for **additional research and monitoring**. The Council noted that evidence of spawning fish has been found in all three SSMZs; however, the **System Management Plan Workgroup** noted that **existing monitoring programs are insufficient** to fully evaluate long-term biological outcomes.

Because of this the Council favors **extending the sunset provision for another 10 years**. Extending the provision for another 10 years would allow additional time for research and monitoring of the areas while providing a **"deadline"** to help prioritize research and monitoring projects.

How Do I Comment?

The comment period **starts October 26th, 2026.** Comments must be received by **5:00 PM on Friday, November 13th, 2026**.
There are several ways that you can submit your comment to the Council including:



Comments taken during the webinar
Monday, November 9th at 6:00pm



Written comments
Written comments may be read and submitted on Regulatory Amendment 39 using the online public comment form at the following link:



https://safmc.net/amendments/snapper-grouper-regulatory-amendment-39/

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

